



Willi Goetschel and Daniel Silver, *Interdisciplinary Simmel. Special issue of The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 2019, 94:2.

Gregor Fitzi

Volume 23, Number 2, 2019

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1075216ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1075216ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Georg Simmel Gesellschaft

ISSN

1616-2552 (print)

2512-1022 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Fitzi, G. (2019). Review of [Willi Goetschel and Daniel Silver, *Interdisciplinary Simmel. Special issue of The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 2019, 94:2.] *Simmel Studies*, 23(2), 123–128. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1075216ar>

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GREGOR FITZI

Willi Goetschel and Daniel Silver, *Interdisciplinary Simmel. Special issue of The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 2019, 94:2.

2018 marked the centenary of Georg Simmel's death. Many different conferences, monographs and miscellanies were dedicated to his legacy. The question arose again as to who Simmel really was: a philosopher, a sociologist, a genial but superficial feature writer? Through his often unofficial reception, Simmel has played a major role not only in the disciplinary field of sociology but equally in philosophy, Critical Theory, and cultural studies. Yet, the reception of his oeuvre has been often selective and spotty. While this

situation poses serious challenges, it presents also an opportunity to explore the actuality of Simmel's thought, with particular focus on the interdisciplinary impulse that drives his critical thinking. This was the impetus behind the conference "Interdisciplinary Simmel" held at the University of Toronto in September 2018. It gathered sociologists, philosophers, historians, literary critics, and interdisciplinary scholars. Yet, the greatest interest of this undertaking was that literature science and theory determined the focus and the viewpoint of the debate, so that Simmel's interdisciplinarity emerged from the study of the genre properties of his texts. This approach allowed the Canadian research community to find expression in exchange with some colleagues from the US and Europe.

A common key of interpretation for the contributions to the volume derives from the reinterpretation of Simmel's most classical statement that his legacy would be like "cold cash". In that statement, by likening his legacy to cash, Simmel suggested that it would spread to "many heirs," who could each "convert his portion into an enterprise...that corresponds to his nature," even as the provenance of the enterprise was "not visible". Yet, for the editors of the miscellany Simmel's legacy has been similar to money in other respects as well. As he argued in the *Philosophy of Money*, money is the ultimate symbol of the relational aspect of the world, rendering comparable and connected the most seemingly disparate and incomparable entities. Simmel legacy would be like that too: a tie that binds and bridges, joining disparate conversations enough to learn from one another, while leaving room for them to develop independently. This was also the spirit of the conference in Toronto. Overcoming the fragmentation of Simmel's oeuvre between fields – especially philosophy and sociology – that his own work constantly transcended. Therefore, the publication sought to pursue an interdisciplinary dialogue around Simmel as a thinker who

does not fit disciplinary divisions. This seems for the authors of the volume all the more necessary, because Simmel's reception is marked by the fragmentary familiarity of readers with his work, which is often due to the selectivity of the translations in other languages.

As the editors remark, the readers will note a central topic running across the contributions: the problem of form. Yet, this congruence was not planned, but emerged spontaneously in the debate as the possible point of contact across disciplines, and created a focal point for wide-ranging exchange. The shared background interest in Simmel thus generated a shared object and vocabulary, and allowed participants to learn from each another. The papers in the special issue carry forward this central theme, and develop it in a number of different directions.

The main starting point of the volume is literature theory and this aspect constitutes the special interest of the publication. In the essay "*Beobachtungen zu Georg Simmels Schreibszenen, Schreibfeld und zu späten Schriften*" Harro Müller – who is a leading authority of German studies in the USA – examines Simmel's writing style as an expression of the impetus that drives his mode of thinking. The way in which Simmel circumscribes the scope of his writing, guides for Müller his explorative gaze in a generative fashion that avoids epistemological closure for the sake of the appreciation of the chiaroscuro, the interplay of the tension of opposites that shape our thinking and forms of associations alike. All of Simmel's oeuvre is seen as developing along the lines of the dialectic between form and content and this does not only guide Simmel's writing practice, as Müller shows. It also appears in Simmel's privileging of duality rather than dualism as his "operative sociological paradigm", as Omar Lizardo names it in his essay "Simmel's Dialectic of Form and Content in Recent Work in Cultural Sociology". Simmel's recognition of the critical thrust of duality, as Lizardo shows, allows

for a more nuanced understanding of the function of culture in current social behaviour. This duality makes it possible to account for the “functionalization of culture” for the purpose of communication that switches content to form, exhibiting new functions of culture that would remain otherwise incomprehensible. In the essay “Simmel’s Poetic of Forms,” Oliver Simons explores in the opposite direction. He examines how Goethe’s notion of form offers Simmel a model for rethinking form morphologically, in a way that contrasts with, yet also productively complements Kant’s more static approach to the issue. With attention to the role of Goethe as a poetic counterweight to post-Kantian epistemology, Simons’ intervention reminds us that Simmel’s concept of form is so promising because it recognizes the constellation of Kant and Goethe as the fertile contradiction that enables to renegotiate a concept of form capable of understanding modernity.

Rethink the concept of form, however, presupposes above all the ability to overcome the scholastic periodization and tripartition of the author’s work introduced by Frischeisen Köhler’s epitaph study. In “Three Concepts of Form in Simmel’s Sociology”, Dan Silver and Milos Brocic parse three concepts of form that weave through Simmel’s central study: geometric, transcendental, and vitalist. They highlight that we need to revisit the conventional periodization of Simmel’s thought and work into three phases. Rather, they suggest, the trajectory of Simmel’s thinking is more complicated, rich, and intriguing if we consider the multiple concepts of form at work in all aspects of Simmel’s thinking. It is a pleasure for us older Simmel’s researchers that this necessity, which we once tried to point out, is raised again by a younger generation of specialists. Yet, the idea of form in Simmel’s oeuvre has many more facets that must be taken into account. This includes comprehending form as a function of relation. In “Form and Relation: Difference and Alterity in Simmel”, Willi Goetschel argues

that Simmel's rethinking of form allows him to understand form as the function of a relation that as an epistemological category must – unlike Kant's – remain critically open to change. Simmel's point of thinking form dynamically allows him then not only to describe processes of social interaction but also address thought processes. This occurs in an interplay of a reciprocal back and forth that prefers the more open movement of reciprocity over dialectic hampered by the desire of closure. In an intense dialogue the centrality of the concept of form as a relation is taken up by one of the most established theorists of Simmel's relational sociological theory. In her essay "On Simmel's Relativism and the Foundations of a Relational Approach", Natalia Canto Mila shows how relation is for Simmel a central notion that defines his sociological research project. Her paper undertakes a careful examination of the shifting formulations Simmel gave to his basic notion of sociology, from the beginning to the end of his career. In the end, she argues, it is precisely this sociological intuition that has critical significance for his philosophic trajectory as well. Simmel can thus establish his central and often misunderstood philosophical category of "relativism" as the idea of a comprehensive reciprocal action of all entities of the world characterized by the open end dialectics of life and forms.

Accordingly, individuality and sociality can also be inquired into as forms, especially if this occurs from an historical viewpoint. In his essay, "Georg Simmel: Decentering the Self and Recovering Authentic Individuality", the historian John McCole unpacks some of the tensions Simmel faced in working out his intuition that individuality as much as sociality is constituted by its form. In this context, he counterposes two powerful strands in Simmel's thought about the nature of selfhood. In one, the self is complex, socially-constituted, and multiple; in the other, the self is unified and unique. In the end, McCole argues, Simmel struggled with these divergent

thoughts, oscillating between an impulse to valorize the unity of the individual and the another to affirm its irreconcilable multiplicity. If form is the constituent of life the crucial issue is, yet, how it develops in time. In order to understand this, Thomas Kemple unpacks Simmel's notion of "adventure" in his "Simmel's Sense of Adventure: Death and Old Age in Philosophy, Art, and Everyday Life". In particular, he pursues Simmel's provocative claim that modernity itself can be seen as an adventure by understanding the subsequent representations of the rhythm of life, i.e. through an examination of Simmel's studies of Rembrandt. At the same time, this reveals Simmel's distinctive approach to art, which seeks to avoid reducing the work of art to a sociological case or a vehicle for aesthetic experiences. Finally, the central question of the issue, interdisciplinarity, is examined from the viewpoint of the reflexion that may arise from an analysis of the particular conception of disciplinarity that characterizes Simmel's work. Accordingly, the editors underline that Elizabeth Goodstein's essay, "Thinking at the Boundaries: Georg Simmel's Phenomenology of Disciplinarity", provides a fitting capstone to the issue. She highlights the liminal character of Simmel's seminal *Philosophy of Money*, which is both and neither philosophy and sociology. In fact, the *Philosophy of Money* itself, per Goodstein, thematises the nature of liminality in ways that cannot be grasped within the confines of a sociological examination of money and monetary relationships.

If beauty is nothing other than the promise of happiness, as Stendhal writes, one can hope that the consistent steps in the direction of an interdisciplinary reading of Simmel's work – to which this volume bears significant witness – will be continued in the future.