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## *Georg Simmel's Social Aesthetics and the Digital Public Sphere*

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*Abstract. In this paper I use concepts of Georg Simmel's social aesthetics to investigate and describe several relational and communicative dynamics that occur in the digital public sphere—where the aesthetic dimension has now assumed great importance. Specifically, Simmel's work proves to be more suited than Habermas's for understanding the mechanisms of "typification" and "gamification" found in online interactions between individuals. I further argue that, on the Web, these mechanisms in particular are responsible for blocking the exchange of opinions and meanings on subjects of public interest, thereby betraying the universal, societal outcomes of Simmel's social aesthetics.*

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### **Introduction**

The way we define the public sphere has changed significantly over the last twenty years, primarily because of the widespread availability and popularity of digital tools, the rise of social media, and the success of the World Wide Web as a virtual space for exchanging opinions and meanings between increasingly large numbers of individuals. The constitutively hybrid nature of social media, in part due to their affordances, has intermingled the public and private spheres (boyd, 2010; Gurak and Antonijevic, 2008); it has also forced scholars to go beyond the boundaries established in classic theories of the public sphere: divisions between public and private but also between reason and emotions. This paper aims to show that, unlike the theories of Jürgen Habermas, among others, Georg Simmel's social aesthetics is particularly suited to understanding some of the functional mechanisms of the digital

public sphere.<sup>1</sup> First, I look at the connection between the first social *apriori* formulated by Simmel, which hinges on a partial, generalized, and “typified” knowledge of others in social relations, and at “typification” as a salient characteristic of the digital public sphere. This connection arises from a set of accelerative and simplifying mechanisms inherent in the tools that convey meanings in the digital public sphere, starting from the media. Secondly, I show that the central role played by ludic interactions or play-forms of association in Simmel’s social aesthetics can aid in understanding gamification mechanisms that lie at the core of online relationships.

Consequently, the term “aesthetics”, as I intend it in relation to Simmel’s theory, has two different but interconnected meanings. The first refers to the empirical transcendentalism of the three *apriori* that make society possible, which are presented as formal conditions that enable action, oriented directly toward praxis. For this reason, they are also “aesthetic”, in keeping with the meaning of “aisthesis”, which refers to sensation and perception: rather than residing in a dimension detached from perceptible reality, they contribute to its foundation, like the socio-cultural forms and styles of modernity. The latter, too, are pure but simultaneously “aesthetic” forms of social relations, in the sense that they have an immediate reference to immanence and praxis. Hence, both social *apriori* and more properly artistic forms are “aesthetic” because they are in dialectical tension with life and with the concrete and tangible experience of social relations. Indeed, as argued by Boulanger and Christensen (2018), in Simmel’s theory social representations can be viewed as social forms precisely because of their aesthetic component.

I understand Simmel’s social aesthetics to have a second meaning as well, one that is more directly related to ludic forms of

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1 Some recent studies have reassessed Simmel’s work on the genealogy of the aesthetic public sphere in contrast with Habermas’s. See especially Adut (2018) and Carnevali (2020).

association or “social games”: these, too, are pure forms of relationality but they are not detached from reality and, indeed, they contribute to founding its concrete dimension.

Finally, my interpretive approach does not aim to reconstruct the genesis and development of these concepts in Simmel’s theory. I seek instead to rework them freely as tools to shed light on key aspects of the digital public sphere—independently from a specific analysis of how Simmel uses them—while remaining aware of the multiple meanings they have throughout his work.

I propose that Simmel’s theory, understood in the terms and aims described above, helps to grasp the way gamification blocks exchanges of opinions and meanings concerning topics of public interest. This effect is caused by accelerative dynamics in online communication and by mechanisms linked to the algorithms and affordances of digital platforms. As a consequence, the digital public sphere is becoming a collection of closed communities based on strong identities that do not communicate with each other. The ludic form of association and communication found online favors typification and generalization as modes of access to knowledge of others. In Simmel’s social aesthetics, the *apriori* of typification resides in a dialectical tension between two other *aprioris*, which are related to individuals’ constitutively societal and interrelational aspects.

Several mechanisms that I examine in this paper cause online gamification to instead flatten social interaction into a partial, typified knowledge of others—something that Simmel describes in connection with the first of his social *aprioris*. This occurs because of a corresponding blockage in the tension between form and life that is a distinguishing feature of Simmel’s social aesthetics, which means that pure forms of association do not represent a territory different from the relational reality but rather contribute to founding it. By contrast, online gamification pushes relational dynamics based on *apriori* and prejudiced knowledge of others to an extreme, without allowing that knowledge to pass through the concretely relational, societal sphere to which it belongs.

Finally, I show that although Simmel's theoretical grid proves adequate for understanding how the digital public sphere functions, the emerging connection between ludic forms of association and partial knowledge of others in the digital public sphere "betrays" the universal, societal outcomes of his social aesthetics.

### **Beyond Habermas: the Aestheticization of the Public Sphere**

The concept of the digital public sphere (Schäfer, 2016) is closely related to a reassessment of the aesthetic dimension in the public space. This explains preliminarily why Simmel's theory of modernity, which is strongly focused on a reevaluation of aesthetics, may be particularly suited to studying specific forms of online interaction. An observation of this sort inevitably leads, by opposition, to the concept of the public sphere introduced by Jürgen Habermas, which is essential to any discussion of this topic. As is well known, in his 1962 book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas reconstructs the birth of the public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*) from a historical and sociological point of view. Habermas' public sphere should not be understood in the institutional sense but, rather, as a space of publicly accessible discursive practices in which citizens discuss rationally together and assess the validity of one another's arguments. Understood in these terms, the public sphere has to do with the conditions that help individuals form a reasoned opinion, together with others, on problems of general interest. An interesting point with regard to the themes of this paper is that, similar to Max Weber's theory of culture modernity, Habermas creates a separation between the validity of the "aesthetic-expressive sphere" and "scientific-theoretical validity" and "moral-practical validity" (Habermas, 1981a). Only the latter two are conceptually dominant in his theory of the public sphere. In his critique of postmodernism, Habermas also excludes the validity of the aesthetic sphere from everyday communicative functions that make intersubjective understanding and agreement possible between those who exchange meanings

(Habermas, 1981b; 1985). As Lash notes (1990), postmodernism itself tends to trespass on the division between scientific, moral, and aesthetic spheres, producing a de-differentiation (Lash, 1990) that restores artistic value and a cognitive, practical, and ethical value to the aesthetic realm.

As many critics point out (McGuigan, 2005; Jones, 2007), Habermas' approach seriously undervalues how the emotional sphere contributes to the construction of shared meanings in the public space, in a way that does not accurately reflect reality. This is all the more true in the context of the digital public sphere, which, I argue, forms a public space that is strongly contaminated by the aesthetic. This aestheticization of the digital public sphere has to do primarily with the domination of the public sphere by mass media, or its "mediatization."

As is well known, over time Habermas himself has acknowledged the progressive mediatization of the public sphere, so much so that he argues that it is now "produced through the mass media" (Habermas, 1992 [1996]: 75). For this reason, Habermas' approach—especially his theory of the public sphere—has attained a position of relevance in communications studies (Garnham, 1992; Hofmann, 2017; Wessler, 2018; Kautzer, 2019). Its importance can be explained starting from a revision the author made to his model of the public sphere regarding the media, starting from his introduction to the second German edition of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and continuing up to his article "Political Communication in Media Society" (2006).

For Habermas, the mass media are able to produce a "general public opinion", and, consequently, they constitute a fertile terrain for analyzing how the public sphere works. Habermas notes that communications conveyed by mass media transmit content that is both informative and entertaining (Habermas, 2006: 415).

But for Habermas the spectacularization of the discursive exchange is precisely what jeopardizes the deliberative, rational model of the public sphere, fragmenting it into a series of partial,

public microspheres. In essence, Habermas views the degradation and spectacularization of content as a factor in the colonialization of the public sphere by privatistic and market imperatives. Indeed, he considers infotainment a major risk factor for the rationality of the public sphere (Habermas, 2006).

Infotainment, and more generally the products of popular culture, have a direct connection with the aesthetic dimension of the digital public sphere—a dimension that, as Habermas himself recognizes, becomes increasingly important whenever the public sphere is mediatized.

This is even more true online. Numerous studies have shown that information with an entertaining character and on subjects not traditionally associated with the public sphere is quantitatively greater on the Web than on other media (Peters and Broersma, 2017; Mitchelstein and Boczkowski, 2017). Media consumption is more associated with a ludic and privatistic style, precisely because of the hybrid nature of digital media (Chadwich, 2013) mentioned earlier. The same phenomenon of the fragmentation of digital audiences into ideologically similar microgroups—the phenomenon of filter bubbles and echo chambers—leads to an “emotionalization” of online audiences (Higgins, 2008). Hence, in this case too the emotional component proves essential to the constitution of the digital public sphere, which certainly cannot be framed in terms of total transparency between actors who take part in an exchange of opinions and meanings.

Moreover, as some critics of Habermas’ model have pointed out, the aesthetic dimension of the digital public sphere does not make that dimension extraneous to what can be defined as “public.” Entertainment content, originally associated with emotional and private consumption, can actually trigger subsequent moral, civic, and community-oriented concerns. As noted by Monica Sassatelli (2012), there is a “public aesthetic space” in which the emotional, affective element tied to popular culture becomes a means to access knowledge of the Other or that which is different. Hence, there is

an “emotionalization of participation in public discussion” (Sorice, 2019: 129) in the mediatised realm that Habermas himself recognizes as inextricably tied to the new configuration of the public sphere. From this perspective, specifically in relation to surpassing the modern distinctions between the spheres of validity to which Habermas subscribes, the digital public sphere has been called “an emotional public sphere” (Lunt and Stenner, 2005). This definition points to the now unavoidable reintroduction of aesthetics into the mediatised public sphere, and to the impossibility of banishing it from that which pertains to public discourse and to the construction of shared meanings.

The relevance of emotions in the digital public sphere has actually been brought to wide notice (Papacharissi, 2014). As I will show in the remainder of this article, a series of dynamics proper to online communication—associated with an acceleration of communicative flows, a simplification of messages, and their ludic character—imply that the digital public sphere must be characterized as truly aesthetic. Before analyzing these dynamics, however, we must examine why Simmel’s theory of modernity is particularly suited to accounting for this aestheticization of the public sphere we see today, especially on the Web. This also provides an opportunity to reformulate Habermas’s model, and possibly supersede it, at least partially.

### **Simmel’s Social Aesthetics**

According to David Frisby, “had Habermas taken up Simmel’s theory of modernity, he would have been confronted with a conception of modernity that sought to demonstrate the grounding of the aesthetic sphere in the modern life-world, rather than establish its separation from other spheres of life” (Frisby, 1985: 52). In Georg Simmel’s work, the reevaluation of the aesthetic dimension as constitutive of the social reality takes place at multiple levels, which pertain to the various meanings of “aesthetic.” First and foremost, for Simmel the aesthetic sphere constitutes one of the conditions of possibility for the social world. The aesthetic

sphere represents, on the one hand, the formal and “pure” conditions of the human experience, and, on the other, it interacts directly with the social reality. This double function of the aesthetic can also be found in the formation of Simmel’s *aprioris*, which are in dynamic tension with the social reality they help to found (Kaern, 1990; Mayer, 2017). In this specific case, they share a similarity with the immanent transcendentalism of the aesthetic forms in Simmel’s work. His *aprioris* have been associated with Hegel’s spirit and Schopenhauer’s immanent transcendentalism (Ruggieri, 2010), in an attempt to show that the transcendental dimension in Simmel’s thought is directly oriented toward a practice,<sup>2</sup> with both a dynamic form and a basic framework that guide action.

For all these reasons, Simmel’s empirical transcendentalism is primarily an aesthetic transcendentalism—something he himself notes when outlining the connection between aesthetic and social forms: “Society, in the last analysis, is a work of art.” (Davis, 1973: 320) This empirical transcendentalism is fundamental to Simmel’s analyses of the social-cultural forms and styles of modernity. Fashion, for example, in its connection with the concept of “style”, is a pure (and aesthetic) form of social relations, but this does not place fashion in a different territory from the relations themselves: on the contrary, it contributes to creating them (Simmel, 1911). As pure forms of social knowledge, similar in this respect to cognitive *a priori*s, all artistic forms are in a dialectical tension with life. Simmel specifies this in his strictly aesthetic writings, such as on the picture frame (Simmel, 1902) and on the handle (Simmel, 1905b), representations of aesthetics that help create a reality precisely by isolating themselves from it.

This dialectical tension between pure form and life also emerges

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<sup>2</sup> As Simmel himself repeats in *The Philosophy of Money*, representations should be understood as “the presuppositions, the material and the directives for our practical activity, through which we establish a relationship with the world (p. 104).”



in play-forms of association (*Spielform der Vergesellschaftung*) (Simmel, 1917). Insofar as these forms of association denote the simple pleasure of passing time together—“it is the fulfillment of a relation that wants to be nothing but relation”—they represent pure forms of sociability (Simmel, 1917 [1950]: 53), free from any material or instrumental interest. Sociability is a playful form of sociation; in social games people experience a non-instrumental, non-finalistic sociability that implies a pure enjoyment of relation in itself. Some scholars have viewed this form of sociability as something empty and insubstantial (Dal Lago, 1983: 24-25), and therefore unable to account for any real form of social interaction. Conversely, others have restored Simmel’s social aesthetics to prominence in order to describe a multiplicity of social relations that take place in the public sphere (Waitier, 1986).

Tracing this link between Simmel’s social aesthetics and forms of association typical of the digital public sphere puts me in continuity with an interpretive line that, for some years now, has sought to draw attention to Simmel’s aesthetics as a key to understanding the dynamics of today’s social reality. This approach is based on the idea that aesthetic phenomena are an intrinsic component of social ties—not incidental or mere epiphenomena of the social reality (De La Fuente, 2007). From this perspective, Simmel’s social aesthetics is able to capture the inter-relationship between material and ideal aspects of social reality (Carnevali and Pinotti, 2020), and in no way is it reducible to a form of “aestheticization” or to an appendage of postmodern thought. On the contrary, if a link between Simmel and postmodernism exists (Weinsein D. and Weinstein M.A., 1993), in my opinion, it cannot consist in a reduction of Simmel’s social aesthetics to a mere “aesthetic game” (an idea that the concept of postmodernism may evoke); it must be grasped, rather, starting from what Vincenzo Mele (2013) calls the “epistemological insecurity” of the postmodern age: seen, that is, from the perspective of sociology’s redefinition today as a “form of knowledge” that goes beyond its reduction to a “method”. Following this interpretive line, my aim is

to clarify how Simmel's emphasis on social aesthetics is particularly suited to describing forms of interaction that occur in the digital public sphere, by first selecting the concepts from Simmel's theory that shed the most light on online interactions—not to elucidate how he reworks these notions vis-à-vis the philosophical and sociological tradition. As explained earlier, when aesthetics is banished from the digital public sphere (as in Habermas's theory of the three spheres of validity), it is difficult, if not impossible, to accurately analyze the interactional forms that take place in it.

A reappraisal of Simmel's work regarding the digital public sphere specifically involves the immanent transcendentalism of aesthetic forms and the *apriori* that make society possible. Two elements are pertinent here: a partial and typified knowledge of the other, and the game as an equally typical, "pure" form of social interaction. As I will show, these two dynamics are found in the structure of the digital public sphere, but they somehow influence each other; in the context of the Web and social networks, they end up jeopardizing the dialectical tension between form and life that make the founding of an open relationality and a real exchange of meanings possible for Simmel.

### **Play-Forms of Association and Partial Knowledge of Others**

We have seen that the immanent transcendentalism of Simmel's social *aprioris* also relates to the foundational aspect that the pure forms of the social relationship bring to the reality of interactions between individuals. This also applies to ludic forms of association. Far from being vacuous and insubstantial things that are separate from "real" life, insofar as they are a sublimated form of social existence, they actually also constitute a sort of transcendental foundation of life. In fact, Simmel argues that social games are in some relationship with the totality and profundity of the real, which makes them the bearers and representatives of existence as such. (Simmel, 1917 [1950]). This does not mean that social relations find concrete expression only in this pure and disinterested mode.

Nevertheless, the ritualized character of play-forms of sociation—found in such experiences as meals (Simmel, 1910), courtship, in codes such as that of clothing, and more generally in the concept of style (Simmel, 1908b)—relieve individuals from the practical ends of existence, bringing them back to the pure pleasure of spending time with others. Consequently, at a practical and concrete level, too, they are a foundation of social experience.

The digital public sphere, which we have already qualified as aesthetic, is tied in two ways to ludic forms of association; in other words, the public space of the Web has been transformed over time into a sort of game. This digital gamification, I argue, is connected also to another dynamic typical of social interaction as described by Simmel, that is, a partial, typified, and generalized knowledge of the Other.

In his major work *Soziologie* (1908a), Simmel sets out three *aprioris* that constitute the foundation of social experience. The first of these revolves around a partial knowability of the other. The subject's access to real, authentic knowledge of a “you” is precluded in advance. In the social interactions that individuals interweave, they create a sort of necessary fiction that allows them to know the Other only through typification and generalization, thereby constituting a partial representation that nevertheless forms the basis of the relationship: “In order to recognize the man, we do not see him in his pure individuality, but carried, exalted, or degraded by the general type under which we subsume him.” (Simmel, 1908a [1910-11]: 379). The very existence of society as a unity of subjective representations is only possible starting from these typical images. Knowledge of the Other thus becomes the outcome of an act of selection, abstraction, and typification based on the reality of reciprocal interaction. Individuals establish a relationship with another person knowing all the while that they will know only a part of that person, dependent on a “general type” that they themselves attribute to the Other: “Since one never can absolutely know another [...] since we must rather form a conception of a personal unity out of the fragments of another person in which alone he is

accessible to us, the unity so formed necessarily depends upon that portion of the Other which our standpoint toward him permits us to see.” (Simmel, 1908a [1906]: 442). This cognitive approximation is similar in some ways to the cognitive processes that Simmel describes with regard to the overload of stimuli in metropolitan life (Simmel, 1903), and to the aesthetic experiences associated with them. In Simmel’s view, modern culture offers an excess of stimuli and possibilities for self-realization. The reason we adapt to a formal principle, even an aesthetic one (such as style, codified table manners, and so forth), is that we need to manage this excess by conforming to a general principle.

Simmel believes that “the ego could really no longer carry itself, or at least no longer wished to show itself and thus put on a more general, a more typical, in short, a stylized costume” (Simmel, 1908b [1991]: 69). Indeed, he specifies that style is “always that type of artistic arrangement which, to the extent it carries or helps to carry the impression of a work of art, negates its quite individual nature and value, its uniqueness of meaning” (Simmel, 1908b [1991]: 70). In the aesthetic experience of enjoying a work of art, form becomes an epistemological refuge, enabling knowledge that would otherwise be unattainable. In the same way, the overload of objective culture in metropolises (which manifests in aesthetic experiences typical of these places of modernity, such as art exhibitions) can only be managed by conforming to a formal, typifying principle (Simmel, 1896). These observations are particularly apt for describing the modes of relationship and interaction that occur in the digital public sphere. They also cast light on how the typification found there is often an effect of the same social games described by Simmel, which take the form of gamification on the Web.

### **Gamification and Typification in the Public Digital Sphere**

The digital public sphere, some of whose aesthetic elements I have already presented, is also characterized by dynamics strictly

related to the processes of typification and to those of a partial and generalized knowledge brought to light thus far through Simmel's ideas. These dynamics arise precisely because of the aesthetic conformation of the digital public sphere, which emerges as such in part thanks to ludic forms of association, which find ample room online. Above all, as we have seen, Simmel talks about typified knowledge not only as a cognitive *apriori*, but also as a defense that individuals need in order to make their knowledge of others and reality possible in a environment overloaded with objective culture. This surcharge of stimuli in metropolitan settings corresponds convincingly to the information overload that characterizes online consumption of news and information in the digital public sphere. An acceleration in communicative flows and an excess of information on the Web has particularly significant, widely studied effects on lowering users' attention thresholds (Carr, 2010). What Nobel Prize-winning economist Daniel Kahneman (2011) calls System 1, that is, a form of "fast thinking" that systematically uses mental shortcuts and enacts automatic responses to stimuli, often becomes preponderant when users receive a quantity of stimuli and information that is otherwise cognitively unmanageable.

This mental shortcut involves resorting to a way of understanding Web content that is more emotional and less reflexive, more immediate and less mediated. Furthermore, as Giuseppe Veltri and Giuseppe Di Caterino (2017) point out, with System 1, cognitive evaluation of the information content occurs using only a part of the available information. This explains why online information content may be understood only partially, imprecisely, and incompletely. Indeed, because of the speed at which System 1 works, it can only absorb part of the total content. Similar to what occurs in Simmel's metropolises, typification is a form of cognitive defense that individuals require to handle a flow of stimuli that would otherwise overwhelm them.

Simmel viewed the metropolis as the emblematic locus of modernity, whose industrial and technical development would later converge into modern technology. Just as Berlin art exhibitions

(Simmel, 1896), for example, demonstrate the technical-industrial application of aesthetic overload and excessive sensory stimuli, technological development creates a jumble of aesthetic stimuli that can only be managed cognitively by reducing them to types, and by framing them in partial, generalizing forms of thought.

Therefore, as a cognitive mode peculiar to digital culture, typification primarily involves this mixture of accelerated communication flows and information overload. In addition to this, it should be noted that Web users come to knowledge of others through strongly typified cultural expressions, such as profiles and avatars. Moreover, the Web is now increasingly dominated by cultural products such as memes, which use a striking composition of words and images to convey messages in a direct, immediate and, again, strongly typified fashion (Shifman, 2013).

Thus, typification as a form of knowledge peculiar to digital culture responds to two different but interconnected logics, both related to the sphere of aesthetics. On the one hand, as a fiction necessary for the management of an enormous amount of content and information, typification exploits mechanisms with strong emotional associations. When people are unable to know everything and unable to manage everything, primary (unconscious) process thinking prevails over secondary process thinking (accessible to conscious logic), becoming both the cause and effect of a partial and incomplete knowledge. As evidenced by memes, typification is also a direct effect of the “social games” that take place on the Web. These too, as we have seen, are closely linked to the aesthetic dimension. Simmel described them as aesthetic forms of relationship, because they are disconnected from practical purposes and linked to the enjoyment of relationship in itself. But gamification is an increasingly dominant feature of digital culture: interactions on the Web take place more and more frequently in a purely ludic fashion, in increasingly diverse contexts. Because of this, some scholars have used Simmel’s theories to illuminate a series of interactions that take place on the Web, from chats

between adolescents (Drusian, 2005) to online role-playing games (Isabella, 2006).

What has not yet been sufficiently emphasized, however, is the close connection between online gamification and typification, which Simmel himself sees as the basis of knowledge about others and which, like social games, is central to the epistemology of the digital public sphere. This connection is to be found especially in areas of the digital public sphere where opinions and meanings are transmitted.

As mentioned, the public sphere is thought to be increasingly “mediatized” (Dahlgren, 2009): although communication in digital culture often occurs in a “disintermediated” fashion, that is, outside the transmission of messages by traditional gatekeepers, it is also true that invisible intermediaries such as the algorithms of the big players in the digital world create a new communicative intermediation (Giacomini, 2018). In this context, messages are conditioned by the platforms’ affordances and by the algorithms themselves (which lead to the acceleration and simplification of meanings).

A ludic component undoubtedly also has a place among the distinctive features of social networks that come under the definition of affordances: digitality, interactivity, connectivity, multimedia, and hypertextuality (Lister *et al.*, 2009), or their participatory character (Van Dijck, Poell and De Wahl, 2018). There has also been talk recently of digital culture as a culture of the Game, and of the digital revolution itself as a process that, from its beginnings, has pushed social and interaction forms in the direction of play and simplicity. As Baricco (2018) points out, the design of the iPhone, along with the system of likes and followers on Facebook, Twitter, Tinder, and other social media and apps, have a markedly playful component to them, which also has to do with the idea of the simplicity they convey—simplicity in the learning mechanisms, but also in resolving problems that at one time were extremely complex, such as finding one’s ideal life partner.

Recent studies have shown that the use of humorous framing for messages continues to grow in both private and public realms (Highfield, 2015). As for newspapers, which play a vital role in forming opinions and conveying messages and meanings in a mediatized public sphere, their languages tend increasingly to adapt to those of the platforms on which the information is consumed. As recent data show, a large portion of the population in Western countries now obtains its news information from social networks, especially Facebook (Statista, 2019). For this reason, newspapers on social networks are communicating increasingly in playful and ironic ways, using language that is close to the spoken register and resorting broadly to paralinguistic signs such as emoticons, which also indicate a recreational consumption of information.

The function of this popularization of journalistic language is therefore to attract the widest possible audience in social network settings that are distinguished by gamification and a concurring acceleration of communication flows—with the result that users with an increasingly low threshold of attention only notice messages that have an immediate impact and are entertaining.

Clearly, though, in part because of the gamification paradigm, messages conceived this way will tend to veer toward strongly stereotyped and typified communication and only include elements that have the greatest impact and hold on readers, making it a complex task to achieve a complete understanding of the content conveyed. Journalistic sensationalism, the use of high-impact headlines and photos, the need for newspapers to put out immediately comprehensible, viral messages in order to win the race for clicks (and advertising revenues), often leads to a hyper-simplification of messages. This applies, for example, to newspaper headlines, which, by their very nature, lend themselves even more than other communication styles to the simplification of complex information; in the ludic and accelerated context of social communication, they often lose any contact with the facts. In practice, headlines amount to empty signifiers, devoid of referents



in a hyperreal communicative vortex, evoking the ideas of Baudrillard (1972) and Virilio (1989) on reality's disappearance in an aesthetic overload of signs (including linguistic ones). Using Walter Lippmann's vocabulary, a "protensive" stereotyping mechanism is thus generated in the digital public sphere: as long as reality does not intervene, the action of stereotypes tends to be completely independent of their referents (Lippmann, 1922). This happens largely because communication has been transformed into a social game, which means that, in its online media representation, reality often becomes accessible only through typifications and generalizations.

This epistemology of partial and typified knowledge caused by gamification can also be found in agenda setting, with newspapers favoring news that has little public interest but is highly viral: it is newsworthy, in other words, more likely to be rewarded by algorithms that value interactions, strong emotions, entertainment, an emotional and immediate understanding that inevitably ends up being partial and whose messages are not thoroughly or reflectively processed. Knowledge of the Other and others in the digital public sphere is inevitably affected by this ludic typification of messages, inasmuch as such knowledge is strongly conditioned by the media that convey it. Mediatization, understood as dependence on who selects and transmits meanings in a mediated way in the public sphere, is certainly not canceled out by the mechanisms of disintermediation, since these mechanisms are in any case subject to the accelerated, ludic dynamics of social communication, which clearly absorb private and public communication in an equal measure.

All these reflections help to understand why Simmel's theory is particularly appropriate for describing mechanisms that regulate various kinds of interaction in the digital public sphere. To summarize the terms of the question, Simmel's theory proves to be more appropriate than Habermas' insofar as it reevaluates the aesthetic sphere as constitutive of interactions between individuals in the public space. This aestheticization, as we have seen, is of

primary importance in today's exchanges of meaning in the digital public sphere. In other terms, while the inclusion or exclusion of the aesthetic in the public sphere was still a matter of discussion in the predigital age, now, with the arrival of the Web and social media, the importance of the aesthetic dimension in both the construction and exchange of meanings appears to be undeniable.

Furthermore, as we have seen, this aestheticization of the digital public sphere is strongly connected to two other mechanisms that Simmel sees as underlying interactions between individuals and social groups: partial knowledge of the Other and consequent typifications and generalizations, which I have shown to be a direct result of an online aestheticized public sphere on the Web and ludic forms of association. The latter can be found throughout the Web: online communication is in many ways a game—a play-form of sociability. But gamification is connected by the two strands of typifications and generalizations, which, on the Web, stem from the acceleration and “ludification” of communicative flows.

For all these reasons, Simmel's grid of categories is particularly appropriate for understanding some of the functional mechanisms of the digital public sphere. A final question remains: to what extent does the correlation between gamification and typification in the digital public sphere run counter to the universalization of social relations that Simmel associated with his third *apriori*? Stated differently, if Simmel's theory is helpful for analyzing online interactions, then gamification on the Web exacerbates the dynamics of typification and betrays the natural outcome of Simmel's social theory, that is, a universalism of individuals and their propensity to inhabit a public space shared with everyone. Instead, gamification generates a mechanism that in many cases is overly homophilic, tribal, and based on oppositions between groups that are incapable of establishing a real dialogue and a healthy exchange of opinions.

## Tribal Aesthetics: Gamification and the Blockage of Online Relationality

In Simmel's theory, society's existence is made possible by the interlacing of three sociological *aprioris*. The first one, as we have seen, regards typification and generalization as ways of knowing the Other; however, it is not the only transcendental form that makes social relations possible. The process of typification and generalization alone cannot account for the reality of forms of association between individuals. It must be accompanied by Simmel's second *apriori*, based on the premise that every individual is not an entirely collective and social being but also something "else." This individual transcendence means that the social structure does not absorb the totality of the individual: "Each element of a group is not a societary part, but beyond that something else." (Simmel, 1908a [1910-11]: 381). "The *apriori* of the empirical social life is that the life is not entirely social" (Simmel, 1908a [1910-11]: 382). In other words, this is a centrifugal force on individuals that prevents them from complete fusing with the social structure of which they form a part. This centrifugal force, which places the individual simultaneously inside and outside a social group, forms the basis for Simmel's description of numerous forms of relationship, including, for example, that of married couples. In this type of relationship, the social *apriori* makes the self something different from and other than the fusional union that marriage would presuppose.

This individual transcendence can be interpreted as a form of the individual's universality, that is, as a natural tendency to reject absolute belonging to a social group and to prefer inclusion in wider circles: a natural tendency to constitute oneself as universal rather than particular. The nonsocial part of oneself, which goes beyond society, is thus what makes sociability possible.

The process is brought to completion by Simmel's third social *apriori*, which founds the individual's belonging to society in its modern form—understood as a scenario in which social circles

become wider and wider and the individual must establish his or her shared existence with someone who is spatially distant and with whom he or she does not have a direct relationship. The third *apriori* is what enables the transition from an “I-you” relationship to an “I-you-world” relationship; it is the consciousness of being in society with other individuals, even in the absence of any direct contact. The self therefore acquires the capacity to think of itself in a complex, differentiated social system, within a set of abstract, objectivizing structures that hold together a shared existence that is disconnected from visible contexts. Complex and diversified societies imply the possibility for individuals to continue representing themselves as members even in the absence of any visible, direct, and immediate relationship with the other individuals of the society.

The level of abstraction here is different from that of the Other's typification and generalization in the cognitive process. The abstraction in the third *apriori* makes it possible to acquire a social consciousness that goes beyond primitive forms of association, such as the homogeneous and restricted groups that characterize “primitive” societies. Simmel repeatedly describes the contrast between “primitive” homogeneous societies, which present significant barriers to individuals distinguishing themselves from the group, and the ties typical of modern scenarios, in which the self is a product of intersections between numerous social circles but without it belonging in entirety to any of them. As has been noted, the extension of social forms thus multiplies the forms of relationships governed by an impersonal third party (Conte, 2010). The concept of the “third person” (Esposito, 2007) allows us to overcome fusional and dyadic relational modes. The intertwining of Simmel's three *aprioris* thus gives shape to a relationality that goes beyond an individual's membership in socially and culturally homogeneous closed groups that are resistant to a relationship with the Other. It leads instead to a social outcome of a universal nature or, in any case, to one that is strongly distinguished by an expanded

exchange of meanings and a generalized communication between individuals who are always both inside and outside the social groups involved.

The widening of social circles in contemporary society patently and directly relates to technology, through which we are able to develop long-distance ties that acquire meaning even without any direct contact with the Other. A society of networks gives rise to a relationality made of ties that are strong and weak, close and distant, direct and indirect, but all equally a part of the social sphere and all equally important in defining individuals' sociability (Rainie and Wellman, 2012). Ultimately, the meaning of Simmel's three *aprioris* lies in the ability of individuals to shift their boundaries from the self to a social relationship, and from a dual relationship to a societal relationship, including the third person and the abstract and objective structures that make relations possible in a post-traditional modern society.

The Web, as mentioned earlier, theoretically represents the ultimate realization of this type of sociability, insofar as it widens the space of relationships and amplifies remote relationality and weak ties. All told, online relationality should theoretically represent an extension of that social consciousness of self to which Simmel's three *aprioris* tend, leading to a definitive overcoming of traditional communities and the consequent realization of a universal sociability. Yet, the aestheticization of social relations and social games that, as we have seen, are a major feature of the digital public sphere often cause relationality to be blocked at Simmel's first *apriori*, re-establishing a homogeneity between social groups in which typified knowledge of the other loses its universal outcome.

Explicitly inspired by Simmel, Michel Maffesoli has applied a few elements of Simmel's social aesthetics to online relationships. His theory of aesthetic postmodernity adds several points to what I have already discussed about the link between gamification and typification and helps to show how this link leads to a tribal outcome and a reconstitution of homogeneous communities online. As noted, gamification is a process that is characterized in

the public digital sphere by an acceleration of communication flows, leading to knowledge that is often partial, typified, focused on System 1, and consequently on an emotional understanding of meanings. As I have shown, this is connected specifically with the “gamified” way in which the media transmit messages on the Web. The transformation of information into games, with the construction of ludic, easy-to-understand messages that fit the social platforms where the information is predominantly consumed, thus produces a partial and typified understanding of messages.

But the fragmentation of online audiences into self-referential and noncommunicating niches, the phenomenon of “echo chambers” (Pariser, 2011) is also implicated in the Web’s social games. Taking up Simmel’s ideas, Maffesoli states that in postmodern society the aesthetic form of relationship supersedes the more utilitarian traits typical of modern culture: there is a preference to spending time together without any particular purpose, an attitude of “enjoying the moment” for the pure pleasure of experiencing shared emotions (Maffesoli, 1990; 2003). According to Maffesoli, technology has the power to encourage this “re-enchantment” of the world (Maffesoli, 1993), thanks to which online social relationships tend to shed their utilitarian component and take on a non-purposive form. For Maffesoli, the massive circulation of aesthetically charged cultural products and images promotes the formation of aesthetic communities that display these traits.

Maffesoli’s theory also shows, however, that going beyond individualism through the aestheticization of social relations promotes the formation of actual “neo-tribes”, both offline and online (Maffesoli, 1988; 2008). These are communities in which an emotional bond completely prevails over any rational connection. Neo-tribes are none other than the homogeneous communities that Simmel describes as an early phase of human sociability. In Simmel’s theory, the play-forms of sociation, along with the interlacing of his three social *aprioris*, should establish an open,

universal society, in which the non-purposiveness of the relationship assists in an exchange of meanings without barriers or walls. In actuality, the mechanisms that segment social spheres online, due to algorithms (Sunstein, 2017) and a consequent formation of echo chambers based on hyper-emotionalized ties, make gamification on the network particularly dangerous, precisely insofar as it emphasizes a partial (and ideologically oriented) understanding of meanings, thus giving rise to social groups that perpetually seek validation of their own worldview (Quattrociocchi and Vicini, 2016) and tend to be resistant to any questioning of their ideas.

Hence, because of the functional mechanisms of the digital public sphere, the universal potential inherent in the non-purposiveness of ludic forms of association often reverses into its opposite, promoting the formation of tribal communities. Gamification in the digital public sphere has no truly societal outcome. If on the one hand it allows the overcoming of utilitarianism in social relations, as in Simmel's theory, on the other it contributes to the formation of group narcissism: hyper-homogeneous communities capable of embracing only partial meanings that do not challenge their group identity. Far from establishing disinterested online relationships,<sup>3</sup> online gamification tends rather to facilitate the formation of ideological bubbles (Klinger and Svensson, 2018).

This causes social experience to remain blocked at the first of Simmel's three *aprioris*: a partial and typified knowledge of the Other, who is labeled "different" and "foreign." This does not occur because of an intrinsic defect of aesthetic relationality, however, but because of the form it tends to take in the digital public sphere, in which the algorithms and affordances of platforms

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<sup>3</sup> The idea that online relationality can be centered on mechanisms of disinterest is at the heart of some theories put forward by so-called cyber-optimists. Clay Shirky (2010) fits this description: he expects the characteristics of the Web to give rise to a "cognitive surplus" and a "collective intelligence" based on the generosity and willingness of users to pool their cognitive and intellectual resources.

promote a dangerous interweaving between social games and the reconstitution of tribal group identities.

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