



The *Blasé* and the *Flâneur*. Simmel and Benjamin on Modern and Postmodern Forms of Individualization

Vincenzo Mele

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Article abstract

Simmel's blasé and Benjamin's flâneur as symbols of their models of metropolitan subjectivity can be the necessary reference points for delineating two models, sometimes converging, other times diverging, regarding the representation of the individual and its possible autonomy in the context of the "aestheticization" of contemporary daily life. Simmel does not stop looking – albeit with an accent on the tragic that grew ever stronger in last stages of his reflections – at the individual and the process of individualization from the perspective of the ever more marked differentiation and growth of the vital possibilities of the individual. Simmel's conception of life as Adventure expresses an irreversible trend of contemporary subjectivity, which is towards the realization of its peculiarity and uniqueness. Benjamin, on the contrary, criticizes the conception of the adventure as the very search for true "lived experience" (Erlebnis), because it would lead directly to the aestheticization of politics, the exaltation of the noble gesture, the search for the authentic – all the forms of cultural expression that led to fascism and war. He seems rather prefer going beyond – in the utopian and/or ideological sense – the individualistic structure of contemporary society. His hope was that the void created by the disappearance of the western individual could be filled by new forms and figures of subjectivity and intellectuality made possible through the means offered by the technical reproducibility of artwork. From an exquisitely theoretical point of view, nothing can guarantee a priori that the search for authenticity does not head in this regressive direction, instead of establishing a point of departure towards new ethical and political paths.

VINCENZO MELE

*The Blasé and the Flâneur. Simmel and Benjamin on Modern and Postmodern Forms of Individualization*¹

Abstract: *Simmel's blasé and Benjamin's flâneur as symbols of their models of metropolitan subjectivity can be the necessary reference points for delineating two models, sometimes converging, other times diverging, regarding the representation of the individual and its possible autonomy in the context of the "aestheticization" of contemporary daily life. Simmel does not stop looking – albeit with an accent on the tragic that grew ever stronger in last stages of his reflections – at the individual and the process of individualization from the perspective of the ever more marked differentiation and growth of the vital possibilities of the individual. Simmel's conception of life as Adventure expresses an irreversible trend of contemporary subjectivity, which is towards the realization of its peculiarity and uniqueness. Benjamin, on the contrary, criticizes the conception of the adventure as the very search for true "lived experience" (Erlebnis), because it would lead directly to the aestheticization of politics, the exaltation of the noble gesture, the search for the authentic – all the forms of cultural expression that led to fascism and war. He seems rather prefer going beyond – in the utopian and/or ideological sense – the individualistic structure of contemporary society. His hope was that the void created by the disappearance of the western individual could be filled by new forms and figures of subjectivity and intellectuality made possible through the means offered by the technical reproducibility of artwork. From an exquisitely theoretical point of view, nothing can guarantee a priori that the search for authenticity does not head in this regressive direction, instead of establishing a point of departure towards new ethical and political paths.*

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1. Introduction

The *metropolis* represents the grandiose summation of the new ways to experience space and time, the physical and social environments that have characterized western societies since the spread of capitalism – the perpetual becoming, the continual, uninterrupted upheavals of social order, unstable social relationships, and at the same time, the longing for an eternal, immaculate, stable present (Cacciari, 1973; Füzessey and Simay, 2013; Mele, 2011; Rafele, 2010; Abruzzese, 2011). Georg Simmel dedicated only one essay - which is the transcript of a lecture he gave at the *Gehe-Stiftung* in Dresden - explicitly to the subject, namely *The Metropolis and the Mental Life* (“Die Grossstädte und das Geistesleben”, 1903), but we can consider his entire work pervaded by a “metropolitan spirit”. The essay on the metropolis summarises the main themes of the *Philosophy of Money* (1900), in which he carries out an extensive philosophical, sociological and aesthetic analysis of the monetary economy, which largely coincides with metropolitan culture. The metropolis has a similar theoretical and biographical importance in Walter Benjamin’s work. He devoted fourteen years to his unfinished work on the *Passages of Paris* (*Arcades Project*, 1926-1940), the city that for him (as for Siegfried Kracauer) was the emblem of modernity. He intended this study to be an “primeval history of modernity” (*Urgeschichte der Moderne*) as represented in the events and culture of the French capital between the rise of the “bourgeois King” Louis Philippe and the decline of the fragile republic with the empire of Louis Bonaparte. The conceptual framework inaugurated by Simmel and Benjamin would turn out to be particularly important during the entire 20th century up to the present. As Featherstone perspicaciously observed, the rise of the *metropolis* moreover represents a key, even founding, moment in the sociology of cultural processes and *cultural studies* in general:

while we can utilize Weber and Habermas to orient ourselves in the tastes and life styles of artists and intellectuals, and their interest in generalizing aesthetic perceptions and sensibilities, Benjamin and Simmel can be utilized to direct us toward the way that the urban landscape has become aestheticized and enchanted by the architecture, the billboards, shop signs, advertisements, packaging, road signs, etc., and by the people who, immersed in this setting, consequently move about in these spaces: individuals dressed up to various degrees, fashionable clothing, hair styles, makeup, or who move or hold their bodies in a particularly stylized way (Featherstone, 2007: 76).

Featherstone suggests that Simmel and Benjamin still furnish some key elements for interpreting any analysis of the post-modern “culture of consumerism” and the phenomenon of the “aestheticization of daily life”. An analysis of the *metropolis* enables us to understand the aesthetic contributions to the modern process of *reflexivity*. This is especially true if we consider the problem of *subjectivity* and its survival in the context of mass society culture, whose true “paradigm” is to be found precisely in the social form of the 19th-20th-century metropolis. If we regard the *blasé* and the *flâneur*, respectively, as emblems of Simmel’s and Benjamin’s models of metropolitan subjectivity, we can see how analysing, reconstructing and comparing these two figures can help understand some essential aesthetic and cultural characteristics of our times. Paraphrasing the renowned closing of Max Weber’s *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Zygmunt Bauman, a contemporary author very attentive to the ethical and sociological dynamics of individuality, splendidly framed the importance of the figure of the *flâneur* in the contemporary cultural scene:

The *flâneur* wanted to play his game at leisure; we are forced to do so. For when *flâneurism* was carried out from of the Parisian arcades into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly aesthetics, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of

the post-modern consumerist order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with living their life as play, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last bit of information is turned out by the computer. In Baudelaire's or Benjamin's view the dedication to mobile fantasy should lie on the shoulders of the *flâneur* like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment. But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage (Bauman, 1994: 153).

Thus, in contemporary society we are all forced to become *flâneurs*, to wander aimlessly through the labyrinths of consumerism. That which 19th-century individuals did for amusement and relaxation, curiously exploring the first consumer paradises, has nowadays become a mass practice: we are all *flâneurs*, zapping through myriad TV channels, surfing the Internet or cruising the *Shopping Malls* in the outskirts of our cities. The *flâneur* can with good reason be viewed as a metaphor for the subjectivity of modern consumerism, of life lived as a “representation” – a game whose natural setting is the world of conspicuous consumption, where it is possible to take on disparate “virtual” identities that meet and are played out in the domain of acquisition. This “generalization” and massification of the *flâneur* experience is a good example of a transition of the age. Experience of the *metropolis* seems to have moved from the *boulevards* of the 19th-century to the shopping malls, to our TV screens and other non-places of *supermodernity* (Augé, 1995) or contemporary postmodernity. Is this the reason that the experience of the *metropolis* has changed its ways and means? Has there, in other words, been a “post-modern” metamorphosis in the processes of the dialectics between individual and society, to the point of representing a truly new phenomenon in the social and cultural panorama of western modernity? To try to answer this

question (an endeavour that could easily take up the research agenda of a lifetime), we would like to introduce some conceptual elements that will enable us to, if not actually answer it, at least suitably contextualize it, and thereby open up a path for future in-depth research.

2. Between Schopenhauer and Nietzsche

In a brief, but highly cogent, well-documented essay, the German philosopher and sociologist Axel Honneth delineated the “fragments” (*Bruchstück*) of a “sociological diagnosis of the time” containing some essential aspects of post-modern culture; these turn out to be particularly important for any proper comparison between the 19th-20th-century *metropolis* and the “aestheticization” of contemporary daily life. Firstly, the technological innovation that came about in the late 20th century, together with the extensive process of internationalization of capital, has led to a massive entry of culture into the processes of economic evaluation, whose most prominent manifestation is the growth of mass media and advertising. This, in turn, has led to a phenomenon that has become daily experience for modern westerners (and not only), that is, the ever-increasing flow of electronically produced information and images that enters our homes daily through TV screens and computers. One result of this is the “trend to erosion of the aesthetic means of communication of the world of social life” (Honneth, 1994: 12). To put it in other, simpler terms, cultural activities lose their particular nature as the means to communicate a symbolic representation of the living world of men, and instead take on the characteristics of an electronically reproduced “technical environment” designed exclusively for amusement and entertainment. Secondly, this process of erosion of the media goes hand in hand with a process of erosion of the normative bonds of the world of social life itself, a phenomenon that the French

philosopher Jean-François Lyotard has described as “the end of the great narrations. Finally, this “erosion” of the social also involves a weakening of individuals” communicative and relational capacities, which indicates a tendency towards the “atomization” of the individual and erosion of the social bonds through which social groups expressively and normatively reproduce. The definitive “erosion” (*Auflösung*) within the “social” milieu has some important consequences on the development of individual subjectivity: in contemporary reality, instead of traditional 19th-20th-century models of *self-realization*, based upon more or less sound interior subjective motivations, fictitious biographies are constructed aesthetically through the virtual culture of electronic media. Thusly defined, the transition to the post-modern represents nothing more than the pessimistic cultural diagnosis that Adorno and Horkheimer formulated in the chapter on the *Cultural Industry* of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). The difference however resides in the fact that, contrary to these latter, post-modern authors judge the cultural erosion and loss of individual authenticity positively. Hence, according to Honneth, the transition from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to *post-modern* theories and cultural diagnosis can be meaningfully compared to what Simmel had already stated regarding the cultural transition from *Schopenhauer to Nietzsche* (described in his 1907 book):

While one [Schopenhauer] still remains oriented to the idea of an objective goal (*Zweckgebundenheit*) of human life, in the light of his definitive insolubility, but also in the pessimism of his Metaphysics of the will, the other [Nietzsche] can free himself from such negativism by dissociating himself from the idea of fulfillment of human life and internalizing it to the mere growth of its possibilities; in place of an idea of “self-realization”, the image (*Vorstellung*) emerges of an experimental invention of the self (*Selbsterfindung*) (Honneth, 1994: 15-16).

The question is therefore set in terms of a conception of subjectivity (Schopenhauer) that remains anchored to an idea of an *objective goal* of life, even though coloured by pessimism regarding the possibility of its realization, and another conception (Nietzsche) that definitively frees it from any presupposition of fulfilment, of self-realization of subjectivity, whence the question of the mere growth of possibilities arises. Schopenhauer (Bodei, 2002: 52) is the philosopher who refused the *principium individuationis* and revaluation of the dimension of the body and all those external appeals to rational subjectivity (dreams, myths, the unconscious), which opened up new perspectives for research in western thought (Nietzsche himself, Pareto, Freud, Benjamin, Adorno and Horkheimer). Schopenhauer represents *one* of the fundamental poles between which the dialectics of 20th-century subjectivity oscillates: that which can be described and characterized as scepticism towards the *evidence* of subjectivity, of the capacity for self-determination and fulfilling oneself through reflection. However, this vision remains tied to the idea of an objective goal to life: indeed, it is the blind will of self-preservation. Twentieth-century currents of Schopenhauerian thought can thus be said to be critical of the metaphysics of the free and autonomous individual (the fact that individuals are not only self-aware consciousness and reason), but they do not extend this fundamental scepticism to the objective goal of life, which, in the currents that connect to Marxism, the need for organic exchange with nature still remains (man's essential need for *work*). For Schopenhauer, the ego, the individual, personal identity are only marginal and secondary phenomena of the *will to live*, that, despite the term, has nothing to do with man's free will and discretion, but rather represents an undifferentiated *energy* that characterizes every being in the world. All individuality is therefore a deceptive reality and intrinsically void of any value, or better, as put in *The World as Will and Representation*,

“we are like the *swirls* that the will to live scribbles on the infinite blackboard of space and time”, quickly cancelled to make room for others (quot. in Bodei, 2002: 47). Although men appear different one from the other and endowed with unique, exclusive individual characteristics, their affairs are actually similar to those of theatrical masks in plays, where the same characters with the same passions and the same destiny are always present. In his fundamental cycle of lectures published in 1907², Simmel underlines that the importance of Nietzsche with respect to Schopenhauer consists in having posed the question on the meaning of life per se:

From the thoughts on evolution, Nietzsche, in contrast to Schopenhauer, attained an entirely new concept of life: that in and of itself, by its own, most intimate essence, is elevation, growth, increasing concentration of the forces of the world surrounding the individual. Through this instinct, immediately set-in motion in him to guarantee elevation, growth, the perfection of value, LIFE ITSELF CAN BECOME THE GOAL OF LIFE and hence exonerated from the question regarding its ultimate goal, which remained beyond its process that unfolds purely and naturally (Simmel, 1991 [1907]: 20-21).

Simmel therefore calls attention to Nietzsche’s new concept of life, which is “the Darwinian absolutization of the idea of evolution”, by which he diverges radically from Schopenhauer. Both philosophers, however, assumed as their point of departure the fact that “the contents of life do not suffice to confer value on it”: while Nietzsche resolves the problem of value by establishing a “qualitative growth of life”, Schopenhauer instead insists on the absurdity of the life process, on its circularity and its senselessness (Rammstedt, 2003: 89).

Nietzsche attributes analogous importance to the primacy of the vast and obscure region of the body. This does not however completely obscure its philosophical counterpart, “the ancient and venerable hypothesis” of the soul, as it seems to occur in Schopenhauer. According to Nietzsche, it is simply a matter of overturning the original Platonic texts, taken up by Christianity, and declaring – in the words of Michel Foucault, who echoes Nietzsche’s – that “the soul is the prison of the body” (Bodei, 2002: 83-84). The problem of the individual therefore is that he does not simply *have* a body, but rather *is* a body, made up of an enormous quantity of monads, each in turn endowed with consciousness: “there are [.....] in man as many consciousnesses as there are beings – in every instant of his existence – that constitute his body” (Ibid.). The presumed “consciousness” of the Ego can maintain its consistency and its unity over time only because it detaches itself from the infinite variety of the experiences of the many “bodily” consciousnesses and, as a consciousness of superior rank, chooses only a *selection* of simplified experiences, which are rendered perspicuous and intelligible. Only through this “reduction of complexity” (this expression of Luhmann’s is absolutely relevant here) is it possible to prepare what we commonly call “a will”. If decisions were not taken, if there were no continuous “coup d’état of the will”, humankind would die off in the paralyzing chaos provoked by the myriad voices of the body. Thus, according to Nietzsche, the Ego represents “a plurality of forces of the personal sort, of which now one and then the other come to the forefront, as the ego, and regards the others as an individual looks at an external world rich with influences and determinations. For a time, the individual is at one point and then for another at another” (Ibid.). In such a context consciousness is no more than a “multiplicity of consciousnesses, and that which we call Ego is nothing more than the societary construction of many souls”. Here

we find the model of subjectivity described by Simmel in *Social Differentiation* and which is sometimes defined as the model of the “Plural Self” (Ferrara, 1996).

If we accept the scheme proposed by Honneth, and consider Schopenhauer and Nietzsche as two points of fundamental oscillation of the cultural dialectics of the 20th-century modern and post-modern, from both the general philosophical point of view, and the sociological point of view due to its effects on what has been defined as an “erosion” of the social (or “aestheticization of daily life”), then our research on Simmel and Benjamin begins to take the form of a “pre-history” of modern and post-modern subjectivity, in that the *blasé* and the *flâneur* represent two archetypes, two “original forms” of 20th-century reflections on subjectivity that oscillate between these poles. Within a certain margin of error (such a comparison would require further research), we can consider the subjectivity represented by the *flâneur* akin to Schopenhauer’s model: Benjamin’s research tends toward a new form of subjectivity unalienated by the recovery of forces extraneous to identity rationality (myth, dreams, intoxication)³. Simmel’s *blasé* individual, to the contrary, aims to increase his own particularity through distinction from the masses, remaining faithful to Nietzsche’s *pathos of distance* (albeit interpreted critically, Lichtblau, 1984). For Simmel, the importance of Nietzsche as “moral philosopher” lays in his “ethic personalism” that constitutes a “Copernican revolution” in moral philosophy (Simmel, 1992). Nietzsche goes beyond the alternative of “egoism and altruism” in modern ethics in favour of

³ There are few investigations on the affinities between Benjamin and Schopenhauer. Based on Eiland and Jennings (Eiland & Jennings, 2014), there are no traces of Benjamin’s reception of Schopenhauer. However, there are striking similitudes between Benjamin’s “pessimism all along the line” as expressed in his 1929 essay on French Surrealism and Schopenhauer’s pessimistic world view. On Schopenhauer’s concept of society see Horkheimer & Cronan, 2004. On Simmel and Schopenhauer’s pessimism see Ruggieri, 2006.

an “objective idealism of realizations of the human genre represented by singles persons”. In other words, what decides the values of a determined social organization it is not the happiness of the majority of its members and neither the general wellness, but its capacity to favour the development of objective qualities (nobility, beauty, talent) whose existence is a goal in itself, like the work of art. If the nineteenth century introduced the social point of view as the point of view of excellence, Nietzsche infringed the modern identification of society and humanity, excluding that the value of human action consists in its social effects. Simmel obviously couldn’t foresee the intrinsic ambiguity of this philosophical position (as Benjamin did): from one side it represents a disfranchising from society and its utilitaristic criteria, from the other side it requires the social production of exceptional individuals. To this question, Nietzsche answer was the exaltation of inequality and even slavery: a very dangerous thesis rich of political consequences that Simmel from his standpoint on the threshold to 20th-century couldn’t be pledge for guilty⁴. The *blasé* and the *flâneur* thus become the necessary reference points for delineating two models, sometimes converging, other times diverging, regarding the representation of the individual and its possible autonomy in the context of the “metropolization of social life”. Therefore, even the characteristics of current modernity, which are often included under the label of postmodernism, can be better understood through in-depth investigation of the *modernité* (or the *metropolis*). It is not by chance that careful commentators and analysts of postmodernity or liquid modernity, felt the need to refer to the conceptual historical period of the turn of the 20th century⁵.

⁴ On Simmel’s interpretation of Nietzsche as “moral philosopher” see Partyga, 2016 and Ferruccio Andolfi’s introduction to the Italian translations of Simmel’s essays on Nietzsche (Andolfi, 2008: 7-28).

⁵ On postmodernity in social sciences see Susen, 2015 and Mele, 2017.

Simmel's *blasé* and Benjamin's *flâneur* represent two symbolic figures of the cultural dialectics of 20th-century subjectivity, which focused its reflections on the problem of the conservation and development of an autonomous subjectivity in the context of mass society, represented emblematically by the social form of the metropolis.

3. The *blasé* and the *flâneur*

The experience of Benjamin's metropolis is in both continuity with and opposition to Simmel's. In continuity, because Benjamin owes Simmel a series of central indications and motifs (Mičko, 2010: 187ff.): the sociology of metropolitan perception and acceleration (Dodd and Wajcman, 2016), the theme of fashion, the sociology and culture of objects, critical reflections on Marx's theory of value, the metaphorical-empirical method that comes from Goethe (Dodd, 2008). In opposition, because the analysis, diagnosis and above all the prognosis that Benjamin produces with regard to the process of western individualization is radically different from Simmel's. With his "pre-history of modernity" (*Urgeschichte der Moderne*) Benjamin intended to investigate precisely that aesthetic-cultural modernity which Simmel interpreted so cogently. Benjamin, however, – and herein lies the fundamental difference – witnesses with his own eyes the failure of the *principium individuationis*, which for Simmel constituted the distinctive mark of metropolitan social life. For Benjamin the metropolis is above all the "mournful representation" (*Trauerspiel*) of the disappearance of that model of autonomous and differentiated individuality that Simmel aspired to, though in an ever more disenchanted fashion towards the end of his reflections. Little does it matter in this case whether the object were Paris or Berlin: Simmel is a "metaphorical" inhabitant of this great city that Benjamin looks to find the origin (in the peculiar sense in which he intends all of this: *Ursprung*) of the catastrophe toward which bourgeois society was headed, faced with the rise of

Nazism and the Second World War. Benjamin tries to take a retrospective look at the “rubble” of that era in which Simmel still had a leading, albeit late, role. Benjamin’s scrutiny is a retrospective one. In a certain sense the *flâneur* as a historical-cultural figure is the *blasé*, and therefore, as a historical figure also exhibits the characteristics of dandyism, urban aristocracy, etc. Benjamin contemplates the existence of different *flâneurs*: there is the contemporary *flâneur*, represented by Benjamin himself, who portrays “city images” of Naples, Moscow, Marseille, San Gimignano, the cities on the North Sea (Buck-Morss, 1989; Gilloch, 1996; Mele, 2011). Distinct from these is the autobiographic portrait in Berlin, which is instead *flânerie* in time, rather than in space, the forerunner of the historical-collective *flânerie* of the work on *Paris Passages*. Lastly, there is the historical-metaphysical *flâneur*, represented by the *Angelus Novus*, the watercolor by Klee that appears in his theses on the concept of history. The *flâneur* as a 19th-century historical-literary ideal type, the eminently Parisian creature that Benjamin traces in 19th-century literature above all in the works of Baudelaire (Benjamin, 2003b [1938], 2003a [1940])⁶. This is the figure that we can liken to the Simmel’s *blasé* the dandy, journalist, metropolitan intellectual, present in other European capitals as well. The Paris of the second half of the 19th century, “capital of the 19th century”, the metropolis symbol of modernity for Benjamin, is seen above all through the gaze of Baudelaire’s allegorical poetry. It is Baudelaire “the hero of modern life” of Benjamin (Benjamin, 2003b [1938]:

⁶ Benjamin’s interpretation of the *flâneur* as social figure has been criticized for lacking historical accuracy. Benjamin’s concept would be based on incorrect readings of Baudelaire and Poe, and conceived as a myth based on a one-sided understanding of modernity involving self-loss, alienation, and fetishization (Lauster, 2007). This interpretation however doesn’t invalid the *flâneur* as a key figure of modern and postmodern forms of individualization.

43ff.). The metropolis of Baudelaire is therefore the first, fundamental metropolis experience we encounter in Benjamin. It expresses Benjamin's point of view on the modern. Benjamin's "Baudelaire" is the one that can most usefully be compared to Simmel's *blasé*, as they are both sons of the same metropolitan *Geist*. What characterizes the French poet in a peculiar way is that he is, according to Benjamin, "a secret agent – an agent of the secret discontent of his class with its own rule" (Benjamin, 2006: 92n): he is an asocial, a character on the margins of his social class who expresses his latent unease. Baudelaire, unlike the *blasé* and Simmel, sees the metropolis from the visual angle of *death*. Benjamin saw an affinity between the presence of allegory in his poetry and the Baroque allegory to which he had devoted himself with his study of German Baroque drama. He wondered about the *Flowers of Evil*. "How is it possible that a stance seemingly so 'untimely' as allegory should have taken such a prominent place in the poetic work of the century?" (Benjamin, 2003c [1939]: 179). What could the Paris of the Second Empire have in common, with its glittering department stores of goods, the ladies strolling along the great boulevards, the muffled world of Jacques Offenbach's operetta (Kracauer, 2002 [1937]), with the gloomy and melancholy atmosphere of the German Baroque *Trauerspiel*? Benjamin captures in Baudelaire's allegorical ingenuity the lucidity of those who had been able to see behind the glittering phantasmagoria of the times, the dark shadow of the capital's permanent domination. The splendor of urban phantasmagoria with its premises of progress and well-being caused in him the typical response of allegorical melancholy. At the basis of Baudelaire's allegorical sensibility is no longer - as for the Baroque *Trauerspiel*- the loss of faith in divine action in history, but, in the worldly context of the Paris of the Second Empire, the anarchy of financial capital, the fetishistic character of the commodity in the context of capitalist production, which prevents men from having

full control over their individual and social destinies⁷. Paris therefore appeared to Baudelaire, like History to the German Baroque poets, not as “process of an eternal life”, but rather “as process of incessant decay” (Benjamin, 2019 [1928]: 188) because he sensed, albeit instinctively and anarchically, the injustice and precariousness of the foundations of the social order.

It is in this context that allegorical sensitivity becomes “secularized”, while maintaining - as is characteristic of the late phase of Benjamin’s thought - its original theological meaning⁸. “The gaze of the allegorist, as it falls on the city, is the gaze of the alienated man” (Benjamin, 1999 [1935]: 10). The psychological basis of the allegory then becomes the daily experience of the inhabitant of the metropolis that Simmel described for Benjamin with exactitude. And here Benjamin, in the wake of Simmel, develops that theory of the “atrophy of experience” (*Verkümmierung der Erfahrung*) which made him famous in the following *Massenästhetik* (Raulet, 1996). The experience in the modern metropolitan context is transformed from *Erfahrung* to *Erlebnis*, from cumulated and passable “experience” (*Erfahrung*) to individual and fragmentary “lived experience” (*Erlebnis*). According to Benjamin, *Erfahrung* belonged to traditional and community

⁷ While writing the book on the *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin was engaged with Georgy Lukács, whose *History and Class Consciousness* he read in 1924. Marx’s localized theory of commodity fetishism became in Lukács a view of society as “second nature”. Benjamin discovered a consonance between the central idea of Lukács’s book – the concept of “reification” – and the concepts that emerged in the writing of the book on the *Trauerspiel*, particularly that of “history-nature” (*Natur-Geschichte*). Looking back to this period in a letter of 1931, Benjamin said that the *Trauerspiel* book was “already dialectical, if not yet materialist” (quot. in Eiland & Jennings, 2014: 226).

⁸ Baroque allegory inspires in the spectator not just “insight into the transience of things” but a “concern to redeem them for the eternity” (Benjamin, 2019 [1928]: 223).

contexts (Benjamin, 2003a [1940]: 313-321). When one gives “experience” in the sense of *Erfahrung*, the contents of the individual past come into conjunction with those of the collective past through the continuity of tradition. “Experience” comes to configure itself as the possibility for man to draw spontaneously from his own past and to make it vital in the present. *Erlebnis*, on the other hand, in the particular meaning that Benjamin gives to this term, is precisely the experience that is possible when the traditional and community context of the *Erfahrung* is shattered. It is not only the “lived experience” of the isolated metropolitan citizen, definitively uprooted from his past, but it is also the fruit of the social reality that he finds himself facing at every crossing of the street, made of sudden gestures, sudden shots, perceptive shocks. The *Erlebnis* that takes place in this context “sterilizes” the event, depriving it of its relationship with the past. It, therefore, comes to be the social foundation of modern allegorical sensitivity. The past becomes for the allegorist “dead possession”, “object of remembrance” (*das Andenken*), incapable of muttering correspondences to the present. Here lay the greatness and importance of Baudelaire. He was the poet who placed the metropolitan, “intellectualistic” (Simmel) and reified experience at the center of his artistic work. He sought to lyrically represent a form of experience that was the exact opposite of lyricism. In this sense his was a work by Sisyphus, destined to inevitably suffer checkmate and plunge into anguish.

There is a certain affinity between the metropolis of Baudelaire and that of Simmel. Both see the reification of experience, the dissonance between subjective and objective culture. A fundamental difference lies precisely in the “anger” with which the poet hurls himself against the city and the melancholy with which he paints it. Simmel, despite having witnessed the tragedy that the metropolis confronts us with, still strives to maintain an impartial attitude: “our task... is not to accuse or forgive: only to understand”

(Simmel, 1997b [1903]: 185). But above all, however, the metropolis of Simmel produces a form of extreme, refined individuality. It is always in any case a hotbed of possibilities of individuation and personality development. For Simmel, *Erleben* is possible as a positive synthesis of individual experiences. “Goethe is the individual who has now conquered his own law, perfect and closed autonomy - *Erlebnis* who became *Dichtung*, existential multiplicity dominated by the measure and ‘rhythm’ of subjectivity” (Cacciari, 1973: 62)⁹. This is not Baudelaire's viewpoint. He rejects the logic of the division of labour and takes the side of the asocials and outcasts: “he realizes his only sexual communion with a whore” (Benjamin, 1999 [1935]: 10). He prefers these, because they seem to him more sincere than an order and a facade that appear to him to be lying. Stephane Symons argues persuasively that “the category of the individual, of such importance to Simmel, is no longer of primary importance to Benjamin” (Symons, 2017: 96). Benjamin's views on Baudelaire illuminate his category of modern metropolitan individuality. The *flâneur* is not an individual in Simmel's sense: he doesn't possess a singularity and it doesn't refer to a unique and irreplaceable, continuous unity. The *flâneur* – in the various incarnations we can find in Benjamin's work – remains, on the contrary, on the surface of things and does not have a mental life to speak of, with a deeply rooted sense of selfhood. “To indicate such a non-individualized life that nevertheless comes together with a dimension of hope, Benjamin uses the term ‘character’” (Ibid.). In this sense, the *flâneur* can be related not to a beggar but a Prince, that is Prince Myshkin (Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*) of whom Benjamin

⁹ Podoksik persuasively argues that Goethe's individualism for Simmel is a true synthesis of individuality and universality achieved through the radicalization of qualitative individualism, without any recourse to quantitative individualism (Podoksik, 2010: 139). On Simmel's concept of individuality see also Schwerdtfeger, 1999.

wrote that he is “completely unapproachable” and “emanates an order at whose center we find a solitude that is almost absolute” (Benjamin, 1996 [1921]: 79). “Any sense of a ‘deeper’ self or inner-I, that is to say, is alien to the mental universe of characters, who cannot shake off a seeming superficiality and shallowness. Characters do not build up a unified ego through a spontaneous openness to the world’s events, and their identities are not ‘continuous streams of becoming’ that take shape in an intimate dialogue with their surroundings” (Symons, 2017: 96). If we concentrate essentially on the *flâneur* as a historical figure that foreshadows the prehistory of modern subjectivity outlined by Horkheimer and Adorno in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Adorno and Horkheimer, 2002 [1944]), Benjamin seems to want to delineate a recipe for going beyond – in the utopian and/or ideological sense – the individualistic structure of contemporary society. He witnesses the process of “bourgeois” individualization fail definitively and fade above all before the ascendancy of the “reactionary mass regimes” of fascism and Nazism and the great technological revolutions for which the metropolis is an eminent symbol: journalism, cinema, radio, and in general the technical reproducibility of art. His hope was that the void created by the disappearance of the western individual could be filled by new forms and figures of subjectivity and intellectuality made possible through the means offered by the technical reproducibility of artwork. Art—in particular cinema, an art from and for the masses—can be in this contest the educative mechanism through which the crowd as “new collective technoid body” can begin to appropriate its own political and technological potential¹⁰. In this

¹⁰ In the very important essay dedicated on *Surrealism* (1929) Benjamin theorizes this concept of a “new collective technoid body” as the basis of a new “technological cosmopolitics” (Caygill, 2005: 225): “The collective is a body, too. And the *physis* that is being organized for it in technology can, through all its

sense his diagnosis goes beyond Adorno's (as testified to both by the correspondence between Benjamin and Adorno and the reflections that the latter advanced in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Minima Moralia*, or in his years of exile from Germany immediately prior to the war), which was equally pessimistic about the recovery and disappearance of bourgeois subjectivity, but nonetheless gave him hope for radical criticism of the social structure. In fact according to Adorno Nietzsche's (and Schopenhauer's) illusion of willingly breaking the "chains of individuality" would only end in redelivering us defenseless to the omnipotence of economic mechanisms¹¹.

Simmel instead does not stop looking, albeit with an accent on the tragic that grew ever stronger in last stages of his reflections (Simmel, 1968b [1918]), at the individual and the process of individualization from the perspective (in this case remaining faithful to Nietzsche's moral philosophy) – of the ever more marked differentiation and growth of the vital possibilities of the individual. According to Simmel, the modern metropolis does not produce a deficiency of personality, but rather an excess, a proliferation of myriad and diversified lifestyles. His judgment in this regard is ambivalent. The metropolis leads not only to cultural tragedy, but also and equally to an exaggeration of the personality,

political and factual reality, only be produced in that image sphere to which profane illumination initiates us. Only when in technology and image so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the extent demanded by the *Communist Manifesto*." (Benjamin, 1999a [1929]: 217-218)

¹¹ For Adorno, any criticism of the subject that does not start from the decision to save it is reactionary. If this is not the case, criticism becomes merely symptomatic, a mimetic expression of the crisis and not its mastering: "all that remains of the criticism of bourgeois consciousness is the shrug with which doctors have always signalled their secret complicity with death" (Adorno, 2005 [1951]: 64)

in such way that the individual, according to Simmel, “he has to exaggerate this personal element in order to remain audible even to himself” (Simmel, 1997 [1903]: 184). Moreover, “the particular modern need for a behavioral style in personal life, which Simmel centers on in his ‘diagnosis of the time’ (*Gegenwartsanalyse*), brought with it increased manifestations of subjectivism, which he saw around the end of the century in the loss of meaning of historical traditions, in the disappearance of the strength of conviction in the world’s great conceptions and in a multiplicity of offerings of new possibilities for cultural self-realization” (Lichtblau, 1997: 61). This multiplicity of styles is the very fruit of the increasing possibilities for choice in modern times and represents a chaotic, disorienting offering that prompts a search for a life style that is formally and coherently defined. As Simmel himself states in one of his late essays on culture (Simmel, 1997a [1911]), modernity is characterized precisely by a superabundant life that has yet to find the ability to express itself in any form.

4. Aesthetics and everyday life

In order to better understand the differences between Simmel’s and Benjamin’s conceptions of individuality, it is important to consider the differing relation between aesthetics and daily life, a relation that – as highlighted by Honneth – form the bases of modern metropolitan subjectivity. According to Simmel, art plays a fundamental role in subjectivity: it is through the “aestheticization” of life that individuals partially succeed in escaping the fragmentation of the plurality of affiliations and the anonymity of monetary relationships: this aestheticization takes the forms of fashion, adventure, sociability or all other forms of “*Spielformen der Vergesellschaftung*”, to which Simmel devoted a number of essays – such as *sociability*, *coquetry*, *ornament*, *style*, amongst others (Mele, 2013: 21-58). This characteristic has made Simmel a “forefather of cultural

Bolshevism”, to put it in Benjamin’s words¹²: that is to say, a precursor of the 20th-century avant-garde artistic movement, which aimed to overcome the boundary between art and daily life. However, it can be argued that as Simmel makes art the very paradigm of social practice, it tends to lose its critical and utopian nature. In other terms, Simmel and Benjamin propose two different, competing forms of the aestheticization of daily life: one becomes the very paradigm of social and individual reality, the other seeks to build itself up against it, and thereby represents an irreducible, utopian escape route from the state of existing things. In Simmel and Benjamin, therefore, there is a face-off between Baudelaire’s “anger” and the bourgeois detachment of the *blasé*, the unkept *promesse de bonheur* and the work of autonomous classical art. Simmel seemed to have realized this when he conceived of his own “sociological aesthetics” in counter position to the traditional conception of the artwork as autonomous and complete in and of itself. The fact that an understanding of the disruptive power of “auratic” art depends on reference to the practice of daily life can be interpreted as a sign that it has the capacity to assert its own “self-

¹² “You look askance at Simmel –. Is it not high time to give him his due as one of the forefathers of cultural Bolshevism (*Kulturbolschewismus*)? [...] I recently looked at his *Philosophy of Money* [*Philosophie des Geldes*]. There is certainly good reason for it to be dedicated to Reinhold and Sabine Lepsius; there is good reason that it stems from the time in which Simmel was permitted to “approach” the circle around George. It is, however, possible to find much that is very interesting in the book if its basic idea is resolutely ignored. I found the critique of value of Marx’ value theory remarkable” (Benjamin, 1994: [1910-1940]: 599). *Kulturbolschewismus* was the term which the Nazi minister of culture Goebbels used to define “degenerate art” (*das entartete Kunst*), that is, the practices and movement of the avant-garde, expressionism in particular. With this reference Benjamin intended to highlight the radicalism of Simmel’s position, which was substantially different from the “dialectic mediation” that forged Adorno’s line of reasoning. In this regard, it is in this philosophical space of the description – at once metaphorical and empirical – of the modern experience where Benjamin met Simmel. On Simmel and the early Frankfurt School see Mele, n.d..

sufficiency” solely within the “mutable and contradictory form of life”, thereby renouncing every form of transcendence (Lichtblau, 1996: 390-391).

In a late essay (1914) Simmel himself criticized the conception of *l'art pour l'art* for its excessive rationalism, that is, because “it excludes from that which is significant to the essence and value of the artwork all that does not act within the sphere of art” (Simmel, 2000 [1914]: 13). He does however try to correct the “aesthetic rigorism” of this conception via the “new conception of the relation between life and its elements and contents”, in other words, the *Lebensanschauung* – his own conception of the philosophy of life. If one adopts such perspective, one can arrive at “preserving the integral clarity and closure of the pure artistic point of view – the liberation of art from all that falsifies its essence as art and in conceiving of it, together, as a wave in the stream of life” (Ibid.). In other words, Simmel believes that the “salvific” intervention of art in existence can occur if it establishes a paradoxical, contradictory relation with life: on the one hand, it represents “an entirely closed whole, that does not need the world, a sovereign, self-sufficient whole also with respect to those who enjoy the work” (Ibid: 12). At the same time, however, “it is situated within the stream of life, welcoming this flow into itself as regards the creator, and releasing this flow from the perspective of the beholder” (Ibid.). The “lived experience” (*Erlebnisi*) of artwork, allows us to transform the fragment of our life into a whole. Art is thus both *more life* (continuous creation, power that originates from life, a “wave” in the stream of life) and *more than life* (a whole that goes beyond life itself as a sovereign, self-sufficient whole). Hence, the experience of art is an adventure, one that transforms the chance fragment of existence into totality, providing its remains (precisely) an adventure, that is separate from the rest of the course of life, just as a *frame* separates a picture from the rest of reality.

For Simmel the aesthetic sphere – in the Kantian sense of disinterested pleasure – performs a significant role in settling or attenuating this conflict within the metropolitan culture. Apparently marginal, peripheral experiences become central to achieving realization of one's own personality. One example, amongst others, that Simmel offers of his conception of the “aestheticization of life” comes in his important essays devoted to *Adventure* (Simmel, 1910, 1996 [1911]). An “adventure” is experience as *Erlebnis*, in which life becomes a whole, on a par with artwork. The adventure must be interpreted literally, that is, as *Ad-venture*, to move forward apparently unawares towards the future, with “the ‘sleepwalking certainty’ with which the adventurer leads his life” (Simmel, 1997c: 227). The adventure thus becomes the opposite of a chance occurrence along the path of existence. It interrupts the normal course of things, but at the same time creates positive and meaningful bonds with the whole that the adventure itself has interrupted. Thus, the adventure brings forth life in its totality, in its full breadth and force herein resides its importance for individual subjectivity. It frees us from the influences and limitations that dominate ordinary life – we venture into the unknown. In this way the individual can reach his own center through the unfolding of his personality. As Remo Bodei states in the article published in this issue (Bodei, 2019: 17), for Simmel “the richness and meaning of life are to be found in virtual spaces and times, in an ‘elsewhere’ which is unplaceable in the series of places and events in which we find ourselves day after day”.

Benjamin takes up the considerations made in Simmel's essay in some fragments of the *Passagenwerk* devoted to “Idleness” (*Müßiggang*). As he had already theorized in his essay on Baudelaire, he reveals himself entirely skeptical about this possibility of regaining *Erlebnis*, authentic experience that arises thanks to the extension of life into the field of art. He views this tendency as

dramatically similar to the aestheticization of the experience of war carried out by the fascists during his own century. The nature of *Erlebnis*, that is, the fact that life is concentrated in it, as in an instant without past or future, in such way that every external content becomes relatively immaterial, the *shock* that it represents, looming large on the opaque background of the rest of life, refers directly to the experience that soldiers had in the trenches of the First World War: “I am born German; it is for this I die” – the trauma of birth already contains the shock that is mortal” (Benjamin, 1999: 801). Benjamin criticizes the conception of the adventure as the very search for true “lived experience” (*Erlebnis*), because in his opinion it would lead directly to the aestheticization of politics, the exaltation of the noble gesture, the search for the authentic – all the forms of cultural expression that led to fascism and war. Is not war itself perhaps the most genuine and thrilling form of adventure? Is it not true that all of life becomes focused in war, to constitute an “eternal present”, without future or past?

In these fragments Benjamin critically summed up the consequences of Simmel’s vision on his conception of modern individuality as expressed in the essay on *Adventure* as form of *Erlebnis*. The aristocratic tendency in Simmel’s thought fully embodies for Benjamin the contradictory nature of modern bourgeois individualism, above all when it reacts to the threat of the disappearance of the individual with the philosophy of life. The intellectual aesthete penetrates the totality of the world through his fragmentary interiorization: the extraordinarily intense *Erlebnis* of the individual exceeds his state of disruption and restores for him in aesthetic form the exceptionality and excellence which modernity has stripped from it. The individual makes sense of his existence in the exceptionality and fortuitousness of his most intense experiences, without being able to connect them, if not *artificially*, into an individual story, which in any case appears detached from

that of the collectivity and endowed with value because it is absolutely “personal” and “original.” The experience of the individual is attractive precisely because it is isolated – a *fragment of life* that solidifies around a violent emotion without being tempered in the continuity of a process. The individual becomes punctiform and loses all sense of *duration*, even if turn-of-the-century philosophy (above all Bergson) tries to incorporate duration into a metaphysics of Being. The experience contracts in an instant and can no longer be attained through *Bildung* – the culture of formation; it is no longer only cumulative in nature character, constructionistic, but condenses into fleeting, shocking experiences that cannot be appropriated by the person experiencing it, but only undergone – endured – by the disaggregated individual¹³.

These are the “strong points” of Benjamin’s criticism of Simmel’s conception of modern subjectivity. And yet there is something excessively severe in these criticisms. Simmel’s conception of *Adventure* expresses an irreversible trend of contemporary subjectivity, which is towards the realization of its peculiarity and uniqueness. In today’s profoundly changed world, we can interpret this tendency as a search for a new form of normativity based upon the search for expression of individual authenticity, the ethical need to be and express oneself in each and every social circumstance, from work to politics. We can, in other words, restore “a strong ethical dimension to the cultural adventure of the individual: after all, in such a perspective, the struggle to realize oneself is nearly a duty, but in any case, an existential goal” (D’Andrea, 1999: 59). If we follow this interpretation, the so heavily criticized intellectual and existential “*vagabondage*” (*ad-venture*, or moving towards the future) can be interpreted as a person

¹³ For this critique to Simmel’s conception of individualism see also De Conciliis, 1998: 93ff.

embarking on a clearly *unique* and *individual* journey (in the sense of Goethe's incommensurable "type"), whose harmony with the individual's unique *Beruf* cannot be appreciated by external observers. As has been perceptively observed, "one possible way of viewing normative validity in a context marked by the so-called absence of fundamentals and, therefore, by the impossibility of comprehending validity as corresponding to primary principles, or even more simply to principles of rationality, is to think of it in terms of *exemplary self-consistency of an identity with itself* (Ferrara, 1998: 60ff). Such a perspective, which links the individualization of behaviors to the search for authenticity, and no longer necessarily to a process of closure in the individualism of ownership and consumerism, provides a key to reading some tendencies of current modernity. We must therefore distinguish – once again following Simmel's reflections – *individualism* from *egoism* as distinct phenomena having entirely different characteristics. The former – named "ethic personalism" – constitutes both the premise and the consequence of a highly diversified society, in which the individual claims the right not only to *autonomy*, but also to *difference*. The latter – egoism – instead indicates the rejection of the other, the closing of oneself into the private sphere, the inability to view oneself as belonging to a moral and historical community. If this constitutes a phenomenon discernible in all societies, individualism, intended as the moral duty to assert one's own *independence* and *particularity*, represents an irrevocable conquest of modernity.

As Simmel had shown us, it is after all the objective dynamics of a society characterized by extensive division of labor and profound separation between the social spheres – family, politics, work, leisure time – to ensure that individuals are born as separate realities, as entities that do not coincide with any of the social circles to which they belong. It is this belonging to many circles that provides the impetus to develop forms of highly "individualized

identity”, in the sense that only a highly individualistic personality with a strong spirit of autonomy is able to withstand all the attractions exerted by the single social circles. In “contemporary consumer culture” (Featherstone, 2007) there is an ongoing accentuation of this process, by which it is precisely the individualized identities – which are expressed through “life styles” that may appear eccentric and disengaged – that drive toward solidarity, sharing, new forms of public spirit and active citizenry.

Naturally, the “ethics of authenticity” is not without its contradictions. In addition to Benjamin’s critique, previously discussed, there is the one discerned by Honneth. In a later article on *Organized Self-Realization. Some Paradoxes of Individualization* (2004) Honneth completes his analysis of the pathologies of the “postmodern” form of social life previously exposed. Considering what the distinctive characteristics of individualism are nowadays Honneth states that individuals seem to be confronting the new burden of “authenticity” and compulsion to “self-realization”. The individualism of self-realization, which Simmel traced to Romanticism, re-emerged over the past fifty years to become an instrument of economic development in the context of postmodern consumer-oriented capitalism, spreading standardization and fictionalized lifestyles under whose consequences individuals today seem more likely to suffer than to prosper¹⁴.

A further contradiction could be the possible relapse in the cult of the authentic of “*sanguini et soli*”, which Benjamin and Adorno

¹⁴ Honneth arrived at the conclusion that we are currently faced with the rapid rise of what Simmel described more than one century ago as “exaggerated individualism”: “urged from all sides to show that they are open to authentic self-discovery and its impulses, there remains for individuals only the alternative of simulating authenticity or of falling into a full-blown depression, of staging personal originality for strategic reasons or of pathologically shutting down” (Honneth, 2004: 475).

had already viewed as the hotbed of fascism¹⁵ and which today can be gleaned as the background for identity fundamentalism, various forms of which contaminate the contemporary political panorama. From an exquisitely theoretical point of view, nothing can guarantee a priori that the search for authenticity not head in this *regressive* direction, instead of establishing a point of departure towards new ethical and political paths. What can instead be decisively concluded is, that consumistic egoism, fundamentalism and narcissism are not necessarily corollaries of individualism and the “ethics of authenticity”, but they rather represent only an inferior, problematic form of it. The culture of modernity is thus characterized by ambivalence that is difficult to resolve unequivocally: consumistic narcissism, “the tyranny of intimacy” (Sennett, 1977: 337ff.), fundamentalism or, on the other hand, the search for new forms of critical individuality, endowed with a strong spirit of autonomy and able to withstand conformism and homologation. This seems to be a significant feature of the contemporary social and cultural panorama, one which we have tried to shed light on with the help of the theories of Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin.

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¹⁵ Beyond the notorious study on the authoritarian personality (Adorno, 1950), Adorno gave a 1967 lecture on the new right-wing extremism in post war West Germany – recently republished (Adorno, 2019). The lecture addressed the general question of what fascism is and how we should think about challenges to liberal democracy that come from the extreme right. For Adorno, democracy is not a full-fledged reality that fascism has damaged; it is an ideal that is yet to be realized and that, as long as it betrays its promise, will continue to spawn movements of resentment, fundamentalism and paranoid rebellion.

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