



Social Sensibility. Simmel, the Senses, and the Aesthetics of Recognition

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Article abstract

In this article, I sketch a theory of social sensibility building on Simmel's Sociology. I focus on the sense of smell and its "distancing" function, and I develop Simmel's insights in line with the phenomenological theory of the "oral sense" (Oralsinn). Notions like atmosphere and Stimmung allow me to shed light on the almost subliminal functioning of social evaluation: sensible inclinations pre-condition deeply social relations. In addition, I focus on the link between recognition and esteem (Anerkennung and Schätzung) in its active meaning (how we value others through our feelings) as well as in its passive meaning (how we strive to please and how the quest for recognition is part of the search for distinction). I conclude by suggesting the need for a reciprocal integration between Simmel's and Bourdieu's reflections.

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Abstract. In this article, I sketch a theory of social sensibility building on Simmel's Sociology. I focus on the sense of smell and its "distancing" function, and I develop Simmel's insights in line with the phenomenological theory of the "oral sense" (Oralsinn). Notions like atmosphere and Stimmung allow me to shed light on the almost subliminal functioning of social evaluation: sensible inclinations pre-condition deeply social relations. In addition, I focus on the link between recognition and esteem (Anerkennung and Schätzung) in its active meaning (how we value others through our feelings) as well as in its passive meaning (how we strive to please and how the quest for recognition is part of the search for distinction). I conclude by suggesting the need for a reciprocal integration between Simmel's and Bourdieu's reflections.

Introduction¹

The study of the role that the aesthetic dimension plays in the dynamics of recognition has important precedents in the work of elite sociologists. Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu highlighted the link between aesthetic issues and social valorisation (in the practice of the arts as well as in the production of forms), and Thorstein Veblen and Erving Goffman reflected on the deep relationship that seems to exist between the construction of social status and visibility. The author who truly offers a wealth of insight and analysis on this issue, and represents an exemplary model of thought in dialogue between philosophy and sociology, has never been

¹ A previous version of this article was published, in French, in *Terrains/Théories*, 4, 2016, special issue "Théories de l'estime sociale", dir. A. Le Goff and C. Lazzeri.

interpreted from this perspective. I am referring, of course, to Georg Simmel, particularly to his work on sociological aesthetics, which will be the leitmotif of my reflection in the following pages. Nevertheless as my intent is to develop a “social aesthetics”, grounded in not only in sociology, but more broadly in anthropology and philosophy,² my interpretation is not confined to the letter of Simmel’s text; in fact it does not stem from strictly exegetical concerns, but instead is involved with defining the outlines of a broader philosophical perspective.

In this article, taking a cue from the sociology of the senses, I would like to show in particular how the aesthetic dimension is intertwined with the question of recognition and social evaluation and conditions it deeply, starting with the phenomena of perception and taste. This approach has never been pursued by philosophers like Axel Honneth or Paul Ricœur: they privilege the moral and normative dimension of the problem (recognition as the attitude one owes others to be respected) or, at most, its cognitive dimension (recognition as an act of identification, as *Erkennen*). It must be stated from the outset that the aesthetic dimension of recognition, from a philosophical point of view, is not limited to integrating existing theories by adding a differentiated third dimension with an autonomous logic and independence from the moral and cognitive dimensions. On the contrary, one of the most fruitful results of this re-reading of recognition through the prism of aesthetics is the discovery of an aesthetic *qualitative dimension*, that is both original and fundamental, which precedes the differentiation between the three spheres and which I name *aisthesis*, or social sensibility.

My remarks will be organized as follows. I will retrace Simmel’s theory of social sensibility from the pages he dedicates to this question in his *Sociology*. I will then analyse the role of the different

² With regards to this project of social aesthetics, I refer to my book on social appearances (Carnevali, 2012b). The second edition will be published by Columbia University Press in 2018.

senses of the *aisthesis* by focusing on the sense of smell – the true sense-guide of social aesthetics due to its “distancing” function – and I will develop Simmel’s insights in line with the phenomenological theory of *Oralsinn*. Notions like *Atmosphäre* and *Stimmung*, which are at the heart of Simmel’s theory of perception, allow us to shed light on the almost subliminal functioning of social evaluation which happens through sensibility: the emotional states awakened by the senses translate into an immediate positioning of the subject with regard to the objects of his perception; they produce sensible inclinations which deeply pre-condition social relations. Finally, I will focus on the link between recognition and esteem (*Anerkennung* and *Schätzung*) and between value, pleasure, and distinction, a question that Simmel treats in its active meaning (how we value others through our feelings) as well as in its passive meaning (how we strive to please and how the need for recognition and esteem is part of the search for distinction). I will conclude by suggesting the existence of a link – as well as the need for a reciprocal integration – between Simmel’s and Bourdieu’s reflections.

1. Social Sensibility

Our point of departure will be the brief but very dense chapter of *Sociology* entitled “Excursus on the sociology of sense impression.” Based on Simmel’s characteristic way of writing and ordering the text this section comes from an independent article published in 1907 in the magazine “Die Neue Rundschau”.³ One year later, the essay was recast in *Sociology*, in the section dealing with the form of space and the spatial organization of society. This specific position of the text in the structure of the volume is very revealing for our purposes, given that the sensory co-presence of

³ In the first version, the essay was preceded by a valuable introduction to the microscopic method of social analysis which was incorporated into the opening chapter of his major work on sociology. For more on the method of Simmel and his style of thinking, see Thouard, 2012.

people in the same space is “the primary scene” of Simmelian sociology. In this situation that offers a model for thinking about social interaction, the senses play the role of fundamental mediators of the relationship of proximity and distance: they are “bridges” that connect individuals and enable them to overcome their physical as well as spiritual separation.⁴

The basic idea of the essay is as simple as it is ground-breaking. The senses are, so to speak, the sensory or aesthetic conditions making social relations possible; they enable and influence interpersonal communication and the formation of the social bond in a fundamental way. The first social relation is created notably through the eyes: the eyes look into the eyes, that is the original link between human beings,⁵ which has a particular dialectic between the perception of others and self-expression. This ability to create intersubjective links is not exclusive of sight, but is the property of all the senses. It varies according to the natural characteristics of sensory organs and according to the historical characteristics of environments, such as their level of technical development. For example, the function and social significance of eyesight and hearing are not the same in a village as they are in the modern metropolis, where it is possible to have the specifically modern experience of observing people travelling with us on public transportation,

⁴ On the centrality of the bridge metaphor in Simmel’s thought, thinker par excellence of the in-between and the exchange, see his essay “Bridge and door” (Simmel 2007 [1909]). Of course, the senses are also “doors” in the relationship between human beings and their environment.

⁵ “In the look that takes in the other one reveals oneself; with the same act, in which the subject seeks to know its object, it surrenders itself to the object. One cannot take with the eye without at the same time giving. The eye unveils to the other the soul that seeks to unveil the other. While this occurs obviously only in immediate eye-to-eye contact, it is here that the most complete mutuality in the whole realm of human relations is produced”, Simmel, 2009 [1908]: 571.

without speaking to them.⁶ According to Simmel, who will open the line of research of Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer (and later of cultural studies), perception always has a strong socio-historical dimension.

All this is quite well known: the pages on sight, on the social meaning of the face, and on the perceptive styles that are peculiar to modernity, are the most frequently cited of this essay, which are, however, surpassed in significance by the philosophical ambition of Simmel's approach. These few pages sketch a whole theory of social sensibility, of the aesthetic foundations of being-together and of the subliminal valuation (*Schätzung*) of other people which is included in ordinary social perception. In particular, I would like to focus on a reading close to philosophical anthropology and phenomenology,⁷ and draw the attention to a passage, normally overlooked by commentators, which serves as a prelude to the essay. Simmel remarks that "The fact that we notice people physically near us at all develops in two respects whose joint effect is of fundamental sociological significance" (570). He speaks, to be precise, of two directions or tendencies (*Entwicklungen*) of the perceptive act, subjective and objective,⁸ which encourages us to evoke a concept

⁶ See also the additional remarks of the essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (Simmel, 1997 [1903]) which can be read as the counterpart to the sociology of the senses.

⁷ In the tradition of Blumenberg, 2006. On Simmel, see chap. XI in particular.

⁸ This Simmelian analysis of the relationship between subjectivity and the objectivity of the senses seems to dialogue with Kant, in particular with paragraph I, §16 from *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*: "Three of them are more objective than subjective, that is, as empirical *intuitions* they contribute more to the *cognition* of the external object than they stir up the consciousness of the affected organ. *Two*, however, are more subjective than objective, that is, the idea obtained from them is more a representation of *enjoyment* than of cognition of the external object. Therefore one can easily come to an agreement with others regarding the objective senses; but with respect to the subjective sense, with one and the same external empirical intuition and name of the object, the way that the subject feels affected by it can be entirely different.", Kant, 2006: 46.

foreign to his thought by reading this reflection as the outline of a theory of the *intentionality of the socio-perceptive act*.

At first, perception is considered from the point of view of the subject, as “their” perception, which provokes inside immediate reactions coinciding with the feeling of a life increase or decrease: “Acting on the subject, the sense impression of a person brings about feelings in us of attraction and aversion (*Lust und Unlust*), of one’s own enhancement and diminishment, of excitement or calm by the other’s appearance or the tone of that person’s voice, by the mere physical presence in the same space” (*ibidem*). Perception counts here for its ability to arouse pleasant or unpleasant sensations – it is in *me*, and it is *me* who feels it – and not for its value of knowledge. It does not serve to recognize or determine others, because “That person’s self is left, so to speak, outside by this reaction of feeling to one’s physical appearance” (*ibidem*). From an objective point of view, on the other hand, perception turns to the outer world and serves to know it; it is a means of informing oneself about the other person and of “characterizing” them: “what I see, hear, feel of the other is simply the bridge over which I would get to where that person is an object to me” (*ibidem*). Simmel illustrates this distinction by the difference between the sound of a person’s voice and the meaning of what that person says. Any voice immediately exercises on those who hear it an effect of attraction or repulsion which is independent of the content of its remarks. The latter, on the other hand, helps to discover not only the thoughts of the other, but also the content of their personality. It is the same with all sense impressions: “they usher into the subject as that person’s voice and feeling (*Stimmung*), and out to the object as knowledge of that one.”

From this analytical distinction, Simmel draws an important conclusion regarding the specificity of perception between people. For non-human objects, the two aspects are often quite separable: the fragrant rose smells good to me, the branch of the tree rocked by the wind or a pleasant sound cause emotional reactions in my soul; if I want to know these objects as a rose, tree, sound, however,

I must use different “energies” and try to discard subjective impressions (Simmel does not explicitly say as much but the model of this form of de-subjectivised knowledge is obviously science). When we deal with a human being, on the other hand, and we perceive their appearance, their voice, their smell, it is difficult for us to separate the two aspects. Simmel does not say that this is impossible, but he insists on the difficulty of drawing an “objective knowledge” of the other person that is entirely “purified” of subjective impressions.

What are here rather disparately alternating with one another are for the most part interwoven into a unity vis-à-vis human beings. Our sense impressions of a person allows the emotional value, on the one hand, the usefulness for an instinctive or sought-after knowledge of that person, on the other, to become jointly effective and for all practical purposes actually inextricable in the foundation of our relationship to the person. To a very different extent, of course, the construction being done by both, the sound of the voice and the content of what is said, the appearance and its psychological interpretation, the attraction or repulsion of the environment and the instinctive sizing-up of the other based on that person’s mental coloration and sometimes also on the other’s level of culture – in very different measures and mixes both of these developments of sense impression construct our relationship to the other (571).

These remarks lead us to formulate the following theoretical conclusions:

- 1) All social perception is a mixture of objectivity (information about the perceived person) and subjectivity (subjective reactions of pleasure or displeasure and, consequently, related to individual taste), whose equilibrium varies in degrees according to different combinations and the natural characteristics of the senses concerned. According to Simmel, the senses such as sight and hearing tend towards objectivity and have a high informational content (hence the possibility of easily sharing their perceptions: people gathered in the same room can perceive the same sky and

listen to the same music, they can “feel together”; here Simmel stresses the political meaning of this tendency towards objectivity); the senses such as taste and smell (and probably also touch, which is not mentioned by Simmel in this essay), instead characterise the subjective side (it is I who feels the taste of strawberry or the scent of the rose) and show instead an individualistic tendency.⁹

2) Since it cannot do without this subjective reaction of pleasure or displeasure, which Simmel beautifully terms the affective reaction (*die Reaktion des Gefühles*) to the sensible image (*sinnliches Bild*) of others, knowledge of people is necessarily an *affective knowledge*. In this subjective reaction of feeling, which coincides with a sensible, non-reflective and instinctive inclination relating us to others in a movement of original sympathy or antipathy, lies the key to the intelligibility of the role that sensibility plays in the phenomenon of recognition and of social esteem.

3) The sensible appearance is the medium of social interaction through which all the cognitive, aesthetic, and practical dimensions of human relationships pass and flow. The example of the voice demonstrates this in an exemplary way: it is its sound which connects human beings and which creates a sensory and emotional communication.

2. A question of nose

After the introductory remarks on the two sides of the intentionality of perception Simmel turns to a detailed analysis of the different meanings of perception in the rest of the essay by enlisting the specific contribution of each of the sense organs to social relations and to its sociological significance. This project of analysis of social sensitivity – rich in subtle suggestions and, as always in Simmel, bordering on philosophical anthropology and

⁹ In the “Sociology of the meal” (Simmel, 1997 [1910]) Simmel shows how different cultures, through a profound work of stylization, have transformed the act of eating, which precisely by virtue of its subjective inclination is the most selfish and individualistic of all, into a ritual, even *the* social ritual par excellence.

sociology of modernity – ought to be further developed and explored, because its contribution to social philosophy could prove extraordinarily valuable.¹⁰ An analysis of the aesthetic dimension of social interaction would be a precious contribution especially for the theory of recognition: the small number of studies that address the issue are generally limited to the treatment of sight, whose notion of *visibility* is considered in its metaphorical sense to be a synonym for that of recognition, both in an empirical and normative sense.¹¹ Yet it is in the analysis of the “lower” senses, that may seem most foreign to the question of recognition, that the originality and fruitfulness of the Simmelian conception are best revealed.

The most interesting sense, for our purposes, is that of smell. This sense, traditionally despised, considered inferior, seen as beastly and therefore not properly human due to its intimate relation to corporeality,¹² presents to Simmel’s eyes a great sociological interest, rightly so, for his intentional imbalance on the subjective side of perception:

There is no doubt that the surrounding layer of air scents every person in a characteristic way, and in fact it is essential to the olfactory impression existing that way so that, of the two developments of the sensory experience — toward the subject,

¹⁰ Among the studies that can already be counted in this project on social sensibility are those of Helmuth Plessner, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Serres, Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf. See also Ostrow, 1990; Howes 1991; Classen 1993 and 1997; Synnott, 1993; Vannini, Waskul, Gottschalk, 2012. The field of *sensory studies* is rich in specific magazines and monographs.

¹¹ In reference to the first meaning see especially Heinrich, 2012, which, to designate the recognition that is unique to media celebrities, speaks of a “visibility capital”. The normative meaning is illustrated by Axel Honneth in his important article on “invisibility”, Honneth, 2001.

¹² On the history of the theories of smell and on the prejudices and epistemological obstacles that prevented its correct philosophical appreciation, see Jacquet 2010 in particular.

as liking or disliking it, and towards the object, as recognizing it — one allows the first to prevail by far (577).

Smell, according to Simmel, says little about the characterization of its object and offers low information content. It remains “captive in the human subject”, immersed in the senses’ reaction to the perceptive act. By considering the sense of smell in light of a major Simmelian concept, that of *Wechselwirkung*, which allows us to classify the senses according to the level of reciprocity established between the perceiving subject and the perceived object, one could conclude that smell is at the bottom of an ideal scale dominated by sight. While the eye, in the paradigmatic form of eyes gazing into other eyes, permits the purest and most direct reciprocity that can exist, the nose does not seem to contain any symmetrical exchange, any move between subject and object. The scale of the reciprocal action thus unfolds between the two poles of sight: total reciprocity – with the gaze being given and received in a single act; hearing – a selfish sense as it takes without immediately giving (it requires a voice to be broadcast to restore the symmetry in two different moments); smell and taste, which take everything without giving. As for touch, in its simultaneous passive and active state it is a figure of reciprocity like sight. It is not a coincidence that, at the normative level, the attribution of recognition will thus find its sensible expression in knowing how to treat people as moral subjects by “looking” and “touching” them in the right way; conversely, looking down at and through someone and lacking social tact are two attitudes that show lack of respect for others.¹³

This imbalance towards subjectivity justifies the strength of olfactory reactions and the capacity of the sense of smell to produce, in the subject, sensations of pleasure or displeasure (in fact it is particularly the latter, “repulsions”) which immediately are translated into evaluative and practical dispositions and which are

¹³ On the meaning of the act of looking through, see Honneth, 2001. On tact, in relation to the problem of recognition, Goffman, 2008.

involuntary and irrational. The sense of smell makes us react to its perception with more immediacy and force than the other senses, more often in a negative way. Hence the consequence emphasized by Simmel:

Instinctive antipathies and sympathies that are attached to the olfactory sphere surrounding people and those, for example, that often become important for the social relationship of two races living on the same territory, find all the less resistance of thought and volition (577).

It is precisely by being instinctive that *aisthesis* reveals its profound relationship with the social, which allows us to reveal the hidden mechanisms of intersubjective recognition. Though this phenomenon concerns all the senses, it is the sense of smell where the evaluative dimension of perception acquires a singular force. Such a dimension is associated with uncontrollable reactions of taste and disgust, which in turn are reflected in the process of distancing that is at the root of social spatialisation and hierarchy. Another aspect that is revealed by the phenomenology of smell is the “atmospheric” nature of the sensible exchange, to which I return later. For all these reasons the sense of smell will serve as a guide to social aesthetics.

By asserting that smell is the quintessential organ of social antipathy – of repulsion, thus also of exclusion and distancing – Simmel seems to accept the definition of “antisocial sense” that Kant gave in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*.¹⁴ Unlike

¹⁴ All of Simmel’s analysis seems to be deeply influenced by the reading of this book where Kant had formulated the condemnation of smell as the opposite of sociability and freedom. Smell’s perceptions place man under the regime of necessity: “*Smell* is taste at a distance, so to speak, and others are forced to share the pleasure of it, whether they want to or not. And thus smell is contrary to freedom and less sociable than taste, where among many dishes or bottles a guest can choose one according to his liking, without others being forced to share the pleasure of it. – Filth seems to arouse nausea not so much through what is repugnant to the eyes and tongue as through the stench that we presume it has.

the other senses that “build a thousand bridges (*Brücken*) among people”, the sense of smell is “the dissociating sense”: it breaks up the bridges of society. It “communicates many more repulsions than attractions”, and its “its judgments have something of the radical and unappealing that lets it be overcome only with difficulty by the judgments of the other senses or minds” (579).

It is no coincidence that both racism and class discrimination draw on smells in the expression of disgust: Simmel, a Jewish professor discriminated against in German academia, recalls insults referring to the “smells of Jews” and “Blacks”, as well as “the sweat of workers”.¹⁵ In a nutshell, as the essay sums it up, “the social question is not only an ethical one, but also a nasal question (*eine Nasenfrage*)” (577) – a phrase which anticipates George Orwell’s famous sentence that the secret of class distinctions can be summarized in the “four frightful words” of bourgeois education:

That was what we were taught – *the lower classes smell*. And here, obviously, you are at an impassable barrier. For no feeling of like or dislike is quite so fundamental as a physical feeling. Race-hatred, religious hatred, differences of education, of temperament, of intellect, even differences of moral code, can be got over; but physical repulsion cannot... It may not greatly matter if the average middle class person is brought up to believe that the working classes are ignorant, lazy, drunken,

For taking something in through smell (in the lungs) is even more intimate than taking something in through the absorptive vessels of the mouth or throat,” Kant, 2006: 50. See Jacquet, 2010.

¹⁵ On the sociology, anthropology, social and cultural history of smell, see Largey and Watson, 1972; Corbin, 1986; Classen, Howes, and Synnot, 1994; Low 2009. The question of a “politics of smell” comes up in contemporary moral and political philosophy, for example in the works of Martha Nussbaum, 2006. On disgust see also Kolnai, 2004.

boorish and dishonest; it is when he is brought up to believe that they are dirty that the harm is done.¹⁶

A leap forward towards Pierre Bourdieu's theory can help us measure the scope of such an intuition. As a sensory organ in which the mechanism of social estimation is shown in its pure nature, and essentially negative, the sense of smell plays a role in Simmel's social aesthetic analogous to that of "taste" in *Distinction*: a role that is both metonymic (the sense that represents the totality of the senses) and metaphorical ("it stinks!" as a metaphor for any social distancing). The analogy between the Simmel and Bourdieu, which finds a conceptual justification in their common references to Kant and Nietzsche as well as, as we shall see, in the notion of *Oralsinn* proposed by phenomenological psychiatry, certainly deserves to be developed. But before continuing in this direction, we need to explore the phenomenological analysis of smell, which Simmel considers to be the sense that exemplifies the atmospheric nature of perception.

3. Atmospheres, Stimmungen, Oralsinn

Kant wrote that the absorption by the sense of smell in the lungs is even more intimate than that which is done by the receptive cavities of the mouth and throat.¹⁷ Simmel draws on this idea, noticing that, unlike the senses that relate to their object through the mediation of external representations (sight, hearing, probably also touch), the sense of smell inhales its object, encloses it, so to speak, and consumes it inside oneself. This creates in the subject a feeling of intimacy and almost of identity with the object which has no equivalent in the other senses, apart from the sense of taste:

¹⁶ Orwell, 2001: 197-198. On Simmel's sociological aesthetics for understanding "some insufficiently explored dimensions of class division in society" see also Mele, 2011: 46-47.

¹⁷ See note 13.

When we smell something, we draw this impression or this radiating object so deeply into ourselves, into our center, we assimilate it, so to speak, through the vital process of respiration as close to us as is possible through no other sense in relation to an object, it would be then that we eat it (578).

This sensation of intimacy and fusion with the object, especially when it is particularly intense, is thus transposed into a contrary reaction of defence, comprising an attitude of selection or discrimination (*Auswahl*) and distancing (*Distanznehmen*):

That we smell the atmosphere (*Atmosphäre*) of somebody is a most intimate perception of that person; that person penetrates, so to speak, in the form of air, into our most inner senses, and it is obvious that this must lead to a choosing and a distancing with a heightened sensitivity toward olfactory impressions altogether, which to some extent forms one of the sensory bases for the social reserve of the modern individual (*ibid.*).

More than for the remark on the specifically modern form of relation to odours – the social “reserve” that in the pages of the *Philosophy of Money* and the essay on the metropolis gives rise to an analysis of the emotional-moral distance to others; a defence strategy of modern metropolitan life – this passage interests us here because of the return of the concept of atmosphere (*Atmosphäre*), mentioned previously at the beginning of the excursus. This concept, which cannot be reduced to a simple metaphor and which enjoyed a moment of popularity in the aesthetic lexicon of the beginning of the last century, distinguishes the entire Simmelian aesthetic theory, including in its sociological developments.¹⁸ In its

¹⁸ On the history of the word atmosphere and on the family of terms “atmospheric”, which also includes *Stimmung* (another important Simmelian concept that we will talk about later), atmosphere and aura, I refer to my study on “aura” and “ambiance”, Carnevali, 2006. I will limit myself here to recalling that the atmospheric concepts had a moment of great diffusion between the years 1900-1930, in all the European languages and in the German culture in particular, as concepts of the theory of the cinema, the psychiatry, and the aesthetic theory.

Simmelian understanding odour is a natural envelope of sensations, that is always perceivable, which surrounds the individual as a natural emanation of their sensory image, the *sinnliches Bild*. Simmel also speaks of non-personal atmospheres, emanating from physical places and social circles: there are atmospheres of alpine landscapes, factories, bad neighbourhoods. In all these examples he seems to presuppose that atmospheres, whether personal or non-personal, have a kind of ontological independence and spatial autonomy – one enters them – as well as the capacity to produce a force of emanation, endowed with a power to capture; one finds oneself caught in their sphere. Additionally, any atmosphere is synaesthetic in nature, like the idea of a sensory image. Simmel speaks of *Bild* by metonymy, by virtue of the particular social meaning of sight in relation to the other senses, but he thinks of the image as the product of various sensory perceptions that go beyond the visual dimension and that articulate themselves in the same overall impression; the voice for example, or the smells, which include the natural scent of the body or the artificial perfume, beautifully defined as the “olfactory adornment.” By developing this intuition more systematically, we could add other auditory (for example, the sounds that a person produces voluntarily or involuntarily) and tactile elements (such as the softness of the skin or the stiffness of the beard, sensory impressions that appeal to both sight and tact, or the simple sense of the physical tangibility of a human body in space) to the list; we could raise new issues, such as the possibility of “tasting” a person – for example, by kissing them, or “sipping” them like infants taking their mother’s milk. One can imagine the interest that research on social sensibility could have for the study of the relations of recognition which are most related to corporeality, in particular the research on the development of

Leo Spitzer has traced the semantic history of this conceptual family and analysed the term *Stimmung* in particular in Spitzer, 1963. The theory of atmospheres plays a role in the philosophy of Peter Sloterdijk, especially in the third volume of *Spheres*. See also Böhme, 2017, and Griffero, 2014.

children in their relation with the social environment or on sex, which produces maximum olfactory and gustatory intimacy.¹⁹

The example of odour that emanates spontaneously from the human body lends itself to illustrating the relationship that exists between *sinnliches Bild* and atmosphere, differently stratified layers of the sensory dimension that share its “emanating” (or “radiant” and “radioactive”) nature, as we read in the excursus on ornament-adornment. The propensity to spread by emanation-irradiation--propagation seems to be, in Simmel’s eyes, an essential characteristic of the sensory dimension, which is found in all its natural or artificial manifestations. In the phenomenology of perfume, which must be read in parallel with that of visual ornament, we find all these elements: the emanation, the capacity of capture, the production of a sphere of the person or the personality (*Sphäre der Person -des Persönlichkeit*) in which one enters and in which one is soaked thanks to the porosity of the senses. The perfume:

enhances the person’s sphere as the sparkle of gold and diamond; one situated near it basks in it and is thus, to some extent, caught in the sphere of the personality. Like clothing, it covers the personality with something that should still work at the same time as its own radiance (579).

Following Simmel, the concept of atmosphere, and also the idea that one smells an atmosphere, that one feels it with the nose, became a central theme of the psychiatric literature of phenomenological inspiration. Eugène Minkowski in particular dedicated an entire chapter of his essay *Vers une cosmologie* (*Towards a Cosmology*, 1936) to the sense of smell, in which he analyses the atmospheric nature of odours that spread in the air and imbue things and people by going beyond the boundaries between inner

¹⁹ See, for example, Macfarlane, 1975; Lafine, 2015. This aesthetic dimension of recognition seems to be particularly relevant for the analysis of intimate relationships that Honneth would classify in the first “sphere” of his normative theory, under the category of love.

sphere and outer sphere, between material and spiritual. Smell, writes Minkowski, “reveals the existence of the atmosphere. It is the atmosphere provided with its fundamental quality”.²⁰ In turn, German author Hubertus Tellenbach, in his *Geschmack und Atmosphäre* (*Taste and Atmosphere*, 1968) proposed the crucial concept of *Oralsinn*, the “oral sense” that combines the functions of taste and smell. This concept, which represents for the subject the point of penetration and fusion with the atmospheric element,²¹ is analysed by Tellenbach from a very Simmelian perspective: unlike the objectifying senses, which appropriate the external reality in the form of representations, the senses traditionally considered inferior encompass fragments of this same reality, eating and breathing them, and merging them with the interiority of the subject. At the origin of our relationship to the world, as the primary experiences of babies demonstrate, there is no clear opposition between subjectivity and objectivity, between consciousness and the material world, but a “state of global affection”, a *Stimmung* that would upset the traditional subject / object distinction that is peculiar to the modern theory of knowledge. We are thus led to the concept that constitutes the natural counterpart to that of atmosphere, which Simmel often uses, giving it a precise definition in his aesthetic writings on the landscape.

The perception of people is, indeed, in certain respects, like the perception of landscapes: the one who perceives is not external to what they perceive, as a subject of an object, but they are always involved, caught in the atmosphere of the personality and imbued of its sensitive emanations. The sensory dimension is therefore at once the *milieu* into which we enter and in which we are contained, and the *medium*, the element of synthesis, the intermediate third which connects and unifies the two sides of perception. Above all, as in the perception of landscapes, the entrance into the sensory atmosphere of a person always produces a *Stimmung*, a determined

²⁰ Minkowski, 1999: 115.

²¹ Tellenbach, 1968.

emotional or affective tone. As we read in the “Philosophy of Landscape”:

When we refer to the mood (*Stimmung*) of a person, we mean that coherent ensemble that either permanently or temporarily colours the entirety of his or her psychic constituents. It is not itself something discrete, and often also not an attribute of any one individual trait. All the same, it is that commonality where all these individual traits interconnect. In the same way, the mood (*Stimmung*) of a landscape permeates all its separate components, frequently without it being attributable to any one of them. In a way that is difficult to specify, each component partakes in it, but a mood prevails which is neither external to these constituents, nor is it composed of them.²²

The Simmelian concept of *Stimmung*, like that of atmosphere, is a medium and is synthetic. It designates a sensory and impersonal “state” that makes it possible to overcome the opposition between subject and object in the idea of a third entity that links them and who participates in the nature of the two. Close to the notion of qualitative experience that will be theorized by John Dewey,²³ *Stimmung* is characterized by its holistic nature. When we perceive a person, when we breathe their atmosphere, a form of experience occurs within the subject in which it is impossible to distinguish clearly between the cognitive dimension (what we know of them thanks to the perception), aesthetics (the sensations and affects stimulated by perception, especially the essential forms of sympathy and antipathy) and the practical dimension (the different relationships that can be established with this person). These three levels are merged into a single predominantly aesthetic,²⁴ sensory

²² Simmel 2007 [1912]: 26.

²³ See Dewey, 1984.

²⁴ We can therefore conclude that in the *Stimmung*, as original relation unifying subject and object, the aesthetic dimension is revealed as a primary undifferentiated dimension from which the other cognitive and practical spheres

state characterized by a specific affective tone that “colours” the experience by this qualitative individualization that Simmel called *Färbung* throughout his work. In this holistic sphere, imbued with the aesthetic feeling, the primitive intersubjective relation is always pre-conditioned by an inclination which disposes us towards the other in an infinite multiplicity of given nuances: attraction, admiration, malaise, disgust, confidence, mistrust, love, diffidence ... The question of the possibility of a neutral, and therefore of a discoloured *Stimmung* that takes place in the tone of indifference is not addressed even indirectly by Simmel, and therefore remains open.

It is precisely *Stimmung* at the origin of our opening to others. Thanks to this, we see empathy as an original dimension of recognition, close to the phenomenon of which Axel Honneth speaks in his essay on reification: an elementary, transcendental recognition, always loaded with affective and qualitative contents, that reveals to us our “participation” in the existence of others by affectively “positioning” us towards them.²⁵ Yet, unlike the recognition-empathy that addresses the generic humanity of the other (“we existentially experience the fact that every man is an *alter ego*”²⁶) and that claims universality, the model of recognition that can be drawn from Simmelian thought addresses the individual personality of the other, and distinguishes itself by its irreducibly singular and idiosyncratic meaning. This, precisely because of its aesthetic nature, is what makes each encounter with others determined by the uniqueness of the circumstances of sensory perception as well as by the affective singularity of the individualities

gradually emerge and differentiate. The synthetic, unifying and conciliatory function seems to be a specific characteristic of the aesthetic dimension in the eyes of Simmel, heir to this aspect of the philosophies of romanticism and German idealism.

²⁵ See Honneth, 2008, and the clarification in Honneth, Haber, 2008. On the relationship between *Stimmung* and empathy, Pinotti, 2013.

²⁶ Honneth and Haber, 2008: 103

concerned (the singularity of its sensory appearance, the singularity of my sensory reaction).

This inter-subjective development of Simmel's "qualitative individualism" poses many problems at the normative level. We can indeed reflect on the consequences that the discovery of the aesthetic recognition (or sympathy) has on the properly moral recognition, in particular on its aspiration to an egalitarian and disinterested treatment of the others. In what way, and against what resistance, can we affirm the normative dimension that requires us to treat others with justice? And what is this justice, and how is it articulated vis-a-vis the *injustice* of the initial sensory, qualitative disposition, the *Färbung* which always gives rise to preferences, which makes us discriminate against others according to the feelings of pleasure and displeasure, of sympathy and antipathy, of love and hatred that they necessarily arouse in us? Does this justice consist, from a Kantian perspective, in an equality of treatment and consideration, namely in the affirmation of a universal respect towards the humanity of the other in the form of its rational capacity and which must struggle, by repressing it, against sensible inclination? Or does it consist in the cultivation of initial sympathy, susceptible to universalization by means of progressive corrections and decentralizations – according to the teaching of the Scottish school of Moral Sentiment, and especially of Adam Smith?²⁷

It is beyond the remit of this article to discuss in depth these new problems, to which I intend to return in future studies. To conclude this overview of the aesthetic dimension of recognition, I would now like to consider the relationship between *Stimmung* and social esteem.

²⁷ For a historical and theoretical reconstruction of this tradition of thought, and a critical discussion of its difficulties, see Lecaldano, 2013.

4. Anerkennung, Schätzung, distinction

Simmel does not propose a normative approach and his treatment of the question of recognition remains at the empirical level of the analysis of the concrete mechanisms by which the tendency of human beings to relate to one another by immediate sensory relations is translated into a fight for distinction. We have seen how the reactions of pleasure and displeasure that we experience in perceiving people or things have an initial evaluative dimension: I like him, I do not like her, it attracts me, it repulses me, she is sympathetic, he is antipathetic, they are all initial judgements of value that emerge in a spontaneous and almost subliminal way from the social sensibility. With regards to smell, this reaction is very immediate and instinctive, which makes it a sense that reveals with extreme evidence the dynamic of social esteem. However, in different degrees of mediation, this happens with all the senses, by the simple force of their subjective intentionality: all the senses evaluate, all the senses estimate. The fact that every sensory impression is *mine*, that it brings pleasant or unpleasant sensations *into my soul*, necessarily involves on my part an act of affirmation or negation, the taking stance, the expression of an idiosyncratic taste.²⁸ Simmel thus ends up adopting a Nietzschean explanation: social value originates in the individual psychology of pleasure, which implies that every passive act of perception is accompanied by an immediate re-action consisting of an act of affirmation or of negation: “it tastes good”, “it tastes bad”.²⁹ As Rousseau clearly saw

²⁸ I do not mean “judgement of taste” because this would seem to refer to a more universal and complex dimension, referring to Kant. Instead what we are dealing with here is a completely individual and idiosyncratic experience, as well as one that is both immediate and empirical. For an approach to the social role of taste which owes a great deal to the Kantian heritage, see Gronow, 1998.

²⁹ The influence of the *Genealogy of Morality* on this aspect of Simmel’s philosophy seems obvious to me, beginning with the allusion to the sensation of vital increase or decrease (*Gesteigertheit oder Herabgesetztheit, Erregung oder Beruhigung*) which always accompanies sensory perception. It becomes more explicit in the passages on the olfactory nature of social discrimination: “It is noteworthy that someone of such

in his *Discourse on Inequality*, in the seemingly innocuous act of expressing “preferences” in perceiving others, in other words, in the social expression of taste, hides the act constituting social hierarchy.³⁰

In the excursus on the *Schmuck*, jewellery-adornment, composed and published as an independent essay in 1908 and so contemporaneous with the essay on the sociology of the senses and in turn included in *Sociology*, the same question is repeated from the other side, not that of the person who evaluates through perception, but that of the person who is evaluated through being perceived. The question of pleasure is thus reformulated in the form of the “desire to please” and returned to an anthropological theory of the desire for recognition as distinction. According to Simmel, human beings not only experience pleasure or displeasure in their sensory interactions, but also want to actively please their fellow humans. This desire to please presupposes a selfish interest, the search for self-value at the expense of others which, paradoxically, is expressed by an altruistic act of disinterest:

Interwoven with the desire of the person to please associates are the opposite tendencies in the interplay of which the relationship between individuals generally takes place: a goodness is in it, a desire to be a joy to the other, but also the other desire: that this joy and “favor” would flow back as recognition and esteem, our personality be reckoned as an asset. And this need increases so far that it entirely contradicts that initial selflessness of the desire to please: even by this kindness one wants to distinguish oneself before others, wants to be the object of an attention that will not fall to the lot of others—to

a fanatically exclusive individualism as Nietzsche often said openly of the type of person most hateful to him, ‘they do not smell good.’” (578). See also the allusions to the will of power whose expression is the desire to please, in the subsequent quote from the essay on adornment.

³⁰ On this aspect of Rousseau’s theory, as crucial as it is neglected by criticism, I refer to Carnevali, 2012a, in particular chapter II.

the point of being envied. Here the kindness becomes a means of the will to power (332).

The will-to-please is the original source of this quest for recognition. Simmel refers to it by its Hegelian name, *Anerkennung*, but unlike what happens in the Hegelian process, this elementary move has no normative dimension and falls into the path of desire for distinction, a strategic derivative of the will to power. This mixture of the desire to please – and thus dependence on others as well as the desire for power and thus the desire for superiority – gives rise to the flagrant and incurable contradiction that is typical of all models that see the quest for recognition as a form of the search for distinction, like those of Hobbes and Bourdieu: “there arises thereby in some souls the strange contradiction that, with regard to those people over whom they stand with their being and activity, they nevertheless find it necessary to build up their self-esteem in their consciousness precisely in order to keep them subordinate” (332). As Simmel will say in another context, the paradox of vanity is that it needs others to despise them.³¹

Now, according to Simmel, the value we seek in social esteem is always a *sensory* value. One wants to please and, ahead of that, to be perceived: to receive attention, admiration, attract the eye, which contributes to an increase in the social value of the individual through the mechanism of envy. By evoking a formula that circulates in contemporary culture, we could associate this aesthetic theory of social esteem with an economy of attention, where value is produced precisely by its ability to attract attention and looks, to

³¹ Here again, an in-depth parallel with Rousseau’s theory would be illuminating, according to which the desire for recognition is essentially a desire to please. It should be noted how Simmel addresses the problem of recognition by remaining within the paradigm of the seventeenth-eighteenth-century modern philosophy, that is, linking it, in the fashion of Hobbes, Rousseau, Hume, Smith etc. to the phenomena of the individualistic search for power and distinction, pleasure and sympathy. In his pre-Kantian and pre-Hegelian approach lies the fundamental difference with Honneth.

“cause a sensation”.³² In this strategy of struggle for perceptibility, adornment plays a fundamental role, thanks to the sensual attention that it arouses. It immediately gives value to the subject, while at the same time conflating the dialectic of the will to power and the desire to please, to be for oneself and to be for others:

Adornment is something absolutely egoistic insofar as it makes its bearer stand out, sustains and increases one’s self-esteem at the cost of others [...], and at the same time something altruistic because its enjoyment is simply meant for these others – whereas even the possessor can enjoy it only in the moment before the mirror – and only with the reflection of this presentation attains value for the adornment (332).

The comparison with Bourdieu’s model of analysis of social distinction brings very important clarifications to this theory, and deserves at least to be sketched out.³³ If Bourdieu shares the

³² On the paradigm of strategic recognition, from Hobbes to Bourdieu, passing from Rousseau and Veblen, see Carnevali, 2013.

³³ The affinities between the works of Simmel and Bourdieu are striking, starting with the detailed and nuanced common aesthetic-social sensibility and phenomenological analysis method of group lifestyles. The rapprochement between the two authors is often proposed by German and Anglo-American readers, but rarely, if ever, mentioned in France, probably because of the particular reception suffered by Simmel’s work: hampered by the Durkheimian prohibition, associated with the defence of a certain type of individualism (from Raymond Aron to Raymond Boudon), biased by the post-modern appropriation of Michel Maffesoli’s school and by Bourdieu’s diffidence towards aesthetic formalism (“Here the sociologist finds himself in the area par excellence of the denial of the social”, Bourdieu, 1996: 11). Significantly, it is in an interview on *Distinction* given on German television that Bourdieu explicitly speaks of his debt to Simmel. Answering a question about his relation to Simmel and Elias, he says he “read Simmel a lot”, and “particularly liked his analyses in sociology of culture”, but he also expresses reservations about the Simmelian method, “too confident in its subtle intuitions but a little superficial.” He concludes that he feels closer to Elias, notably to his *Court Society* (Bourdieu, 1983). An affinity of method “from a phenomenological angle” was also noted by Axel Honneth in his Bourdieu obituary published in *Le Monde* (Honneth, 2002).

intuition with Simmel that the stakes risked in aesthetics profoundly influences the question of recognition and give it the form of a struggle for distinction, it does not exhaust all the fruitfulness of this idea, relegating it fundamentally to the field of elite sociology. In his eyes, it is only the ruling classes who practice the aesthetic distinction by making it an instrument of their domination, because they have the availability of economic resources as well as free time (*the scholè*) necessary to cultivate taste and acquire a competence in the field of forms. Bourdieu reduces the logic of aesthetic interaction to his understanding of material pre-conditions, thus his ultimate explanation remains economic. The perspective opened by Simmel, on the other hand, is much broader because, it is fundamentally philosophical anthropology. While it informs the strategy of the leisure class of his time, as in the analysis of the distinctive function of fashion,³⁴ it addresses in principle all the forms of social interaction that take place in the sensory dimension: the practices of all classes, all groups and all individuals, including the simplest, to which, in principle, we can recognize an aesthetic competence as complex and refined as that of the elites. Admittedly, that leaves open the question of legitimate taste, in other words, of aesthetic hegemony, yet what matters in this broadening of perspective is that the aesthetic dimension becomes an ingredient and an anthropological factor in any search for recognition.

Bourdieu's theory can be enriched by another Simmelian intuition which proves invaluable: that of the aesthetic nature constitutive of social value, and especially of the value of distinction that we might call prestige. It is an implicit consequence of the aesthetic-social origin of the question of recognition. If the attribution of social value goes through *aisthesis*, social value itself must have sensory qualities, as exemplified par excellence by precious jewels, in particular jewels and sumptuous clothes, which

³⁴ See Simmel's "Philosophy of Fashion" [1905]. The Simmelian thesis that fashion is a distinctive strategy internal to the struggle of the elite against the petty bourgeoisie is, significantly, the most dated aspect of his analysis, which has attracted the criticism of fashion studies.

are endowed with a capacity of emanation, creating a sensory atmosphere. For this to be truly distinctive, social value must shine, burst, radiate in the air. Again, Bourdieu seems to have glimpsed the trail – the strategies of distinctions are articulated in a privileged manner by the possession of artistic objects and familiarity with the arts – yet again he oversimplifies the problem as a result of his reductive attitude to the aesthetic dimension, which, reduced to its economic logic, lacks, in his eyes, any autonomy or specific logic.³⁵ His structuralist conception of value, moreover, leads him to see, in objects and aesthetic practices, pure positional values independent of their sensory qualities and meanings. For Simmel, on the other hand, it is social value itself that has a purely aesthetic-social origin and effectiveness. We see it in an exemplary way with the example of ornamentation, which fulfils its function insofar as it attracts attention and admiration, precisely, by its visibility.

Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that Bourdieu's theory allows us to correct that of Simmel in at least two aspects of greatest importance, both of which are implicit in the theory of *habitus* formulated in the *Sens pratique*: 1) thanks to his insistence on incorporation, Bourdieu's materialism attenuates Simmelian formalism which always seems threatened by an idealistic inclination. It is the question of the *body*, in all its materiality and all its inertia, which in the end hides under the materiality of sense and perception. Simmel seems to consider this problem in an ambiguous way: sometimes he seems to evoke it indirectly (material bodies are glimpsed behind his numerous allusions to the "sensory co-presence" of individuals in space), but he never discusses it openly. Hence the impression that there are in his social theory senses without flesh and appearances without corporal supports;³⁶ 2) the approach of Bourdieu helps us correct the phenomenological

³⁵ See also Gombrich, 1974.

³⁶ From this perspective, Simmel's legacy should be rethought in dialogue with that of Plessner or Merleau-Ponty, under the model of the interpretation of the question of visibility proposed in Blumenberg 2006.

style of Simmelian philosophy, which sometimes places too much reliance on the immediacy and spontaneity of the senses. Bourdieu constantly reminds us that perception and taste are also socially constructed and determined by patterns of perception, appreciation and action that incorporate the structures of the world (categories, values, systems of classification) necessarily making our appreciative judgements, which we think to be free and spontaneous, the result of fashions and trends, easily susceptible to serving power and social reproduction. What pleases or repels us is often what society has taught us to find pleasant or disgusting through the unconscious training of our *habitus*. Which is why we must always be wary of immediate sensations that are mobilized in the experience of social *aisthesis* as suggested by the orchestra metaphor that often returns in the analyses of Bourdieu: behind the sensations of agreement and harmony, disagreement and disharmony, which are implicit in all *Stimmung*, often hides a “direction” which coordinates the members of the orchestra and which has previously granted them their instruments.³⁷ Any theory of social sensibility must take into account this constructivist reservation.

Once again, I cannot dwell on these crucial issues, which will need to be addressed by specific studies. As a provisional conclusion, I will limit myself to stressing that Simmel’s and Bourdieu’s theories of distinction should always be read in such a way that they are mutually articulated and enhanced. The program of social aesthetics, the bases of which I have presented here in retracing the questions of social *aisthesis* and the aesthetic dimension of recognition, is thus brought about under their joint aegis.

(Translated from the French
by Francesca Montemaggi)

³⁷ See Bourdieu, 2000: 139. The word *Stimmung* derives from *Stimme*, voice, while the verb *stimmen*, in German, designates a plurality of forms of agreement: the correct being, the relevance to the facts, and also the agreement between musical instruments, opinions and tastes, between two or more people, between the elements of a style and an atmosphere (for example the assortment of colors or accessories in a setting or interior decoration).

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