



Possible Times and Worlds: Art, Adventure, and the Stranger in Georg Simmel

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Article abstract

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Abstract: Simmel discovers the essential in the unessential, and sets the centre of our affairs on the periphery of normal life. Temporary gratification, an ubi consistam, can in fact only be obtained in the ulteriority to which we are referred and in which we temporarily linger in marginal experiences, in the eccentric, in the as yet not saturated possibilities that come to meet us, as a gift, or as the result of an activity not entirely our own – the adventure, dreams, artworks. Simmel's fundamental question is how not to remain below one's own unexpressed possibilities. Through social or individual levers, men should be put in the position to exploit the richness of their own subjectivity and the objectivity of the modern world, to force an opening into the possible, while at the same time reducing the inevitable exposure to disappointment.

1.1. I will begin with an analysis of the sensation, described by Simmel, that 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 day¹. Such sensation is however accompanied by the obscure, paradoxical awareness that elsewhere is already here (in “endotic places”, as Georges Perec would put it), that the adventure, the heading toward future things, is contained in the present, in the

¹ The article published here is the English translation of the original Italian version “Tempi e mondi possibili: arte, avventura, straniero”, *aut aut*, n° 257, Sept.-Oct., pp. 59-71) and then re-worked as chapter in the book *Personal Destinies. The Age of the Colonization of Consciousnesses* (2002) without significant change in the interpretative line. We thank the journal “aut aut” – especially Dr Raoul Kirchmayr – for the kind permission to re-publish the English translation.

split-second occurrence of experiences, and that, ultimately, that which initially presents itself as extraneous or foreign is already in us, or rather, is us.

Through a “false move”, Simmel discovers the essential in the unessential, and sets the centre of our affairs on the periphery of normal life. Temporary gratification, an *ubi consistam*, can in fact only be obtained in the ulteriority to which we are referred and in which we temporarily linger in marginal experiences, in the eccentric, in the as yet not saturated possibilities that come to meet us, as a gift, or as the result of an activity not entirely our own (the adventure, dreams, artworks).

Traversing logically impassable spaces, our desire enables us to penetrate the wall mirror that separates the real from the imaginary, to break through into a world with no thickness, which seems more sensible than that in which we, effectively and three-dimensionally, live. Thus, unexpected and unlikely sensory windows open up, and put the reliability of thought to a hard test. In which of these spaces should we in fact place ourselves? Into what time shall we insert ourselves? A game of proximity and distance is thus established. We are thrust toward a satisfying zone of truthful unreality or of satisfying derealisation, toward an illusion truer than any reality around us (not true in the perceptive or logical sense, but in that we take it more to heart because we realise it as a place to realise possibilities unattainable from the world).

The space of virtuality also presents itself as anamnestic, representing the memory of a future that indicates zones of possible experience that are oddly familiar, despite never having been visited. We tend to these as if to a distant country in our perceiving ourselves, almost gnostically or Plotinianly, strangers or exiles in this world.

The feeling of being identical to ourselves, yet strangers in a dream (of which we are, of course, the directors, but neither whose script nor unfolding we decide), the wonder that accrues from crossing space and time stolen from the adventure (stolen, because it is as if the protagonist were someone else), the otherness, englobed but not consumed, of the stranger who is us: all these premonitions allude to another, worthier life, to a gem set in the banality of daily life, to enclaves of extraterritoriality of meaning.

If we consider the essays *The Picture Frame: An Aesthetic Study* (Simmel, 1994 [1902]) or *The Aesthetic Significance of the Face* (Simmel, 1959 [1901]), we see each picture cut out within a non-artistic space, almost as if protecting itself against the interference of the external world by closing itself off within itself, interlacing the normal strands of threads of feeling and sense differently as soon as they have been detached from their original contexts in order to be recomposed at another level within the confines of artwork: it therefore excludes that which is not within the other space and the other time which it actually is and alludes only to that which it is outside itself (see Simmel, 1994 [1902]; Simmel, 1959 [1901]).

In a period in which technology marks the victory of the “peripheral in life” (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 487), that is, its multiplying the systems of objectification of “spiritual” activities, a condensation of meaning comes about through strategies that pulls into proximity that which is remote, and pushes away that which is near². From this point of view, art creates a third realm that is neither interiority nor exteriority, neither convex nor concave, but that rather makes intuitable both the notion of intermediary

² They are analogous to those in art and religion, in that “they have in common the moving of their object as distant as possible, to pull it as near as possible” (GSG 20: 265).

objectivity and, more in general, the typically Simmelian paradox of “the law of the individual”.

1.2. It is however surprising that Simmel’s thought does not include the idea of an “Ego-skin” – an individuality contained within the confining external limits of the body. The senses (based on which the splendid excursus of Sociology exists) put mankind in touch with the far and the near in the world, broadening their awareness to infinity or shrinking it to a point – something which can occur above all when they are conceived as, so to speak, “transcendental senses”, which in dreams or artwork coordinate indirectly perceived material differently.

I will limit myself to mentioning some themes. (The eye – for instance, says Simmel – offers a unique service, hinged on reciprocity, on giving and receiving. In fact, it connects individuals looking at each other, while the ear is “the quintessentially egoistic organ that only takes but does not give” (Simmel, 2009 [1908]: 575). This latter pays for this, its solipsism “by not being able to turn away or close like the eye, but since it only takes, it is also condemned to take all that comes near it”³ (Simmel, 2009 [1908]: 575).

The eye looks at another eye, but an ear cannot get in touch with another ear; the eye penetrates the vision of a face or a landscape in layers of virtual space, in a perspective suggested by the dual dimensions of the scene, but also in virtual times, caught in an instant. In this way, the entire face come to be endowed with that which “has descended to the foundation of one’s life and become

3 In contrast to the “the word spoken and heard”, looking at each other in the eyes “does not crystallize in any kind of objective formation (...) And so strong and sensitive is this bond that it is borne only by the shortest, the straight line between the eyes, and that the least diversion from this, the slightest glance to the side, fully destroys the singularity of this bond” (Simmel, 2009 [1908]: 571).

one's enduring traits"⁴ (Simmel, 2009 [1908]: 572). Thus, while the ear – the most immovable organ of the entire head – “offers us then the revelation of the person bound in temporal form”, the eye “what is permanent in one's nature, the sediment of one's past in the substantial form of one's traits so that before us we see, so to speak, the successions of a person's life in one concurrence.”⁵ (Simmel, 2009 [1908]: 573).

The face (where “the extreme sense of motion” is reconciled “with a minimal movement”) therefore allows reading, in the dimension of the simultaneous, the succession that has been deposited. And this is both at the level of normal perception and at the level of the “transcendental senses” in art. In the face a history is implicitly revealed: this is why art – like dreams, adventure, and especially money – represents the fictitious, artificial element, able to reveal worlds that are contained, *in absentia*, within the materiality of the media of the canvas, paper money or the plot threads, which are invisible, but in their own way thick and substantial, of dreams or adventure.

The opening up towards the possible can survive as long as the possibilities remain condensed into their ‘spendability’ still closed off within itself, as happens with money. Money is virtually all things, or in Goethean terms, the epitome, the sum total of all desires. Spending – on adventure, on dreams, on life – does not necessarily mean buying happiness; it does not therefore, in itself, implicate that

4 We should also recall his statement in the essay on Rembrandt that portraits of old men show an “accumulation of the past”.

5A separate analysis (also for its implications on negative social stereotypes: Hebrews, black, poor) should be devoted to the Simmelian examination of the sense of smell, the most subjective, obtuse, unreasonable and discriminating of the senses, as organ of disjunction: “the other senses build a thousand bridges among people, if they can soothe over with attractions the repulsions that they repeatedly cause (...), one can note, by way of contrast, that the sense of smell is the dissociating sense.” (Simmel, 2009 [1908]: 578-579).

the possible is preferable to the real. In order for the possible to be more advantageous than the real, virtuality must be supplemented by something that I would call euporia, a good passing, a good exit of the possible into the real (in contrast with aporia, the lack of ways out). That which exists need maintain its own store of virtuality, without exhausting it, and that which is possible must reveal to be mature in order to enter the real and endure there. In this sense, money, art, dreams, adventure, contact with otherness or with the stranger, represent ambiguous forms of riches that do not necessarily produce greater well-being in the individual: they can – and herein lies their tragic aspect – also lead to failure. The world is full of aborted, wasted or inadequately exploited possibilities, thwarted or subverted expectations.

If we now consider artwork as a place where virtuality coagulates in a strange subjective objectification, which belongs to sensible materiality, but refers to an invisible or inaudible sense, which transmits endless messages to whomever has made himself able to receive them, we will then see that it is endowed (also in the field of spatiality, for instance, in portraits) with an intrinsic temporal structure of its own. This can exist either due to stratifications perceived in simultaneity or in the subtractive, negative form of atemporality, which also always represents an indirect relation of exclusion over time.

In Böcklin's landscapes "everything is as in the *instants* of summer noon, when nature bates its breath, when the course of time coagulates. The sphere in which we now feel is not eternity in the sense of an immense time span, and hence it is not eternity in the religious sense, but it is simply the halting of temporal relations. In the same way, we say it immortalizes a law of nature not because it has existed a long time, but because its validity has absolutely nothing to do with the sooner and the later" (GSG 5: 98). Böcklin's

paintings in fact show us the calm, the stillness, the completeness of a present eternity or an eternal youth.⁶

If we now consider the aspect by which the atemporal is the very same place as the unplaceability of that which we are looking for, we will probably be able to understand in Simmel some aspects of the topic – of the Leibnizian and Goethean tradition – by which none of us belongs to this world, in that it is *entelecheia* or monadic, that is to say, simple and indestructible. The ‘atemporal’ individual, passing into reality, carves out and realises only some possibilities, while excluding others. But it is precisely in the ability to attain possibilities that the function of the symbolic world, of art, resides, that which frees itself from the world in order to replace it. It is in the ability to activate that which exists in us only virtually that the individual manifests not only culture, but “the tragedy of culture”, or rather the impossibility of adequately realizing those possibilities that necessarily escape him.

6 We should not forget that the term eternity, *aion* in Greek, *aevum* in Latin, originally meant the peak or flowering age or, as Simmel translates it, “turgid days, overflowing, in which one believes to be able to still hope for every past, to already remember every future joy” (GSG 5: 98). Note the chiasm by which hoping, generally referring to the future, regards the past, while remembering, generally referring to the past, is instead set in relation to future joy. Here I would like to add a further note: it is curious that, even with a man as careful as Simmel, the classical concept of eternity, which has persisted for millennia in western culture, is lost. It has no relation to an endless duration; it is not an expansion or inflation of time. From Plato’s *Timeo* to Hegel, it is not eternity that shapes time, but, to the contrary, time that shapes itself upon eternity. Eternity does not therefore constitute time that has been elastically lengthened to endlessness: it is fullness, it possesses precisely that feature of atemporality that Simmel himself attributes to it, in contrast to religious eternity. In reality, that which is called atemporality does not represent anything other than what philosophical tradition, from Plato to Plotino of the *Ennead* III, 7, 11, considers eternity, that is, the overflowing fullness of eternal youth at its apex. Time in itself is loss and dies precisely in that it is unable to incessantly restore its own power, in that the source of its power is, so to speak, dried up, exhausted

1.3. The Simmelian individual is an interweaving mesh of reality and possibility, and this has been true since his 1890 book *On social differentiation*. In this writing Simmel presents the individual as if he were almost a sort of cipher or the combination to a safe. In the past man used to be encapsulated within a multiplicity of potentially concentric spheres (family, lineage, profession, country, church). The modern world has produced social differentiation, abandoning the earlier concentric hierarchical order and setting the individual at the intersection of eccentric social circles or spheres in which he participates, in many cases voluntarily (GSG 2: 237 ff.). The individual thus becomes the virtual meeting place of various real social spheres and I would add (thinking of later essays such as *The adventure*) between various virtual spheres. For this reason, he also belongs ever more to a third realm which is neither that of simple atomistic isolation, nor that of the simple subsumption in the universal spheres that he finds himself traversing.

Especially in the modern world, the more the individual becomes himself, the more he encapsulates the features of universality shared with others, then the more he broadens the range of his possible combinations, while however having the single ciphers in common with others. The individual therefore autonomizes and reaches (when able) his own personal recognizable stylization, but is nevertheless unable to achieve – as his aspirations would sometimes like – to be Stirner’s “the unique one” or, Kierkegaard’s “this individual” – neither absolute originality (however absurd this might be), nor absolute homologation or conformity with others (see Simmel, 1997c [1911]: 187-205). Precisely because the scope of the possible is so broad, everyone has the opportunity – not always seized, and not always happy – to realise himself through virtuality.

Simmel uses an *ars combinatoria* of the possible, which appears rather more Leibnizian than linked to the aesthetic dimension or the

Jugendstil taste of his time (if we had to indicate an heir to Leibniz in contemporary culture, I would say Simmel). Even the essay *The adventure* is not to be read – measuring it on the scale of Italian cultural – in terms of D’Annunzio, of “going toward life”, nor on a French scale – in the terms of Bergson – as an *élan vital*, or escape forward toward the unknown. In a more sober way than commonly thought, Simmel invites the individual to experiment, to the *tâtonnement*, to strive to carve out, in the jumble and phantasmagoria of the possible, his own path, ordered selectively through exclusions, inclusions and combinations.

2.1. The main reason that Simmel’s thought is still attractive today lies in the fact that he offers the individual a sort of *gradus ad Parnassum*, a series of progressively more difficult exercises and theoretical variations (analogous to Muzio Clementi’s music) that aim to teach the art of composing by using the possible and the real together.

Any attempt to broaden the individual ability’s to understand coincides with an increase in his freedom, which is not freedom from bonds, but freedom of bonds: to form or to dissolve real and imaginary relationships. From this point of view, Simmel views modernity as establishing a space for controlled disaggregation, or rather, aggregation that continually refers the individual from the sphere of socialization to that of personalization.

Thus, a game of reciprocity is established, by which every increment in the role of subjectivity produces, as a repercussion, an expansion of the sphere of objectivity (and vice versa). It is nevertheless necessary to frame the process of objectification as the formation of an a-conscious rationality. Here is an enlightening example: the rationality incorporated into a simple sewing machine takes the place of the ability, the skill, the attention, the conscientiousness of women who used to perform the same

operations with needle and thread. These movements have now been incorporated within the machine's internal rationality, and appear, literally, as *the ghost in the machine*. "The sewing machine operator, for example, practices a great deal less spiritual activity than the hand embroiderer, while the spirit of this activity has been, so to speak, inserted into the machine; it is objectified in it" (GSG 2: 255).

The modern, refined individual – the product of complex social differentiation – thus abandons his extravagant claim to be the depositary of a rationality based on self-awareness and dismisses the illusion that he represents the centre of the universe of meaning. Relegated to an uncomfortable periphery, everyone is therefore lead to experience the weighty subjective deficiency of sense (which no longer coincides with rationality), and this occurs precisely as the rate of objective rationality is rapidly growing, invading, refashioning and 'normalizing' ever more numerous, broad spheres of life and human activity. Rationality has the tendency to become devoid of sense, and sense void of rationality.

Therefore, the more that rationality emigrates from subjective awareness and is incorporated into automatisms and material media (such as paper or money), the more the individual will appear tendentially deprived of his previous prerogatives and will see his own faculties inexorably absorbed by mechanisms devoid of awareness. It is however precisely for this reason that he tries to regain the lost centre.

2.2. In this regard, Simmel's attitude appears very different from other philosophers with whom he has been compared, such as Dilthey or Bergson. His concerns do not in fact regard revitalising the individual – his interiority or spirituality – at the expense of objectification, of the incarnation of rationality in money or in machines (monsters as "gelid" as the state, according to Nietzsche).

They instead reside in recognising the fact that the transfer of spirituality into objective, a-conscious automatisms leaves individuals ever more space for freedom and indeterminateness. From such situation springs an element of a “nearly tragic nature”, in which “nearly” does not limit the power of the tragedy, but allows for the possibility that existence also be spent outside some tragic dimension (although this perspective belongs in turn to a game of mirrors, of an infinite *trompe l'oeil* of appearances, in itself tragic, given that not being able to be tragic is itself a tragedy).

It should be stated that the fundamental question, implicitly or expressly discussed by Simmel, it is not that of how *to survive* but on the contrary how not to *sub-vive* that is to say, how not to remain below one's own unexpressed possibilities. Through social or individual levers, men should be put in the position to exploit the richness of their own subjectivity and the objectivity of the modern world, to force an opening into the possible, while at the same time reducing the inevitable exposure to disappointment. We may have a certain number of possibilities at our disposal, but then the question becomes that of employing them in such way that one of them does not cancel out the other, thus returning to Leibniz's grand theme, filtered through Goethe, of the harmonization of the com-possible, with a *pathos* more intense than in Max Weber, who also composed his eulogy during his polemic against Eduard Meyer (Bodei, 1978).

This whirling world of possibilities still in God's mind or, to put it a better way, in the “mind of the Ego”, does not implicate in Simmel simply a swarm of candidates for effectuality. Indeed, there are possibilities that will never be effectual, and these in fact include that which is dearest to our hearts: to truly exist in unplaceable places, in which time and space are transformed into symbols of something else that is neither spatial, nor temporal.

Hence the characteristic need for indeterminateness manifested by Simmel, who once again in this case should not be read solely in the sense of the notorious “sociological impressionism”, since that which may appear as such expresses in a certain way the range of gradation of the possible with respect to their interweaving and inscribing themselves into reality.⁷

All this implies that Simmel’s way of expounding arguments and doing philosophy is indistinguishable from the individualising ‘aesthetic’ regard and approach towards society. Simmel would not be Simmel. and would not be so interesting. if he followed a purely aesthetic line of reasoning, in the traditional sense, or a purely sociological one, in the equally traditional sense, for instance, of the Comtian school, in which the individual, the dimension of individual law, is supposed to have disappeared in favour of an empty universality; or furthermore, in which, such as in the Durkheim’s conception, the individual is no more than the anonymous, endlessly reproducible result of a *moule*, a mould or cast that is forever the same and eliminates all singularity.

2.3. One of the keys to understanding Simmel and the relation of life to forms is provided by the Goethean idea of metamorphosis, that is to say, conserving form through change. Simmel is not at all a ‘gelatinous’ thinker, in which the maximum substance can be found in the tension arising from the indeterminateness of flux to the determinateness of form. Behind his thought there stands out (gigantic, all-pervasive and therefore nearly invisible) the idea of the meta-morphosis, of the trans-formation. Every apparently random, amorphous moment contains within it the

⁷ Against the image of an “impressionistic” Simmel I would however like to observe that there is also an order that is not necessarily based on the concentration or condensation of sense. It is instead a dissipative order, analogous to that “marching order” or procedural which would be addressed subsequently by his ex-disciple and eventual adversary Ernst Bloch.

power of the genesis or the vanishing of one specific form. The unformed exists only in relation to points of departure chosen as samples.

During the same period Husserl stated something similar in his manuscripts on colour, which is that a ‘true’ colour does not exist; there are only *Abschattierungen*, that is, gradations of colour. It is we who arbitrarily establish that a certain colour (say, burgundy red), viewed in sunlight on a cloudless day, is the ‘true’ colour of a specific object. If we then put that object in a wardrobe drawer and its colour changes, we will blame it on the shadow projected by the drawer and will say that what we effectively see is no longer the true colour of the object. But why – if it is impractical, should we prefer the colour of an object in sunlight to the colour of an object inside a wardrobe? In reality, it is the exemplary quality of a colour, abstractly obtained by fixing a perception of it considered to be optimal, that becomes canonical: a colour established in this way, by thought, serves as a unit of measure for the other possible gradations of perception⁸.

3.1. The essays *The adventure* and *The stranger* concretely show how the field of virtuality unfolds, and how the Ego, in a never-ending process of differentiation and emancipation, manages to structure itself better as it becomes more indeterminate.

Indetermination coincides, in a certain sense, with freedom, or at the least, the indeterminate is analogous to money, as it represents a field of latencies that appear attractive precisely because they have not yet been realised. This is also true for some aspects of life in society. I would like to recall a single example of a new articulation of the possible, regarding women. It is drawn from the *Philosophy of money*, but it also refers to his articles on *Female culture* and particularly to *On the psychology of shame* (Simmel, 1997a [1911]: 46-54; GSG 1:

8 See E. Husserl, Ms. D 13 XXIV quot. in Piana, 1966: 21-30.

431-442). While perhaps also thinking of Ibsen's female characters, Simmel observes how women realise their own virtuality through a paradox even deeper than that of men. Through the spread of some accessory devices for household chores (the first sewing machine went into production around 1845, while appliances made their appearance at the turn of the century), women in certain social strata felt discharged from the hardest and most time-consuming duties. Thus they found an unexpected space of virtuality suddenly open to them. Note, however, that they still did not learn to take advantage of it. Hence, also the recurring phenomenon of *Bovarysme*, the female erotic adventure.

Marriage as an institution – objectification in the third realm of social relationships – has not in fact advanced at the same speed as the subjective spirit of the spouses themselves. Liberation from domestic work has not translated into greater subjective satisfaction, in any sensible increase in the time for a sensible life. Simmel says: “many middleclass women have thus lost the core of their activity without having it replaced by other activities and goals. The frequent ‘dissatisfaction’ of modern women, the waste of their energies, which may bring about all kinds of disturbances and destruction; their partly sound, partly abnormal search to prove their worth outside the home, is all the result of the fact that technology with its objectivity has progressed more independently and more quickly than have the possibilities for human development. The widespread unsatisfactory character of modern marriages may be traced back to similar circumstances. The fixed forms and habits of married life that are imposed upon individuals run counter to the personal development of the partners, particularly to that of the wife, who may have completely outgrown them. Individuals are now said to be inclined towards a freedom, a mutual understanding, an equality of rights and training, for which traditional married life does not provide any scope. One might say that the objective spirit of

marriage lags behind its subjective spiritual development” (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 469).

3.2. If life is self-transcendence, if it does not consist only of an existence in the present, but in a projecting into the future by “Man is the boundary being that has no boundary” (*Der Mensch ist das Grenzwesen, das keine Grenze hat*, Simmel, 1969: 223), today's rhythm of the exchange between subjectivity and objectivity does not appear sufficiently rapid. The rhythm – that which in German goes by the Italian term *das Tempo* – has been sped up by the metronome of history. The tragedy of culture also depends on individuals not being able to keep up with the pace of changing events and forms (while adventure is attractive precisely because, in the abruptness of its peak, one does not lose sight of the distance from the starting point). Such tragedy is caused more by losing sync with the tempo than by objectification. To the contrary, in a number of different ways, objectification provides non-negligible benefits, in that it supports the tendencies of human nature in its historical development. Man is in fact the only animal that is fully and continually objectified and perfects his objectivity, separating the ways of considering and treating things from subjective feeling and desire, thereby creating that which is a shared world of values in which the rules of mutual exclusion are not in force: “The more values are transposed into such objective forms, the more space there is in them, as in the house of God, for every soul. Perhaps the wildness and embitterment of modern competition would be completely unbearable were it not accompanied by this growing objectivation of the contents of existence which remain untouched by all *ôte-toi que je m’y mette*” (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 291).

Objectification has been proceeding very much faster, and the world overall becoming more rational than single individuals, who in order to overcompensate for this situation of unease, are left breathless in the attempt to take back that life that is passing them

by. They are therefore forced to diversify and dose the investments of sense, balancing them more attentively between the real and the imaginary. Hence the current importance of art, which fills the world of Baudelairian *correspondences* without explaining it, making the overall network of sense vibrate from any point it is touched. Hence also the meaning of the adventure, in its carving out the possible and escaping the concatenation of events. I do not know if Simmel had in mind the false, but long accepted, etymology of the stoic term *eimarmene* (destiny), which was interpreted as ‘concatenation’ – a necessary link. In this perspective, the adventure consists of breaking the *eimarmene*, the inexorability of fate, the force of destiny.⁹ But it is a way of breaking that which takes place when events – which by their very nature, if we knew them, would appear necessary – present themselves in their fortuity. Thus, in the adventure they produce that feeling (described by Cromwell with regard to the unexpected events of his own life) by which no one rises so high as when he does not know where he is going.

Having an adventure is a to surrender oneself to chance, with a feeling of exaltation: it is regarded with wonder, precisely to say, on the one hand, “It’s me that is having these extraordinary experiences” and to state, on the other, that the adventure manifests itself as if it were “something experienced by another person” (Simmel, 1997b [1911]: 222). Just as in art, the adventure compresses time, in that it condenses manifold events into a brief period, thereby strengthening the Ego by actually alienating it. It makes it feel uprooted from itself, roaming about, but precisely for this reason so much freer to be able to live up to one’s own possibilities. In this sense, it makes the individual much like Venice,

9 According to Walter Benjamin (Benjamin, 2002 [1924-1940]: 801) the adventure has something dated about it: “The intentional correlate of ‘immediate experience’ has not always remained the same. In the nineteenth century, it was ‘adventure’. In our days it appears as ‘fate’”.

which “has the ambiguous beauty of the adventure, which drifts through life without roots, like a flower snatched from the sea” (GSG 8: 263).

In the adventure one advances with the “sleepwalking certainty” (Simmel, 1997b [1911]: 227): following a voice that does not come from us, but rather resounds in the cavity of our consciousness and seems to come from a greater Ego, partly extraneous to our own. Herein lies the charm and the wonder that are experienced upon the realisation of possibilities deemed remote and of affairs and desires previously relegated to marginality moving towards the centre.

The search for a virtual space in an individual’s life does not merely represent compensation for the cold, mechanical prevalence of objectivity in the modern world. It expresses the increased need to consummate the possible in “a sumptuous waste”, in a sort of *dépense* in Bataille’s sense: “a vast number of life experiences that we enjoy derive their intensity from the fact that, for their sake, we leave unexplored innumerable opportunities for other enjoyments and for other ways of proving ourselves. A regal extravagance, a careless *grandeur* of existence, is revealed by the way that people ignore each other or pass on after a brief encounter, by our total indifference towards many to whom we could give much and who could give much to us. But there also emanates from this unique value of non-enjoyment a new, enhanced and more concentrated charm in what we do actually possess. The fact that this one among innumerable possibilities has become reality gives it a triumphant tone; the shades of the untried, neglected richness of life” (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 152-153). Every realisation is accompanied in its victorious march by the shining absence of unfulfilled possibilities. The real thus shines with the invisible aura of the virtuality surrounding it.

3.3 Just as adventure, the stranger also embodies the unsettling closeness of the possible.¹⁰ The very sight of one arouses – in Kantian terms – “negative pleasure”, a repulsive attraction similar to that induced by the sublime.

The stranger is the selfsame person we could be under different circumstances: “as one who comes today and stays tomorrow” (Simmel, 2009 [1908]: 601). He is “the potential wanderer, so to speak, who has not completely overcome the loosening of coming and going, though not moving on” (Simmel, 2009 [1908]: 601). He has inverted the relation of the spatial distance between people: “The union of the near and the far that every relation among people contains is achieved here in a configuration that formulates it most briefly in this way: The distance within the relationship means that the near is far away, but being a stranger means that the distant is near.” (Simmel, 2009 [1908]: 601). And he is near in the danger of his lack of objectification that manifests in the errancy, in the absence of bonds with the earth – analogous to poverty – and in the absence of bonds with propriety.

This whole world of possibilities, which unfolds through a system of releases, leads Simmel, to maintain –according to the old Plotinian and Augustinian tradition – that we are always in transit, *in itinere*. Only that in his thought such approach is lacking any *telos*. Humanity on the whole in fact seems to constitute a *civitas peregrinans* that does not however know which way to head, that looks for “the point of passage for wandering about proceeding from the

10 The spatial dimension proper does not however express anything more than one aspect of the psychic dimension: “The form of spatial nearness or distance does not generate the peculiar phenomena of neighborliness or alienation, however inevitably it may seem. Rather even these are facts generated purely by psychological contents,” (Simmel, 2009 [1908]: 544) and the conceptual form of the “stranger” reveals that “the relationship to space is only the condition of the relationship to people” (Simmel, 2009 [1908]: 601).

indeterminate to the indeterminate, that loves paths without destination and destinations without paths” (GSG 12:34).

Faced with such theses, the most radical question (not delved into here) which we ought to pose is the following: can we be satisfied with the “ambiguous beauty” of the adventure described by Simmel, or do we have justifiable need and sufficiently farsighted perspective to continue to prefer, with some success, paths with destinations and destinations with paths?

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