Introduction: Georg Simmel (1858-1918)

Simmel is considered to be one of the earliest exponents of sociology. He worked in late nineteenth century Germany and was originally trained as a philosopher. His interests, however, ranged well beyond the narrow confines of a single discipline...Simmel's broader theory of modernity is articulated most fully in *The Philosophy of Money* (1900; 1978 English trans).

Through his thinking on visual interaction and the distinctive features of metropolitan culture Simmel makes one of the first contributions to our understanding of visual culture and modernity. These aspects of Simmel's thought are particularly clear in his essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life'.

**Simmel and Modernity**

Simmel's work does not sit easily within disciplinary boundaries as ultimately he was concerned with analysing the essential features of modernity, a task which lay outside the purview of any academic discipline. For Simmel modernity involved 'the modes of experiencing what is “new” in “modern” society' (Frisby 1985: 1). Many of Simmel's observations were sparked off by his knowledge and experience of the city of Berlin, a cosmopolitan urban centre in which he spent nearly all his life. Simmel sought to penetrate the 'inner nature' or 'soul' of modernity by contemplating the conditions of existence of its products. What resulted was a form of analysis that was as much aesthetic in character as scientific. Simmel held out the prospect 'of finding in each of life's details the totality of its meaning' (1978: 55); he sought to extract the most general principles from the inspection of cultural minutiae, for example elucidating features of the instrumentality bred by the money economy by reference to the practice of prostitution or the contrasting attitudes of the miser and the spendthrift.

For Simmel modernity was not to be understood as simply the culture of capitalism or industrial society. Its roots lay further back in history. Modernity's origins are to be found in the advent of a fully monetarised economy rather than in variants of the traditional society/industrial capitalism distinction. For Simmel it is the replacement of seigniorial dues and other forms of barter by money as the principal medium of economic exchange that has far-reaching consequences for the contours taken by modernity. In a detailed and complexly argued analysis Simmel shows how money is a highly flexible form of exchange that can be divided in any number of ways and that can be put to an infinity of purposes. Money, then, is pure instrumentality, completely subservient to the ends to which it is put. In this respect it breeds the calculative outlook so typical of modern societies. The processes of rationalisation so well explicated by Max Weber (1864-1920) have their origins in monetary exchange which becomes almost synonymous with calculation.

**Simmel and the Metropolis**

In his classic essay of 1903, 'The metropolis and mental life', Simmel elucidates some social-psychological features of the culture of modern cities. In the modern city many anonymous persons come into fleeting contact with one another, for example travelling on public transport or purchasing goods in a department store. Individuals are removed from the emotional ties and social bonds that link people together in smaller communities.

Simmel describes a social-psychological configuration which seems characteristic of those who live in large urban centres. The urban dweller's mental life is predominantly intellectualistic in character. People respond to situations in a rational rather than an emotional manner. The broad orientation of urban dwellers tends to be calculative; the daily life of people is filled 'with weighing, calculating, enumerating' which reduces 'qualitative values to quantitative terms' (1971:328). A common stance of urban dwellers is thus the blasé outlook: a renunciation of responsiveness, and an indifference towards the values that distinguish things. The world of the blasé person is flat, grey and homogenous. Often accompanying this outlook is to be found an attitude of reserve. A reserved attitude acts as a protective shield for the urban dweller behind which candid views and heartfelt sentiments can be preserved from the scrutiny of others.

Simmel's influential paper has often been mistakenly construed by commentators as turning around an analysis of the contrast between urban
and rural ways of life. But this is by no means the case (see Savage and Warde 1993: 110-114). Very often what Simmel is seeking to contrast are the differences between the traditional village or small town and the modern city. Moreover Simmel maintains that within modern societies it is not easy to sustain a distinction between rural and urban ways of life because the city's influence ramifies throughout the entirety of the society. Further, Simmel does not see the features he describes as simply originating from the ecology and organisation of the modern city. Instead he regards the city as the prime 'seat of the money economy' through which are refracted features (calculativeness, the blasé attitude) that ultimately derive from the advent of fully monetarised systems of exchange.

Social Interactions in Public Places

From your reading of Simmel's essay you should begin to see the ways in which the features of modern urban culture he identifies point to the predominance of the visual sense. In public places, for example, it is essential that the calculative, blasé, reserved urban dweller is able to scan the immediate environment for all kinds of practical purposes -- finding one's way about, avoiding colliding with others on a busy street, being watchful for potential sources of danger. These everyday interactions were considered by Simmel be the basic material of society.

Although it is commonplace to think about society in terms of institutionalised social structures such as political and economic organisations, social classes and the like, these large-scale structures are themselves crystallisations of multitudes of everyday interactions between people (buying tickets, asking the way, dining together, standing in a queue and so forth). Simmel considered a fundamental task for sociology to be the description and analysis of the characteristic features of these forms of interaction (or 'sociation' in Simmel's term) and he eventually consolidated these inquiries in a substantial volume, *Sociology: Investigations of the Forms of Sociation*, published in 1908.

Visual Interaction

In a brief section of Simmel's pathbreaking book (*Sociology: Investigations of the Forms of Sociation*) entitled 'Sociology of the senses' Simmel gave particular attention to sight, for of all of humanity's senses 'the eye has a uniquely sociological function' (Simmel 1969: 358). Consider first the mutual glance, when two persons look at ('into') each other's eyes, as distinct from the simple observation of one person by another. In the mutual glance, says Simmel, we find 'the most direct and purest reciprocity that exists anywhere'. Each person gives equally to the encounter. 'The eye cannot take unless at the same time it gives...In the same act in which the observer seeks to know the observed, he surrenders himself to be understood by the observed' (1969: 358). Naturally enough, glances are transitory phenomena, gone in the moment they occur. But social interaction as we know it would not be possible if humans did not have the capacity for the mutual glance, since the glance serves as a vehicle for conveying recognition, acknowledgement, understanding, intimacy, shame and so forth.

Simmel draws out further aspects of the sociological significance of the eye. When humans interact the face tends to be the primary focus of visual attention because it is a crucial indicator of mood and intent; people are first known by their countenance, not their acts. Indeed, the human face serves no practical purpose except to tell us about the state of mind of its possessor.

It follows from these observations about glances and faces that the attitude of the blind characteristically differs from that of the deaf. 'For the blind, the other person is actually present only in the alternating periods of his utterance.' This gives the blind, Simmel suggests, 'a peaceful and calm existence' in contrast to the often 'more perplexed, puzzled and worried' (1969: 360) attitude of the deaf. Moreover the visual mode assumes a greater significance in the large city because the person is likely to encounter many people in a relationship of anonymity, a relationship in which all that is available to the person is the appearance of the other. Cities present a range of situations (cinemas, theatres, restaurants, buses and trains) in which the individual is placed in the company of anonymous others who are only known to the individual through what can be inferred about their appearance. The increased role of 'mere visual impression' (1969: 360) is characteristic of modern, large-scale society. People living in such a society, Simmel concludes, suffer from some of
the same perplexity that afflicts the deaf: the increased role of 'mere visual impression' contributes to a widespread sense of estrangement.

Conclusion

'A visionary of the real world' (Sennett 1969: 10; note the metaphor!), Simmel's thinking about metropolitan culture and visual interaction indicates the ways in which modernity impacts on visual culture. His frequently diffuse, elliptical yet persuasive writings have influenced further studies of the visual dimensions of ordinary city life, including those of Walter Benjamin.

Bibliography


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