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Volume 28, Number 1, 2024

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1115159ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1115159ar>

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Publisher(s)

Edizioni ETS

ISSN

1616-2552 (print)

2512-1022 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Mele, V. (2024). Review of [A nonfoundational manifesto for sociological aesthetics. On Helmut Staubmann, *Sociology in a New Key. Essays in Social Theory and Aesthetics*, Springer, Cham 2022]. *Simmel Studies*, 28(1), 165–172. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1115159ar>

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VINCENZO MELE

A nonfoundational manifesto for sociological aesthetics. On Helmut Staubmann, *Sociology in a New Key. Essays in Social Theory and Aesthetics*, Springer, Cham 2022.

In 1896 Georg Simmel published the essay *Sociological Aesthetics* in the journal *Die Zukunft*, an influential political and literary weekly edited by journalist, actor and radical intellectual Maximilian Harder. Simmel, who was remarkably familiar with such diverse disciplines as philosophy, art history, psychology, history, economics and sociology, introduced into the debate of the *Gründerjahre* (the founding years) in Germany a bold and original juxtaposition of two fields of knowledge, which previously certainly had not been communicating well. Moreover, the literary form of the essay was the *medium* and the creation of an experimental space in which different styles of thought and research could fruitfully meet. Although the daring juxtaposition of terminology – both a neologism and in many respects a conceptual oxymoron – does not reappear in later works, in Simmel’s essay it is clearly possible to recognize a genuine *sociological aesthetics of modernity* that focuses on a specific “point of indifference” between art and the sphere of social interactions, with the aim of showing the “reciprocity” (*Wechselwirkung*) between the two fields.

Helmut Staubmann’s book, *Sociology in a New Key. Essays in Social Theory and Aesthetics* explicitly fits into this strand in a conscious and innovative way. The author, however, does not have the ambition to introduce a new “aesthetic or sensory turn” – on a par with those

we have been accustomed to for decades. Rather, and more realistically, he proposes “to examine the theoretical consequences associated with a relationship to aesthetics, the senses, emotions and the body for sociology in general” (ivi, p. 1). The paradigms within which sociology has historically conducted its research both enable and at the same time limit the understanding of the issues at hand. Instead, this volume argues for the need to redefine and reorganize basic sociological concepts and assumptions, to transpose them “in a new key” – inspired by philosopher Susanne K. Langer, the author of *Philosophy in a New Key*, 1942.

In chapter one, the author attempts to clarify the meaning of aesthetics as conceived by him, before subsequently drawing conclusions for social theory, for some basic concepts of sociology and for sociological methodology. Aesthetics in the proper sense means a form of knowledge based on the senses, *aisthetike episteme* in Greek. Subsequently, specializing as a branch of philosophy, it slowly morphed into a structured reflection on the nature of art and beauty. According to Staubmann, the history of aesthetics has witnessed three important “semantic bifurcations” that need to be taken into account in order to bring clarity to the field of inquiry: the first bifurcation is consequent to the split between rationalism and empiricism, which have opposed each other on the basis of the answer to the question about what the source should be of valid knowledge. Whether rational thought precedes perception or vice versa, in both these strands of thought sensory experience is understood as a condition for conceptual or cognitive knowledge of reality. This first “bifurcation” is highly relevant to sociology, since the role of aesthetics and the senses as *aisthetike episteme* is to provide “empirical” data for cognition in general and for science, which would be its most developed cultural form. However, there is a type of “knowledge” quite distinct from cognitive concepts, and this leads us to the second semantic bifurcation toward a definition of aesthetics in the narrow sense: as an “inner” or emotional response to sensory stimuli describable as sensations, feelings or affective states. This nonconceptual – and therefore by definition

nonconscious – “information” that comes from sensory perceptions is just as important a tool for orienting oneself in the world as cognitive information. As far as the functioning of the social world is concerned, this second “emotional” exception of aesthetics underlies such phenomena as sympathy/antipathy, attraction and repulsion, atmosphere in social contexts, affective reactions to contact and body language, among others. Georg Simmel, in his *soziologische Ästhetik*, explicitly refers to this meaning of aesthetics. Indeed, in this essay he observes – in a passage that in the past has earned him harsh criticism of aristocratism and classism – that the social question is *also* an aesthetic question, “because of the meaning of the immediate sensation of pleasure and displeasure, and not only because of the beauty of forms” (Simmel 2020, p. 101, quot. in Staubmann 2022, p. 3). Simmel thus alludes to a third semantic bifurcation of “aesthetics,” which can be expressed terminologically in the bipartition of *aesthetic* as reflection on sensations based on sensory perceptions and *aesthetic* as reflection on the beauty of forms and the arts in particular. As in Simmel’s case, the sociological literature commonly uses the concept of aesthetics in an undifferentiated way, but for this very reason it may be useful to keep in mind the distinction between the latter two semantic elements.

Why, however, can – and indeed must – contemporary sociology and social theory once again fruitfully turn to aesthetics? Staubmann entrusts a quote from Mark Twain to describe what is at stake: “Lord, what do you want words to do to express this? Words are only painted fire; a look is fire itself...” (Mark Twain in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, 1889, p. 347, quot. in Staubmann 2022, p. 12). A sociology that fails to capture the very fire of communication and interaction fails to understand a decisive part of social life. The sociology of the “old European tradition” – as Niklas Luhmann described it – defines humans through specific differences with animals. According to this tradition, corporeality and sensory perception are in common with animals: instead, what would exclusively characterize humans is rationality. According to

these anthropological premises, two “matters” or “substances” have had a privileged place in sociology and have therefore characterized associated life: meaning and normativity. Although used with completely different colorations, the equations social = normative or social = meaningful have become common keys for formulating the distinctive morphology of social systems. In addition to norms and values in normativist structuralism and meaning in phenomenological sociology, it is economic self-interest in materialist social theories and rational self-interest in the various versions of behaviorism that are established as the stuff of which the fabric of society is woven. All these theoretical traditions determine a priori something that in reality can only be determined a posteriori, thus creating a blind spot, not only for the senses, emotions and the body, but for everything that is categorically outside the substance or essence assumed as *definiens* of social phenomena.

In the book, which compiles previous essays by the author, there are several extremely stimulating chapters and paragraphs that seek to demonstrate how doing sociology in this “new key” aesthetic can produce fruitful results. Through a re-reading of significant authors in the sociological tradition such as Georg Simmel, Siegfried Kracauer, T. W. Adorno, Jean Marie Guyau, Gregory Bateson, Talcott Parsons and Niklas Luhmann, Staubmann intends to give battle to what he sees as views of society flawed by “substantialism” or “monism” – among which is that of Pierre Bourdieu.

According to Staubmann, theories of culture that have very often been considered at the antipodes – such as those of Adorno and Parsons – from the standpoint of analyzing the culture/society relationship coincide on the basis of the relative autonomy and independence of the former over the dynamics of the latter. Art and science *in primis*, as indeed all cultural forms, should not be interpreted and explained as mere accumulations of products of action, but as entities that in the course of action and interaction

attain a meaning and reality of their own. Culture, precisely because it is a supra-subjective phenomenon, affects other forms of authority, domination and subordination as well as prestige. It would be the primary task of an “enlightened” *cultural sociology* to reveal and explore the respective relationships:

Instead of taking the path of postmodern dedifferentiation and the regressive fusions of concepts and disciplines as represented in large parts of cultural sociology, we need to further pursue the Parsonian lead and meet his demand for a further conceptual differentiation in the theory of action. It is this important legacy of Parsons that Niklas Luhmann, one of his students, called “sociological enlightenment”: providing a highly complex theory to help us come to terms with the increasing complexity of our contemporary socio-cultural world (ivi, p. 100).

However, in order to accomplish this task, it is necessary to go beyond the objectivist and monistic theory of culture widely accepted and disseminated by Bourdieu, in which forms of capital are merely different appearances – and thus easily interchangeable with each other – of the same power, which results “ultimately” from an economically defined praxis. In fact, Bourdieu would hypostatize the figure of the “over-economized man” – the man devoted to the maximization of his position – to all social space and actions, reducing the relationship between society and aesthetics to that of the *parvenus* (or the *Bildungsbörer*, as Adorno put it) who buys the piano or listens to music even though he understands nothing about it just to enhance his social prestige. A particular case present in the social space, especially continental European, is taken as generalized and as a model to outline an interpretive model of social practices *tout court*.

Alongside theoretical reflections in the book, however, are attempts to look “in a new key” at the world of music (the *Rolling Stones*) or television series (*Game of Thrones*).

Following in the footsteps of French sociologist Jean Marie Guyau who considered aesthetic experiences as the most important

means of creating social solidarity – understood as a feeling of common belonging – the music of the *Rolling Stones* is read as the fundamental factor that generated this feeling of identity and unity for the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Music as art is a means to motivate action and, as a social medium, to create a feeling of unity among those sharing the experience.

Through it, the *Stones* helped disrupt and dissolve established cultural patterns and weave the fabric of what would become a new youth culture, proposing a “pop” lifestyle model. Many observers felt that the *Stones* expressed the social antagonisms of the time with their music that “fueled political sentiments.” Attempts to engage the *Stones* in some more explicit political statements, such as the juxtaposition of 1960s politics in Jean Luc Godard’s film *One plus One*, however, had little success. With Adorno, we know that the political relevance of music and art is not a matter of including “objective” elements or exhibiting political views in works of art. Art that successfully relates to society includes the antagonisms of reality in the immanence of its forms. In our society, however, musical communication is always linked to technological and economic means. Therefore, music has a dual character of a cultural object and a commodity. The two values can get along well when advanced technology and economic criteria are mainly limited to the means of artistic creativity and communication with the public. However, how does the question arise in the global culture industry when economics and technology become forces that can direct and distort musical creativity and authenticity? Daniel M. Downes and June M. Madeley trace the interaction between cultural industry dynamics and authenticity of musical expression to the formula of “constructed authenticity” (2013, quot. in Staubmann 2022, p. 83). This acknowledges authenticity and at the same time the fact that the *Stones* have become “commodities of an increasingly global cultural industry” with all its implications.

According to Staubmann, therefore, a sociology of the *Rolling Stones* can never claim to explain their music and performances, but rather presupposes them. Like any music, that of the *Rolling Stones*

cannot be totally “explained” by scientific means. In epistemological terms, science remains a second-order observation and cannot internalize the observed into the observation. The confusion of these levels has often had disastrous consequences for social and cultural studies. When Goethe – considered the greatest prodigy of German literature of all time – was confronted with the question of why he had become so famous, he did not refer to his genius, as expected, but gave a rather modest answer. He said it was because he and Germany grew up together. As for the *Rolling Stones*, the answer to the corresponding question might be that it all happened because they and the post-war youth, with all its peculiarities and social and cultural transformations, grew up together. First, the “game” itself; second, the coincidence of the right circumstances, which are extremely complex and beyond the control of any “player” and, if they occur by chance, count as luck; and third, the hard work and effort to keep the game going. The *Stones’* success rests on these three foundations: their music, their performances and their ecology of conditions and circumstances. Despite their simplicity, they do not dispense with the need for further study and research; they are all there is

Similarly, according to Staubmann, one cannot explain the global success of a series such as *Game of Thrones* solely on the basis of qualities extrinsic to the work or merely commercial in nature: “The series is not successful because it reflects current social realities, but rather because of the specific form of the fiction itself, which is about aestheticizing fundamental human powers and thus has an effect by means of its effective imagery” (ivi, p. 100). The appeal of *Game of Thrones* is not based on content or sociopolitical realism, but rather on formal-aesthetic qualities. It is the logic of “fantastic fiction” that creates tension and excites the audience. From a theoretical point of view, it is not about “homomorphic” creations – in the sense of forms that imitate social reality – that can be found in successful “fantastic fiction,” but rather about a functional aestheticization of the society and environment of the target audience. It is about aestheticizing the tension between the powers

of chaos and the struggles for order, as well as their pitfalls. In *Game of Thrones*, this is achieved by using stylistic devices with deeply rooted cultural metaphors such as that – exemplary and archaic – of the “dragon” that becomes the key to the specific understanding of power. The dragon is a refunctionalization of the *monster* archetype that expresses the archaic fear of the uncontrollable, of darkness, conceptualized in classical political philosophy by Thomas Hobbes’ metaphor of *homo homini lupus*. However, the opposite phenomenon is also well represented in the series: triumph over “dragon chaos” can reverse into the opposite effect: an absolute, totalitarian political order – Leviathan – kills life on par with uncontrolled disorder.

In summary, *Game of Thrones* depicts the archaic and primordial side of power by effectively showing us the frightening and at the same time attractive face of the cosmos that exists outside the “iron cage” of modern rationalization, over which we have no control and on which our existence nonetheless depends.

On these theoretical and empirical investigation bases, it is possible in conclusion to say that Staubmann’s book effectively contributes to a “manifesto for sociological aesthetics” that has long been needed in order to gather a widespread sensibility in authors and researchers that differ from each other, yet share a “family resemblance.” It leaves a “non-foundational” manifesto – unlike many political or artistic manifestos of modernity – which does not intend to propose a new sociological theory or a new way of doing social research, but which can contribute to revising and enriching existing social theory and research from the perspective that Simmel pioneeringly called “sociological aesthetics.”