

On the Promise of a Sociological Aesthetics: From Georg Simmel to Michel Maffesoli

This article outlines the contribution of a sociological aesthetics to explaining social life. The central argument is that aesthetic phenomena are neither incidental nor epiphenomenal to social structure; rather the social bond itself possesses an aesthetic dimension. The two central thinkers discussed are Georg Simmel and Michel Maffesoli. The first pioneered a sociology grounded in aesthetics through the study of forms of sociation where, as social interaction becomes more fully autonomous, the aesthetic attraction of doing things together starts to dominate. The second emphasizes what social actors feel they have in common when they share tastes, customs or habits. He terms this an 'ethics of aesthetics' and asks whether it is becoming the dominant form of collective bonding. Synthesizing these insights, the article concludes by advocating that the full potential of a sociological aesthetics is realized only when: (1) careful attention is paid to the specific character of aesthetic forms of integration; (2) aesthetic and non-aesthetic forms of sociation are clearly differentiated; and (3) socio-aesthetic analysis avoids vague 'culturalogical' generalizations.

KEYWORDS

Aesthetics; aestheticization; Maffesoli; Simmel; social bond.

Introduction

This article challenges the assumption that aesthetic factors are merely surface phenomena or that they divert us from the task of explaining social life. It takes its inspiration from thinkers who have argued that form and aesthetic style are central to patterns of social life. It will draw on the sociology of Georg Simmel, who argued, 'The more we learn to appreciate composite forms, the more readily we will extend aesthetic categories to forms of society as a whole' (1968: 74). It will also examine the thought of Michel Maffesoli, a theorist of postmodern sociality, who contends that one of the major barriers to understanding contemporary social bonds lies 'in refusing any importance to style, or, more exactly, of attributing to it a secondary place and mak-

ing of it ... a frivolity' (1996a: 39). In keeping with the insight that social life revolves around form, this paper will demonstrate that aesthetic questions are far from being 'decorative' (see Rojek and Turner, 2000). However, the relevance of aesthetics to social theory raises the question: what do we mean by aesthetics and what kind of social situations are amenable to an analytical framework based on a sociological aesthetics?

Sociology and aesthetics

The concept of 'aesthetics' has not been well regarded in the social sciences. As Janet Wolff (1983: 27) notes in her book *Aesthetics and the Sociology of Art*, sociology has tended to either 'implicitly' or 'explicitly' present a 'challenge to traditional aesthetics'. By traditional aesthetics, she means the philosophical and art theoretical discourse that arose in the eighteenth century around the theme of 'aesthetic judgment'. The sociological suspicion of aesthetics is founded on the following two assumptions: firstly, that aesthetic discourse is historically specific and connected, at least in Western modernity, to the emergence of institutions of high culture; and, secondly, that the discourse of aesthetics conceals a class-specific 'regime of value' that prioritizes contemplation over embodied action. The most famous exponent of such a critique of aesthetics is Pierre Bourdieu who, in *Distinction*, provides a sociological mapping of the 'judgment of taste'. In this text, he offers the observation that when it comes to aesthetics, the 'sociologist finds himself in the area par excellence of the denial of the social' (Bourdieu, 1986: 11).

The social scientific suspicion of aesthetics is of course not universal. Some sociologists studying art and popular culture have argued on behalf of taking aesthetics seriously (Bird, 1979; Bielby and Bielby, 2004). Others have questioned the 'animating drive' behind the sociological denunciation of experts in the aesthetic field, such as art historians and philosophers (Inglis, 2005: 98). And, as I have argued elsewhere, attitudes to the place of aesthetics in sociology have been shaped by what Gouldner (1973) termed the 'deep structures' of social science: namely, Classicism and Romanticism (see de la Fuente, 2007). As identified by Gouldner, the Romantic tendency in sociology has tended to adopt an 'aesthetic attitude' to its object of inquiry. But in the main, social scientists have preferred a sociology of aesthetics to a sociological aesthetics.

An exception to the rule has been the work of the Finnish sociologist Jukka Gronow. In *The Sociology of Taste*, Gronow (1998: ix) states that while 'many other publications on the sociology of taste... [are] concerned with the social determination of taste', including how aesthetic preferences are distributed amongst groups and classes in society, his own study takes as its object 'the role of taste – or the aesthetic reflection – in society at large'. His own analytic framework owes a great deal to the Kantian heritage that sociologists, such as Bourdieu, reject:

According to the famous antinomy of taste formulated by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*, taste, or the judgment power, is both totally private and universal, both individual and

social, subjective and objective... This antinomy is solved daily in everyday life in various social formations which, however, only provisionally and tentatively overcome the duality. (Gronow, 1998: xi)

Gronow cites as an example the social mechanisms present in fashion. On a daily basis, people make aesthetic choices about clothing that are 'based on private and subjective preferences of individual taste' and yet these decisions also point to 'a socially binding standard of conduct' (Gronow, 1998: xi). As Kant (1952, Part I: 155) himself observed, 'a man abandoned on a desert island would not adorn either himself or his hut'. The task of a sociological aesthetics is therefore to explain how something that appears 'private' and 'subjective' acquires social and cultural significance; and, conversely, how human association shapes and heightens aesthetic delight.

In this respect, a sociological aesthetics has little to do with the concerns of the sociology of art or culture and more in common with the field of 'everyday aesthetics'. As the editor of a recent collection puts it, everyday aesthetics is both 'an extension beyond the traditional domain of the philosophical study of aesthetics' and a step into 'a new arena of aesthetic inquiry – the broader world itself' (Smith, 2005: ix). In short, the approach of the field of everyday aesthetics goes beyond seeing art-like qualities in everyday objects and events, such as food, drink, housing and the weather (some of the topics covered by the collection edited by Smith). It is also about applying the reasoning of aesthetic inquiry to the broader world, including social life itself. As Arnold Berleant (2005: 31) argues in an essay in the same collection, a social situation 'displays the characteristics of an aesthetic situation when its perceptual and other characteristic aesthetic features predominate'. He lists features such as 'heightened perception', the 'freshness and excitement of discovery', 'recognition of the uniqueness' of the situation and of each person participating, 'mutual responsiveness', and the tendency for an occasion to be 'experienced as connected and integrated' (Berleant, 2005: 31). This echoes Gronow's characterization of aesthetic social experience as the overcoming, even if temporary, of the duality between self and society. It also suggests that the mechanism of integration is free and disinterested compliance. Thus, Berleant (2005: 31) tells us, while:

[p]roper etiquette is ordinarily interpreted as rule-governed behavior... there are occasions when the cultivation of such behavior assumes a certain grace, when the participants delight in the skills involved and at the same time manage to introduce genuine human content into what is usually empty ritual.

The aesthetics of the social situation is maximized when mutual delight and reciprocal focus on the situation, are the key mechanisms of social integration.

Simmel and the project of a sociological aesthetics

Simmel (1950: 57) could be seen as the founder of a sociological aesthetics in that he argued the 'forces of deepest reality' were present in aesthetic phenomena and that as social situations became purely social their aesthetic qualities increased. In this sociological paradigm, there is thus no danger of losing touch with fundamental sociological questions due to a focus on aesthetics. As Simmel (1997a: 135) claimed in his sociological mediation on the meal, the 'banality of the field with which these remarks are concerned should not deceive us into believing that the paradoxical depth of this type is not equally alive within it' (Simmel, 1997a: 135). A similar 'depth' was detected, by him, in aesthetic phenomena as seemingly superficial as fashion, adornment, the design of handles, and the shapes of doors and bridges. The project of a sociological aesthetics was, for Simmel, a very serious pursuit.

Simmel's first foray into the field of 'Sociological Aesthetics' was the 1896 essay with that title. He declares, in that piece, that the 'essence' of the aesthetic method is the ability to perceive the following in social phenomena: 'What is unique emphasizes what is typical, what is accidental appears as normal, and the superficial and fleeting stands for what is essential and basic' (Simmel, 1968: 69). There is no social or cultural phenomenon too 'low', 'ugly' or uninteresting to be the focal point of a sociological aesthetics: 'Even the lowest, intrinsically ugly phenomenon can be dissolved into contexts of color and form, of feeling and experience, which provide it with exciting significance' (Simmel, 1968: 69). The project of a sociological aesthetics is therefore something of a vocation, it commits the social theorist to 'involv[ing] ourselves deeply and lovingly with even the most common product' (Simmel, 1968: 69). It rejects the notion that anything is either entirely 'banal' or 'repulsive' and conceives of every 'isolated appearance... as a ray and image of the final unity of all things from which beauty and meaning flow' (Simmel, 1968: 69). The vocational ethos of the aesthetic sociologist is the following: 'To the adequately trained eye the totality of beauty, the complete meaning of the world as a whole, radiates from every single point' (Simmel, 1968: 69).

The essay offers a theoretical interrogation of aesthetic sensation. Sensation, claims Simmel, is produced by our perception of differences: 'Our sensations are tied to differences, those of value no less than the sensations of touch or temperature' (1968: 70). Human beings are seen as creatures that differentiate. As such, social forms carry within themselves, stylizations of life and their own aesthetic attractions:

Consider, for example, the aesthetic appeal of machines: the absolute purposiveness and reliability of motions, the harmonic integration of the most minute and the largest parts, provides machines with a peculiar beauty. The organization of a factory and the plan of the socialistic state only repeat this beauty on larger scales. This peculiar interest in harmony and symmetry by which socialism demonstrates its rationalistic character, and by which it aims to stylize social life... attests to the deep power of attraction in the idea of an harmonic, internally balanced organization of human activity overcoming all resistance of irrational individuality. (Simmel, 1968: 74)

Symmetrical arrangements therefore involve a 'social picture' requiring 'a minimum of intellectual effort'; the attractiveness of this kind of beauty lies precisely in that all elements are 'mutually interdependen[t] with all others' and are contained 'within the designated circle' (Simmel, 1968: 75). Simmel locates a contrasting aesthetic principle of 'asymmetrical arrangement' in liberal ideas of constitutionality and individual rights, in the worldviews of Rembrandt and Nietzsche, and in the modern preference for floral arrangements where each flower is either 'arranged individually or several of them at most are bound together rather loosely' (Simmel, 1968: 76). Here life is stylized such that beauty resides in 'heterogeneous interests and irreconcilable tendencies' (Simmel, 1968: 75). It is the different stylizations of life, and the kind of beauty that these arrangements embody that are the focus of Simmel's first attempt at a sociological aesthetics.

From symmetry to form: The evolution of Simmel's thought

In 'Sociological Aesthetics', Simmel initiates a recurring theme of his aesthetic and sociological writings: the importance of form. He suggests: 'The origin of all aesthetic themes is found in symmetry. Before man can bring an idea, meaning, harmony into things, he must first form them symmetrically' (Simmel, 1968: 71). Symmetry is seen by Simmel as an initial step in 'man's form-giving power'. Initially, form tends towards harmony and symmetry because it is through the principle of ordering phenomena around a given center that 'the contingent and confused character of mere nature, becomes most quickly, visibly, and immediately clear' (Simmel, 1968: 71).

However, as the form-content distinction became more prominent in Simmel's sociological writings the depiction of aesthetic form moves significantly beyond that described in the dialectics of symmetry. For example, his sociology of sociability places the issue of aesthetics on a different plane. The central argument there is that sociability is a specific kind of interaction, free from all ties to content, where the principle that dominates is the 'feeling of being sociated' (Simmel, 1950: 44). The 'sociability threshold' is crossed when the social form develops a sufficient level of autonomy or differentiation from the rest of life such that there is nothing hindering the 'pure sociability' of equals. In its pure form, sociability requires leaving rank and personal motives behind so that sociable interaction flows freely. In sociability, everyone acts 'as-if' they are there to be sociable and nothing else.

In what sense is this process aesthetic in character? Simmel postulates that sociable interaction has its own charms and even obeys its own 'artistic laws'. However, it is in its form that the parallels with aesthetic phenomena lie. Sociability often suffers from the criticism that it is artificial and stylized. Simmel claims that this is a mistaken view founded on the misrecognition of its aesthetic properties. Sociability is aesthetically pleasing because, within it, reality appears in a condensed and sublimated form. Simmel claims (1950: 57) it is precisely the 'serious person' who takes delight in

sociability because the social form offers a 'momentary suspension of life's seriousness'.

This suggests a significant evolution in Simmel's thought regarding the role that aesthetic factors play in social life. If in 'Sociological Aesthetics', aesthetics impact social life through the organization of sensation and mental constructs such as 'symmetry' and 'harmony', in his later sociology Simmel advances a more explicitly neo-Kantian position in which all symbolic life is mediated through form and its impact on the subject. The Simmel scholar, David Frisby (1991: 74), describes Simmel's Kantianism thus: 'beauty does not lie in the objective existence of things... rather it is a *subjective* reaction which the latter arouses in us'.

There is ample evidence that this understanding of aesthetics becomes more prominent in Simmel's investigations that date from after the 'Sociological Aesthetics' essay. For example, in the sociology of sociability, Simmel (1950: 56-7) asserts that what the social form entails is the replication of the subjective feelings constantly building up within form. In this respect, the relief from reality provided by sociability resembles the kind of aesthetic experience that nature provides for the subject: 'The view of the sea frees us internally, not in spite, but because of the fact that the swelling and ebbing and the play and counterplay of the waves stylize life in the simplest expression of its dynamics' (Simmel, 1950: 57). Simmel uses that analogy to explain the kind of aesthetic pleasure that sociability entails.

Stylization performs a specific function in Simmel's sociology. It is one of the mechanisms through which the subjective is provided with a 'general feeling, a non-contingent form' (Simmel, 1991: 70). Simmel was also not averse to studying the very concrete and material ways in which specific forms shaped subjective experience. His sociological analyses included discussions of bridges, doors, handles and frames. In 'The Picture Frame', Simmel (1994: 17) turns to the theme of how form organizes aesthetic sensation and suggests that the frame 'arrests' and 'advances' perceptual energies by solving 'the problem in the visual sphere of mediating the work of art and its milieu'. In aesthetic forms, boundaries – of which the picture frame is a prime example – perform a very special role: 'for the work of art they [i.e. boundaries] are that absolute ending which exercises indifference towards and defense against the exterior and a unifying integration with respect to the interior in a single act' (Simmel, 1994: 11). The picture frame allows aesthetic enjoyment to take place, by concentrating sensation, and constituting the act of looking as a self-enclosed experience. Similarly, sociability flourishes as a purely aesthetic form when it is bounded from the rest of life.

The 'aesthetic threshold': How social life acquires an aesthetic character

A consistent theme in Simmel's (1968: 76) writings on the aesthetics of social life is that 'aesthetic feelings' and 'aesthetic value' don't develop until 'immediate utility has been cleared away in the course of historical development... [and] the materialistic

motives on which our aesthetic sensibilities are based have been effaced in time'. This model of aesthetics is based on a theory of form that holds that aesthetic sensation requires the transformation of content into something that transcends utility. There are strong echoes here of the Kantian maxim: 'Beauty is the form of finality in an object so far as perceived in it *apart from the representation of an end*' (Kant, 1952 Part I: 80).

The notion of an 'aesthetic threshold' pervades many of Simmel's sociological writings. He writes of sociability that it is originally driven by practical needs such as 'hunger', 'love', 'security', 'religiosity' and 'economic interest', but that over time the social form is removed 'from the service of life that originally produced them' (Simmel, 1950: 42). Simmel is so struck by the transformational capacities evident in sociability, that he uses the example of the aestheticization of sociality to illustrate the effect that the exhibition of objects at 'world fairs' has on the spectator:

In his *Deutsche Geschichte* Karl Lamprecht relates how certain medieval orders of knights gradually lost their practical purpose but continued as sociable gatherings. This is a type of sociological development that is similarly repeated in the most diverse fields... The history of world exhibitions, which originated from annual fairs, is one of the clearest examples of this fundamental type of human sociation. The extent to which this process can be found in the Berlin exhibition alone allows it to be placed in the category of world exhibitions. (Simmel, 1997b: 255)

There are many of other instances where Simmel speaks of a similar type of threshold being crossed, as form starts to dominate content, purpose or practical need, and aesthetic enjoyment becomes a principle in its own right. However, the presence of such a threshold begs the question: what kind of relationship exists between aesthetic and social factors during the process where an object or activity is transformed into something primarily aesthetic?

One of the clearest examples of how social reaches the aesthetic threshold is provided by Simmel's (1997a) analysis in the 'Sociology of the Meal'. The analysis follows the logic outlined above in that it postulates that the consumption of food only becomes 'sociable dining' when it rises above the selfish and practical act of eating. However, what is of most interest in this piece is that Simmel takes us, step by step, through the processes in which the aesthetic threshold is reached and a social activity starts to function as an end in itself. In short, the 'Sociology of the Meal' provides us with an 'ideal-typical' case in the field of sociological aesthetics.

Simmel (1997a: 130) begins his analysis by recognizing that the aesthetic value of the meal, and its sociological structure, are based on the most common and 'lowest' of motives: 'Of all the things that people have in common, the most common is that they must eat and drink'. The paradox of eating is that this commonality is asocial, since eating is an entirely individual act that satisfies the person and nobody else. The evolution of the form, however, is towards the 'egotistical' character of eating being transcended through the 'frequency of being together' for its own sake (Simmel, 1997a: 130). The aesthetic stylization of the form is central to this process.

Simmel's (1997a: 131) central argument is that 'in so far as the meal becomes a sociological matter, it arranges itself in a more aesthetic, stylized and supra-individually regulated form'. These regulations, however, tend to be about eating and not food per se. They relate to the *form* of its consumption. Simmel contends that rules regarding 'temporal regularity' (eating at the same time) and 'sequential ordering' (who serves themselves when) were central to the development of the social form. It is form that allows for the 'triumph over the naturalism of eating' (Simmel, 1997a: 131). However, while these rules remain external props, recommended for extra-aesthetic reasons (for example, communal feasting of a religious nature which prescribes when and what one should eat), the form does not yet represent an aesthetic 'synthesis'. It is when certain aspects of dining – such as eating with a knife and fork, on an individual plate, in rooms specifically furnished for the purpose of eating, and the expectation that participants engage in 'table conversation' – take on specifically aesthetic connotations that the meal becomes a sociological entity. After the crossing of this threshold, one can judge the conduct of the individual according to aesthetic criteria such as whether their eating is 'nimble and free'; and whether, in general, their actions contribute to the enjoyment of all (Simmel, 1997a: 132). It is at this point that the form of social bonding distinctive to dining comes into being. Simmel (1997a: 132) states: 'the socialization of the meal elevates it into an aesthetic stylization which now acts back upon the former'. It 'acts back upon the former' by converting the principle of social compliance into the mutual expectation of aesthetic delight. Rules are replaced by aesthetic enjoyment as the principle of social bonding.

The aestheticization thesis: Postmodern theory and sociological aesthetics

The claims made so far with respect to the power of a sociological aesthetics to explain social life may sound somewhat retrograde or even unnecessary given the significant revival of aesthetics in postmodern thought. We seem to be experiencing, claims Wolfgang Welsch (1997:1), a 'deep-seated' process of aestheticization that extends to everything from 'individual styling, urban planning and the economy to theory'. He adds: 'More and more elements of reality are being aesthetically mantled' (Welsch, 1997: 1). The obvious question is: shouldn't one also expect the same of the social bond?

In the next section, I will compare the kind of sociological aesthetics advanced by Simmel to that of Michel Maffesoli, a thinker who sees the postmodern social bond through the prism of aesthetics. However, before proceeding to this discussion I think it is important to separate the kind of sociological aesthetics advanced by him from the 'aestheticization thesis' that is currently popular in the social sciences. Doing so will sharpen the discussion of what a sociological aesthetics may contribute to the social sciences, as well as assist in delineating its limits.

The first point to make is that the aestheticization thesis that is currently fash-

ionable is in large part an argument about changes at the 'macro' level of society and economy. Scott Lash and John Urry's (1994: 4) *Economy of Signs and Spaces* is a good case in point, dealing as it does with the 'aestheticization of material objects' as capitalism entered a post-Fordist phase of disorganized, flexible accumulation. There is a 'before' and 'after' logic to this narrative in that the economy is held to be more aestheticized than was possible under Fordism or Keynesian-welfarist capitalism. Culture and economy are now more aestheticized in a quantitative sense, as

can be seen not only in the proliferation of objects which possess a substantial aesthetic component (such as pop music, cinema, leisure, magazines, video and so on) but also in the increasing component of sign-value or image embodied in material objects. (Lash and Urry, 1994: 4)

The authors detect a corresponding shift in the identity of consumers and lifestyle groupings, as 'aesthetic reflexivity' becomes a way of forming the self and bonding with others. In a separate publication, Lash (1994) speaks of taste communities that entail 'shared meanings, practices and obligations'. The latter are as much 'producers' as 'consumers' of aesthetic meaning.

There is also Mike Featherstone's (1991) much cited essay 'The Aestheticization of Everyday Life'. Featherstone (1991: 66) offers an important corrective to the 'macro' version of the aestheticization thesis in insisting that the 'articulation and promotion' of an aesthetic outlook 'by cultural specialists may have a long history'. This account has the advantage of demonstrating some of the agency involved in processes of social and cultural change, as well as the long-term processes that may be at work in aestheticization. Featherstone (1991: 66) insists that aestheticization 'projects' already existed amongst artistic avant-gardes, such as Dada, Surrealism and Pop Art, who sought to challenge the institutional autonomy of art by 'effac[ing] the boundary between art and everyday life'. A version of aestheticization was also practiced by figures such as Baudelaire, Wilde and the proponents of Aestheticism, who in the 19th century had proposed to turn life itself into a work of art. What is distinctive to the processes of aestheticization in postmodern culture is that this is no longer a project practiced by small groups of cultural specialists. It is rather a more general condition involving 'the rapid flow of signs and images which saturate the fabric of everyday life in contemporary society' (Featherstone, 1991: 67). The artists and aesthetes of modernity have multiplied into the many aesthetic actors of postmodern culture. The process is based on the increasing dominance of exchange value which has not only 'obliterated the original use-value of things' but has also 'left the commodity free to take on' what Baudrillard refers to as 'sign-value' (Featherstone, 1991: 67). Under contemporary capitalism, to quote the latter, '[w]e live everywhere... in an "aesthetic" hallucination of reality' (Baudrillard, 1983: 148).

Proponents of the postmodern aestheticization thesis have been keen to recruit Simmel's version of sociological aesthetics to their cause. Featherstone (1991: 76) lists Simmel, alongside Walter Benjamin, as the kind of theorist who we might use to

understand how 'the urban landscape has become aestheticized and enchanted', as well as why individuals 'wear, to varying degrees, fashionable clothing, hairstyles, make-up, or ... move, or hold their bodies, in particular stylized ways'. It is true that Simmel was amongst the first to diagnose aesthetic tendencies in modern culture and that he also claimed '[w]hat drives modern man so strongly to style is the unburdening and concealment of the personal, which is the essence of style' (1991: 69). The 'Sociological Aesthetics' essay also seems close to the postmodern aestheticization thesis in suggesting that aesthetic forms of valuing phenomena become possible because '[m]oney, by the enlargement of the role, has placed us at a wider and more basic distance from the object' (Simmel, 1968: 79). This is certainly closer to postmodern theory than to the Marxist explanation that money-exchange generates a fetishistic but basically unaesthetic relation to the commodity. Simmel (1968: 76) also seems to be suggesting something like the 'sign-value' of the commodity when he claims that 'we no longer enjoy the real utility of the object'. There are also echoes of Baudrillard in the proposition that when objects become aestheticized they acquire a 'certain other-worldliness and non-reality' (Simmel, 1968: 76).

While they are hardly proponents of an aesthetic approach – indeed, they regard references in social theory to an 'aesthetic paradigm' an 'unfortunate choice of words' – Deena and Michael Weinstein (1993: 17), in their *Postmodern(ized) Simmel*, make a strong case for seeing Simmel's sociology as appropriate to the postmodern age. They see the insights of Simmel's sociology of sociability – in particular, its reference to autonomous forms as possessing 'play-like' qualities – being borne out by two central features of postmodern culture: television and shopping. As television becomes 'the dominant site of aesthetic experience' in contemporary culture we see more and more evidence of its 'play-form' character (Weinstein and Weinstein, 1993: 165). As with Simmel's forms of sociation, which are pure forms with no connection to content,

television takes all of the materials of vital activity and re-presents them to the viewer in a context or situation that has been voided of any necessity of reference to an ulterior object, opening up a field for a play of images in which nothing is essential. (Weinstein and Weinstein, 1993: 165–6)

It is, in short, a self-enclosed world of sensuous realities that is available at the flick of a switch, but cut off from the rest of life. Similarly, shopping involves the play-form when it doesn't involve shopping for 'something' in particular:

'[G]oing shopping', 'going to the mall', is like watching television – a form of play within a field of signifiers ... One can drift from shop to shop, examining products, imagining what one might do with them ... Life becomes immanent to the sensuous forms in which it participates, but playfully, at a distance. (Weinstein and Weinstein, 1993: 167)

However, despite the apparent similarities between Simmel's sociological aesthetics and postmodern accounts of aestheticization, including Weinstein and Weinstein's

account of television and shopping as play-forms, what remains unclear is how a sociological aesthetics should relate the 'micro' and 'macro' levels of explanation. What is it that connects aestheticized social forms to postmodern culture and vice versa? Interestingly, the relationship between the 'micro' and 'macro' levels is left deliberately open, and unresolved, in Simmel's own sociology. While some 'macro' processes seem to contribute to or heighten aestheticizing tendencies, Simmel also highlights social forms that have little to do with the modern commodity form (for example, sociability and the meal) and postulates that societal arrangements such as socialism possess an aesthetic character. Aestheticization, in Simmel's thought, seems to be a potential development within any social form. He presents us with the challenge of thinking sociologically about aesthetics as a *quality* found in many different social forms rather than as something that societies or social groups possess more or less of due to external factors.

The postmodern social bond: Maffesoli's 'ethics of aesthetics'

The contemporary thinker who has done most to keep the version of sociological aesthetics conceived by Simmel alive is Michel Maffesoli. While there are additional influences, most importantly that of Durkheim's sociology of religion, Maffesoli owes a great deal to Simmel's sociology. In his central methodological statement, the book *Ordinary Knowledge*, he outlines an approach to the sociology of everyday life termed 'formism' (Maffesoli, 1996b). A neologism 'intended to be a tribute to the sociology of Simmel', formism tries to capture both the 'lability and warm currents of lived experience' and the 'invariance' of social life (Maffesoli, 1996b: 8–9). In *Contemplation of the World*, Maffesoli (1996a: 39) adds that 'form is the very thing, precisely, that expresses, at best, the "base" of being-togetherness. All of Simmel's thought on form rests on this intuition'. Maffesoli (1989: 1) also shares Simmel's ethos, as outlined in the 'Sociological Aesthetics' essay, when he says: 'sociality, which points, as it were, to the very foundation of coexistence, obliges us to take into account everything which was generally considered frivolous, anecdotal or meaningless'. Nothing is considered too trivial, too ugly, or insignificant, for a sociological aesthetics of everyday life.

When it comes to the historical relevance of the aesthetic paradigm, Maffesoli has a bet each way. Aesthetics is both trans-historical and of great relevance in the postmodern. The connection between aesthetics and ethics (i.e., the grounding of collective life in aesthesis) is 'not new ... as the Greek ideal of the *Kalokagathos* or certain intuitions of the Renaissance ... show very well' (Maffesoli, 1991: 7). On the other hand, the term postmodern emphasizes that 'artistic will [*Kunstwollen*]' may well be the 'deep source of energy of the various aggregations now composing society' (Maffesoli, 1991: 8). Alois Riegl's concept of 'artistic will' is here shorn of its original connection to fine art, as all of everyday life acquires the character of artistic or creative intention. Everything from 'cooking', to 'relaxing walks' and 'small celebrations' carries signifi-

cance for those that have 'willed' such things into existence. After cataloguing the range of aesthetic forms of existence that now unite postmodern individuals, Maffesoli (1991: 19) poses the following rhetorical question: 'The thing that is at issue here is whether, after *homo politicus* and *homo economicus*, we are not confronted with the arrival of *homo aestheticus*?'

Maffesoli follows Simmel in seeing the aesthetic as a distinctive form of social bonding. He suggests that in postmodern sociality, groups form according to 'taste, the admiration, the "hobby" which is held in common and which cements the collectivity' (Maffesoli, 1991: 16). As with Simmel's forms of sociation, 'experiencing something together is a factor of socialization' and common aesthetic pleasure is able to 'take on the function of aggregation and reinforcement' (Maffesoli, 1991: 19). Doing things together, due to common aesthetic concerns, can be short lived and, in some senses, is an entirely contingent sociological phenomenon. It is something of a lottery whom I will have something in common with. However, despite its fragility, the aesthetic bond is the form of integration that is most distinctly social, Maffesoli (1991: 8) sharing Simmel's insight that sociability or sociality is pure sociation or, as the former puts it, 'social existence ... returned to itself'. In the case of sociability or sociality, we have people bonding together for no other reason than to 'bathe in the affectual ambience' (Maffesoli, 1991: 11). When people rush to do things together for no apparent reason, social forms are seen to possess the kind of autonomy we find in aesthetic forms:

We have passed beyond the aesthetic dilemma of formalism, of art for art's sake. It can be agreed that forms may have autonomy, but not autonomy in themselves, rather a relative autonomy in the sense that every form which is significant for one group may be insignificant for another ... I have referred to this ... as 'formism', and it is this which allows a given group to constitute itself as such and enables it to be totally autonomous of any other. (Maffesoli, 1991: 17)

Maffesoli also shares Simmel's sense that one of the primary features of the aesthetic bond is that it allows subjective taste to be combined with collective sentiment. The most developed socio-aesthetic forms are those where my own 'narcissistic' pleasures enter into a reciprocal state with those of others. There is no external mechanism governing such relationships, and one of the tricks of aesthetic self-fashioning is that by turning the body and self into 'spectacle' the following is achieved: 'integration into the collectivity and the transcendence of the individual' (Maffesoli, 1991: 19). In short, aesthetics always already entails a moment of 'supra-individuality'. Out of the 'collective narcissism' of contemporary 'neo-tribes' or 'lifestyle groups' emerges a form of social bonding or ethics 'centered on what is closest at hand' (Maffesoli, 1991: 19). Maffesoli (1991: 19) contends that this 'ethics of aesthetics' emerges from below, and while 'perhaps disquieting for us', as a source of collective identity, is 'equally as solid as those that have gone before'.

Collective fusion: Aesthetic sociology and the 'social divine'

Maffesoli's use of an aesthetic paradigm for sociological purposes seems to possess similar characteristics to Simmel's sociological aesthetics. His sociology advances the argument that, as social forms become more purely social, their capacity for aesthetic integration increases. Both Simmel and Maffesoli also seem to belong to a neo-Kantian tradition in which subjective pleasure, mediated by aesthetic form, transcends the subjectivism of private taste. As the latter puts it: 'I recognize a sign by recognizing it with others, and so I recognize what unites me to others... the collective emotion attached to a sign, can express itself through a piece of clothing, a habit, a taste' (Maffesoli, 1991: 17).

However, an important source of differentiation between Simmel and Maffesoli (1996c: 21) relates to the latter's reliance on Durkheim's emphasis on the 'sacredness of social relationships'. Durkheim's expression, the 'social divine', is used by Maffesoli (1991: 8, 14) to suggest the kind of 'fusion' that aesthetic attraction entails: 'The attraction of sensibilities is pantheistic: everything partakes of the divine'. He suggests that the 'anthropological structure' of bonds based on 'aesthetic emotion' is something which is 'yet to be appreciated ... [It] leads us to envisage the key idea of being together as being essentially a mystical *reliance* without a particular object' (Maffesoli, 1991: 10). The fusion of the collectivity is as much modeled on the sacred as it is on aesthetics.

One can fully appreciate that there are strong parallels between art and religion when it comes to the fusion of the self with Other. Indeed, to the extent that Romanticism provided modern aesthetics with a vocabulary for dealing with aesthetic experience, the kind of experience of transcendence involved clearly owes something to the human relationship to the divine. But Simmel provides one or two reasons why art and religion may involve a different kind of fusion. In his art historical essay, *Rembrandt*, he compares art to religion and concludes that '[f]or religion, the unification of trans-individuality and individuality is a constriction because religion is grounded in the former. In contrast, for art, whose roots lie in the latter, this self-same unification means an expansion' (Simmel, 2005: 161). The contrast lies in that, in art, individuality and trans-individuality are experienced as 'though there is no duality' (Simmel, 2005: 161). In aesthetic experience, external compulsion is replaced with subjective compliance with an agreeable form. This is why, for Simmel (1950: 94), sociability is aesthetic in that it provides a 'miniature picture of the societal ideal that might be called the freedom to be tied down'.

What is predominantly at issue here is how we conceptualize the 'voluntary' component of social integration through aesthetic means. Simmel seems to favor situations, like sociability and the meal, where individual private desire comes to correspond (not submit) to the group situation; Maffesoli prefers to highlight the activities of tribal groupings where the pleasure of fusing with the collectivity overwhelms and

transcends individual subjectivity. Aesthetics as subjective adjustment to an agreeable object or situation (the Kantian notion of the *beautiful?*) versus aesthetics as submission to an overwhelming spiritual or collective force (the Kantian notion of the *sublime?*).

Whether or not these are mutually exclusive options is an important issue for a sociological aesthetics. Kevin Hetherington's (1998) recent reading of Maffesoli as a necessary corrective to the 'inner-directed personality' of mainstream sociology (the Weberian ascetic and rational actor) is an important contribution to this debate. The former places the latter within a tradition that takes its lead from Durkheim on the importance of affective ties:

The importance of affect within collective sentiment, emotional groupings and forms of identification can be seen in the work of a number of sociologists and anthropologists who take their lead from Durkheim ... [They] have all written on the emotional character of groupings in ways that valorize the significance of affect, rather than treat it as in some way irrational and a detraction from the reasoning and judging capabilities of the bourgeois, individual subject. (Hetherington, 1998: 42-3)

However, the crucial thing about collective identities based on an 'expressive outlook' or 'lifestyle choices' is that their 'affectual' character doesn't diminish the fact that they are also 'elective' and therefore reflective forms of sociation. Hetherington (1998: 49) suggests: 'The terms "elective" (meaning chosen) and "affectual" (meaning derived from feelings), in the context of such identities, can be used together without too much cause for concern'. Maffesoli's aesthetic communities are simultaneously 'elective' and bathing in the 'affectual ambience' of that lifestyle choice. Interestingly, Hetherington uses the work of Herman Schmalenbach, a student of Simmel, to argue for the concept of the Bund to account for social bonds based on aesthetic sentiment. The term has been translated as 'communion' or a connection chosen for its expressive and emotional qualities (Schmalenbach, 1977). Hetherington (1998: 83) suggests that the concept of Bund or communion captures the 'affectual identification with others that gives individuals the elective and expressive identity that they seek'. It is elective and affective simultaneously. In his own work, Hetherington (1992; 1998) has documented how aesthetic groupings as different as the early Kibbutz movement and New Agers who make pilgrimages to Stonehenge entail the Bund form of sociality.

Dionysian energy: Drinking as a form of sociality

If a possible source of tension has opened up in sociological aesthetics between those who stress 'inner-directed' compliance through finding something agreeable (Simmel) and those who see the group overwhelming individual subjectivity through 'affective ties' and 'collective fusion' (Maffesoli), is the project of sociological aesthetics doomed

to remain divided? Or are these two positions stressing different, but complementary, aspects of how aesthetic integration performs its work in social situations? A comparison of Simmel's sociology of the meal with Maffesoli's account of the 'rites of wine' suggests we may want to emphasize both dimensions of the aesthetic experience: the individual subjective adaptation to an agreeable state and the feelings produced by virtue of being together. After all, eating and drinking are paradoxical forms of sociality; it is instructive to see why.

As developed earlier, Simmel sees the meal as the very microcosm of an aestheticized social order. The meal represents a temporary 'aesthetic reconciliation' where the solitary and private, and very 'physical act of eating' blends into a 'higher' synthesis (Simmel, 1997a: 133). Simmel sounds like Norbert Elias when he delineates that the individualized plate, fork and knife, are an important evolutionary step towards aestheticizing this form of sociality; they symbolically frame the act of eating as something where each individual enjoys him or herself individually, consumes an individualized portion and where the enjoyment of the group as a whole is now a function of that regularized individual consumption. The restraint, tact, and refinement, exercised by the individual diner are necessary preconditions for the reciprocal enjoyment of all. We seem to be again, with the bourgeois subject – as Hetherington terms it – that is governed by an 'inner-directed personality'. Only this assumption is coupled with the 'principle of reciprocity ... my enjoyment or my gratification is always dependent on the joy and gratification of all the other participants' (Gronow, 1998: 150). The reverse also holds true: 'It only takes one to spoil the joy of all and by spoiling the joy of others, I unavoidably spoil my own' (Gronow, 1998: 150). Aesthetic delight may strengthen the social bond; but aesthetic pleasure is also a precarious principle of integration at the mercy of the multiple subjectivities present in the situation.

Yet this is where Simmel himself points to the strength of that aesthetic glue. He notes that eating is sociable precisely because of the long prehistory, still discernible within the stylized form, of the 'natural' and 'communal' aspects of eating. He suggests no amount of aestheticization and styling can make participants 'forget' that the meal 'involves the satisfaction of a need in organic life' and is therefore something 'absolutely universal' (Simmel 1997a: 133). Then there is the history of the form, traces of which are present in the meal as aesthetic form. Food has always been consumed, in the company of others, for a range of communal and ritual purposes. Simmel mentions the communal feast and the Christian Communion. The table has always had special significance; and the modern, stylized meal retains a connection to that prehistory.

The merry dance of subjective and collective impulses is even stronger in Maffesoli's sociology of drinking. His book *The Shadow of Dionysius* contains a chapter on 'Bacchus'. Maffesoli (1993: 120) suggests there that while the 'choice of wine' is an important element in the temporal logic of sociality – one 'will not serve ... at lunch, a Bordeaux or Burgundy' – at the same time, '[t]he art of drinking is not abstract; it well expresses a cosmic order'. The function of wine in sociality cannot be reduced to some-

thing as abstract as 'taste' or 'gastronomic connoisseurship', even if these play a role. Wine 'loosens tongues and links bodies' (Maffesoli, 1993: 126). Communion through alcohol is not just communication (verbal or otherwise); it is sensual connection.

Like Simmel on the prehistory of the meal, Maffesoli (1993: 128) notes that 'drinking is done with a certain ritual, which makes one think of its religious origin'. Wine has served as a 'sacrament' cementing a sacred union; it has been used to foster 'camaraderie' and the maintenance of the 'corps'. The 'rite of wine' has been practiced by all classes and all manner of social groups. It is the quintessential form of sociality, and unlike some drugs, doesn't encourage solitude. The site par excellence where we see its effects upon sociality is the 'tavern': '[c]lasses and castes are mixed there, happiness is prepared for and resistance to the imposition of powers are organized there' (Maffesoli, 1993: 128). The 'effervescence' that Durkheim locates at the heart of all social relationships, is very much in evidence when people drink together.

But lest drinking become all collective fusion, without subjective mediation, Maffesoli (1993: 122) returns to familiar ground for a sociological aesthetics: 'Sociality, it must be repeated, is not just unanimity ... alcohol excites both proximity and distance'. The sociality involved here includes both the 'adhesion of the group' and the 'cruel' separation of the individual from the group, as can result through excessive consumption. While Maffesoli celebrates the Dionysian qualities of drinking, and the manner in which alcohol provides for a pure form of collective fusion, the social connections formed through wine are strongest when they 'advance a mask' and are engaged in a '*quasi-intentional* manner' (Maffesoli, 1993: 127). Society needs those moments in which one 'lives more and otherwise' (Maffesoli, 1993: 136). They bind the individual to the collectivity. But, even in the case of drinking wine, sociality 'finds its mechanisms of regulation and ritualization' to order the effects of the Dionysian (Maffesoli, 1993: 124). Aptly, Maffesoli (1993: 124) refers to the different social functions of drinking wine as the 'double movement of sociality' – from individual to collective, from nature to culture, from civility to disorder, and back again.

Conclusion

Sociology needs aesthetics now more than ever. But not for the reasons one may think. While it has become popular in social and cultural theory to argue for the importance of aesthetics due to changes in the organization of economy, culture and society, the strongest argument is probably the aesthetic foundations of the social bond. In Simmel's work, we see that all social forms involve aesthetic coordination in that they organize 'sensation' and the play of 'contrasts'; in the case of 'pure forms of sociality', this is coupled with social life acquiring the character of aesthetic autonomy. Something like an 'aesthetic threshold' is crossed, by forms such as sociability and the meal, when they cease to serve external purposes. The attraction of doing things together becomes the principle of individual compliance and the collectivity only lasts as long as each participant is receiving their share of aesthetic enjoyment. To this play of sub-

jective feelings, Maffesoli adds the insight that social actors partake of an 'affective ambience' that resembles Durkheim's 'collective effervescence'. While some neo-Kantians, like Simmel, prefer their theory of aesthetic experience to be less governed by the metaphor of the 'sacred' (a case of blurring the *beautiful* with the *sublime*?), there is a moment of collective fusion in aestheticized social situations that requires explanation. In the end, it may be a case of both/and rather than either/or. We comply voluntarily in aesthetic situations, but the reward is that we encounter something bigger than the self, and that something bigger is what cements the group.

On the basis of the foregoing discussion, I would like to conclude by spelling out what I see as the main contributions of a sociological aesthetics. The three propositions are predicated on the notion that the explanatory power of a sociological aesthetics increases if the model is applied judiciously:

- (1) *A sociological aesthetics needs to specify the mechanisms of integration at work in social situations with an aesthetic character:* What is different about the way in which individuals integrate themselves in social situations where the aesthetic qualities of an object or event shape the social relationships? It has been suggested that this is partly about the depth of involvement and the kinds of attention that the object or event demand from the subject. However, it also has something to do with the kind of expectations and binding mechanisms that aesthetic forms possess. In this respect, it is not a social bond where individual subjectivity is erased; rather it is one where the individual experiences their relationship to the collectivity – to echo Simmel – as if there were no duality. As Simmel (1971: 128) says of sociability, it involves a particular kind of feeling on the part of the individual: 'the associations are accompanied by a feeling for, by a satisfaction in, the very fact that one is associated with others and that the solitariness of the individual is resolved into togetherness, a union with others'.
- (2) *A sociological aesthetics needs to recognize that not all social situations are aesthetic:* The idea that aesthetics can inform the analysis of social life must be predicated on the capacity to differentiate aesthetic from non-aesthetic situations. Following Kant, the principle of 'disinterested' and free contemplation of an object or event has been widely advanced as a defining feature of aesthetic experience. Social situations involving coercion or rule-governed conduct are not overtly aesthetic. To the criteria of disinterested and free involvement in a situation, one could add the necessity of boundaries to frame the involvement and participation of the subject (Sandelands, 1998: 59). In this respect, aestheticized social situations are to some extent artificial; although, as Simmel rightly pointed out, this doesn't make them any less real. Situations that fail to channel perception and feeling in a concentrated manner will probably fail to reach the kind of aesthetic threshold Simmel described for sociability and dining together.
- (3) *A sociological aesthetics should resist vague culturalological generalizations:* I remain convinced that the future of a sociological aesthetics, and the full realization of its

potential, doesn't lie in succumbing to vague claims about economy, technology, identity-formation or the 'end of politics'. The claim that we live in a society that is 'more' aestheticized than earlier ones, or that aesthetics now performs functions previously carried out by religion, morality or politics, are, in the end, empirical questions. They often also involve ignoring the aesthetic character of earlier societies, or societies different to our own. If the sense, that our existence is highly aestheticized, pervades the journalism and social theory of our age there may be some significance in this (see de la Fuente, 2000; Postrel, 2003). But the links between aesthetic sensibilities and social structure need to be explained rather than asserted. We may well be experiencing a pronounced 'aestheticization of everyday life' but the forces at work are likely to be complex. The strength of Simmel's and Maffesoli's versions of sociological aesthetics is that these sociologies leave the question of micro-macro determination largely open. As Gronow (1998: xii) puts it: '[I]n principle, we can ... recognize an aesthetic dimension in more "serious" social formations, like economic or political competition ... [or, in the kind of aesthetic programs] realized daily by ordinary people in the most frivolous forms of social interaction'. It is, in openness to various levels of analysis, the real 'promise' of a sociological aesthetics lies.

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