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On the Paradoxical Structure of the Concept of Style. A Theoretical Framework

Abstract. In addition to his famous concept of the style of life or lifestyle, Simmel develops a more general concept of style in his writings on art and aesthetics. He makes clear in this context that the concept of style has a paradoxical structure that mediates between the general and the particular and that it always stands for the general. This concept of style allows Simmel to apply it in different research fields: sociology and social philosophy, ethics, art and aesthetics or intellectual history. In developing a theoretical framework for understanding Simmel's concept of style, we will need to cross these disciplinary boundaries. We will examine the fields of arts and aesthetics as well as intellectual history so as to illustrate how Simmel applies the concept of style. This will also make the paradoxical structure of this concept clear

The Context and the Problem: An Outline

Simmel's theory of culture and social systems is not just highly dynamic, but also highly ambivalent. This is owing to its dualistic structure. The central conflicts of modern culture and society arise between life and form, the individual and society, objective and subjective culture, realism and idealism. I argue in the following that Simmel attempts to capture these ambivalences and dualistic conceptions in specific terms such as the concept of style.¹ Style,

¹ According to Lichtblau, the symbol or analogy are the other concepts that have the same function as the concept of style in Simmel's work (Lichtblau, 1986: 60f.).

then, is not simply a principle alongside others and part of a dualistic structure, as Nedelmann proposed (Nedelmann, 1991: 181f.). It is instead a form, as Simmel says, more precisely, a form that *mediates* between the general and the individual without completely erasing the individual aspect (Lichtblau, 1986: 60f., 67-70).² This process of mediation undermines any simple dualistic structure because the mediation takes place *within* this form. No content can be given without form. Simmel still remains a Kantian in this sense. At the same time, however, Simmel criticizes Kant for having conceived his philosophy on the basis of natural science (Simmel, 2010: 126). This starting point lead Kant to posit an absolute validity of forms that is indifferent to their individual content. What Simmel identifies as the “indifference of the law” in Kantian philosophy ensures that a law “applies absolutely, without allowing the individual situation it addresses to somehow unfold as a source of determinations separate from the universal” (Simmel, 2010: 126).³

² Hahn’s analysis of the concept of style also tends implicitly towards this view, although he does not deal with Simmel’s concept of style (Hahn, 1986: 603-611).

³ In contrast to the type of absolute law, which is indifferent to individual content, Simmel develops the law of the individual. This notion is in the background of the following discussion. Simmel refers in this context to Kant’s practical philosophy. We can see how Simmel discusses the same problem from a theoretical perspective in his early writings on the epistemology of history and in his monograph on Kant. Here, too, Simmel criticises a concept of law that only presents a generality incapable of including individual historical events (Simmel, G., 1977 [1905]: 103-146) and respectively Kant’s conception of a formal a priori (Simmel, 2017 [1904]), which, according to Simmel, cannot be applied to specific empirical contents (Oakes, 1977: 16-30; Oakes, 1980, 3-46; Kitagawa, 1982: 19-41; Adolf 2002; Steinbach, 2021: 19-22) and which remains too abstract to capture social and cultural polarities. Against this background, Amat argues that Simmel’s conception of the individual law can harmonise the conflict between life and culture (Amat, 2017: 41-72).

Against the background of a new logic that favours functional and relational over substantial concepts (Böhringer, 1985: 298f., 302; Becker, 2020: 81-98; Schubbach, 2020: 99-123), the concept of style is of particular interest in several respects. First, the concept of style can be found in many of Simmel's works but without its meaning changing. By focusing on such concepts, we can thus recognise a greater degree of consistency in Simmel's oeuvre than is generally recognized and it undermines the widely-held thesis, first proposed by Frischeisen-Köhler (Frischeisen-Köhler, 1920: 1-9), that Simmel's work can be divided into three phrases.⁴ Second, this conceptual consistency allows Simmel to apply the concept of style in various fields: sociology and social philosophy, ethics, arts and aesthetics and intellectual history.

This means the concept of the style of life is just one possible meaning of the concept of style,⁵ namely, one whose application-context is the field of sociology and social philosophy. This is the most famous variant of Simmel's concept of style.⁶ While the

⁴ This means the following discussion seeks to trace a continuity in Simmel's work, as Blumenberg and Fitzi have also done with regard to the concept of life or the paradigm of life and form (Blumenberg, 1979: 121-134; Fitzi, 2018: 135-155).

⁵ Nedelmann's analysis of the interaction of culture and society in Simmel's works is of analytical clarity and is thus in many ways valuable. Nonetheless she subsumes the concept of style under the category of "cultural ambivalence" so that in the end no difference remains between the concept of style and the concept of lifestyle (Nedelmann, 1991: 172).

⁶ In chapter 6 of the German version of the *Philosophy of Money* Simmel uses both concepts – the concept of the style of life (*Stil des Lebens*) and the concept of lifestyle (*Lebensstil*) – synonymously, while the English translation uses the first one almost exclusively. In the English translation of Simmel's *Sociology* the concept of lifestyle is not only used to translate the German *Lebensstil* (Simmel, 2009 [1908]: 628; Simmel, 2016 [1908]: 800) but also synonymously with the German concepts *Lebensführung*, *Lebensweise* (art of living), *Lebensform* (form of life), or even *Lebenshaltung* (attitude towards life;

concept of style was popular in various areas of cultural studies in the 20th century,⁷ it is perhaps discussed the most in the social sciences. Simmel is still one of the main sources of inspiration for research into the sociology of lifestyle. A brief mention of the two central aspects of sociological research into modern lifestyles is helpful as it will allow us to distinguish this from Simmel's concept of style in the following.

The first aspect concerns the focus on the individual pole in the concept of style, which is often associated with the concept of lifestyle. According to Simmel, modernity has led to a pluralisation of different lifestyles, meaning every individual has to develop their own lifestyle. A reality that is not seen as a unity is also incapable of providing one uniform style equally suitable for every individual. This pluralisation seems to be identical with an individualisation of lifestyles from a sociological perspective (Müller, 1992: 29-35) or, as Nedelmann puts it, individuals become "lifestyle managers" due to the "stylelessness of modern culture" (Nedelmann, 1991: 172). The second aspect concerns the question of the lifestyles of different social classes and thus raises questions of social inequality. This aspect is associated far more with Bourdieu's work than with that of Simmel (Müller, 1994: 55-74). In contrast to Simmel, for Bourdieu a lifestyle is an expression of a certain social class and of status (Bourdieu, 1996 [1979]: 196-175; Georg, 2014: 165-168) and it is not primarily an acting subject's reaction to the shifting structures of modern age.⁸ In their bibliography of research into the various dimensions of lifestyle, Müller and Wehrich not only list

Simmel, 2009 [1908]: 55, 203, 347, 368; Simmel, 2016 [1908]: 66, 253, 435, 462).

⁷ See the various contributions in Gumbrecht and Pfeiffer, 1986.

⁸ A classic text on the question of the relationship between lifestyles and class differences is Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* which was published in 1899 (Veblen, 1912 [1899]), one year before Simmel published *The Philosophy of Money* in 1900.

Simmel's approach and Bourdieu's class-orientated approach separately, but also make clear that Simmel is not interested in analysing and describing specific individual lifestyles. What Simmel calls the style of life or lifestyle is the result of the structures of modern culture and society rather than the result of a valuable and creative individual process (Müller and Wehrich, 1990: 16-21).⁹ He sees the modern lifestyle as the result of a process of adaptation and appropriation. This is not to deny that Simmel's work contains fruitful insights on microstructures in the process of social interaction (*Vergesellschaftung*), as Müller admits elsewhere (Müller, 1992: 59-69) and thus served as an inspiration for research on social inequality (Wahl, 2006: 4679-4689). And perhaps the concept of lifestyle has attracted so much attention because it allows both levels to be considered through a change of perspective, namely, the subjective and the objective, the individual and the general (Fröhlich and Mörth, 1994: 12; Nedelmann, 1991: 169-193), the micro- and the macrostructures (Müller, 1992: 379) or the implicit and explicit style (Hahn 1986: 610). Both perspectives can be productively related to each other. Nevertheless, there is a conspicuous tendency in research in the social sciences to link the question of style with the capacities and possibilities of individuals, while also pushing the question of objective resources and strategies into the background (Otte, 2005: 5-15). This tendency has also gained influence in philosophy (Frank, 1999a [1992]: 145-167; Frank, 1999b [1992]: 264-301).¹⁰

The following discussion is not intended as a critique of these developments and fruitful debates, nor is it concerned with the

⁹ According to Nedelman, Simmel shows that the modern lifestyle undermines the individual's creative capacity (Nedelmann, 1991: 169-193). It is therefore easier for most people to use strategies such as stylization than to become creative themselves.

¹⁰ An important 20th century influence that has reinforced this tendency is Adler's research in the field of individual psychology (Ansbacher, 1967: 191-212).

question of who Simmel may have inspired.¹¹ My aim is instead to show that the concept of style is able to capture the various poles of an increasingly differentiated modern culture and society because it has a paradoxical structure. Simmel saw this quite clear.¹² And this structure enables a change of perspective between the micro- and macrostructures, subjective and objective culture, individual and society. In order to work out this structure, we will take into consideration different texts by Simmel from different areas, because Simmel takes up the concept of style at various points and sometimes expands it. However, I will not work out in detail all its various applications in the fields of sociology and social philosophy, ethics, art and aesthetics below.¹³ I instead use Simmel's application of the concept of style in the field of arts and aesthetics and intellectual history as an example that best illustrates its paradoxical structure.

Simmel claims the concept of style always expresses a general structure. It is a principle of form that can encompass individual content-related characteristics. And even the concept of the style of life or lifestyle does not express any qualitative individual aspects. It is only a derivative – or one possible application - of the more general concept of style. Keeping this in mind, we can distinguish

¹¹ There are of course studies on this topic that see traces of Simmel's concept of style realised in Rothacker (Steizinger, 2020: 308-328), Mannheim (Barboza, 2005: 148-152) or Bourdieu (Kim-Heinrich, 2012) as well as others.

¹² Lohmann points out that Simmel was the first to reinterpret the concept of style as lifestyle, thereby extending its application in the field of art to questions of cultural theory (Lohmann, 1985: 547/note 1; Meyer, 2017: 215).

¹³ Fruitful insights to these areas, where the application of Simmel's concept of style plays an important role or stands in the background, can be found in Frisby, 1991: 73-93; Nedelmann, 1991: 169-193; Nedelmann, 1993: 398-418; Müller, 2015: 89-111; Amat, 2017: 62; Müller, 2018: 89-111; Lichtblau, 2019: 33-43; Harrington, 2020: 38-47; Carnevali and Pinotti, 2021: 177-179 – to name just a few.

the concepts of an individual style and a general style in Simmel's work. But contrary to what we would expect, the style of life is what Simmel would call the general style. What he calls an individual style leads into his conception of the law of the individual and this underlies his understanding of the main figures in intellectual history. If someone is able to follow their own law – and not the laws of the general implied by every style –, we can say that this person has an individual style. Although this may seem counterintuitive, for Simmel the main figures in intellectual history are highly individual in a qualitative sense as they manage to objectify their individuality in a work. This paradoxical structure is already implicit in the concept of style because “style is a principle of generality which either mixes with the principle of individuality, displaces it, or represents it” (Simmel, 1997b [1908]: 212). The inner structure of the concept of style always moves towards the general and therefore must lead to a different point than its individual function. Seen in this light, the style of life is only a consequence of and a reaction to the problems of modernity; it is more an indication of a problem than the promise of a solution. I will argue in the following that in the concept of style the sense of the style of life has the notion of stylization as its complement. This strategy of stylization clearly shows that style always addresses the objective pole of the general and the things around us. It concerns, in this respect, the ordinary individual in a majoritarian society whose possibilities become part of the general without a loss of individuality. This might explain why the concept of the style of life became so significant in 20th century sociology. In most cases, of course individuals realise a mixture of quantitative and qualitative aspects. However, the style of life in a strict sense as well as the strategy of stylization first enable the realisation of a quantitative form of individuality and lead to the question of social differentiation. While the concept of the style of life expresses the specific conditions of modernity under which individuals have to live their lives, the concept of style in its individual meaning underpins Simmel's understanding of intellectual history and the

main figures therein. In the treatment of Simmel's understanding of intellectual history below, we will examine a philosophical perspective that functions as a counter-strategy to the alienating effects Simmel describes within the context of his theory of modernity. Simmel regards the giving an interpretation of reality as a whole, e.g. creating a world picture, as a philosophical achievement (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 51, 54; Steinbach, 2020: 141-167).¹⁴

We can see clearly in this context how the problem of style primarily deals with a paradoxical structure right at the heart of the mediation between individuality and generality: It is precisely where we imagine that we are flaunting our individuality to the highest degree that we are far more dependent on the objective structures and the things around us than we would like to imagine; in return, we reach the highest degree of individualization where we are able to objectify ourselves, our subjectivity and individuality. This paradoxical structure reaches its peak in the works of the great intellectual minds in European culture and history. Individuality is not repealed, but lives on in the works in which it is, to use the Hegelian expression, sublated (*aufgehoben*) but not dissolved.

The core function of the concept of style

The core function of the concept of style is to mediate between the general and the individual. This function implies a structural reference that always aims at the general: "For style is always a general form which gives a common quality to a variety of individual artefacts of differing content" (Simmel, 1997 [1916]: 99). Simmel

¹⁴ According to Simmel, philosophy is one strategy among others for reacting to the alienating effects of modernity and that can serve to educate the personality. It is thus part of what Simmel calls *Bildung*. Art is another strategy: it in its autonomy can contribute to the formation of the personality (Harrington, 2020: 47-54). For further discussion of this problem, see Nedelmann, 1991: 169-193.

developed his clearest and most systematic approach to the concept of style in his essay “The Problem of Style” where he focused on its relation to art: “[S]tyle 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. By virtue of style, the particularity of the individual work is subjugated to a general law of form that also applies to other works; it is, so to speak, relieved of its absolute autonomy. Because it shares its nature or a part of its design with others it thus points to a common root that lies beyond the individual work [...]” (Simmel: 1997b [1908]: 211) The artwork serves as paradigm and as an example here, because it seems to best illustrate the extent to which every human work is subject to a style and expresses a certain style. Nonetheless, he makes it clear right at the beginning that the question of style always also has a socio-philosophical dimension because “the practical existence of humanity is absorbed in the struggle between individuality and generality” (Simmel: 1997b [1908]: 211). It is the question of the relevance of the concept of style in a socio-philosophical context that leads to the style of life.

The style of life

Style is a principle of form that contradicts individuality, but, at the same time, allows it to settle into the form that style offers: “Style is always something general. It brings the contents of personal life and activity into a form shared by many and accessible to many.” (Simmel 1997a [1908]: 208). This mediation of individual content and general form takes place *within* the form that Simmel calls style. “Style is forever a universal that brings the contents of personal life and creativity into a form shared with many and made accessible to many.” (Simmel, 2009 [1908]: 334) “Style raises qualitatively singular facets of life into general generalized conventions, norms, or codes of presentation” (Harrington, 2020: 36), as Harrington puts it.

In *The Philosophy of Money*, Simmel makes it clear why even our inner life, which we commonly perceive as being highly individual and non-comparable, is always dependent on general forms. He argues that every perception of our inner life is dependent on given objective structures in the outer world. If we did not use analogies to transfer the objective structures of time and space over our inner life, we would not be able to express our inner perceptions and feelings in a way that was comprehensible to others. Unlike Kant, Simmel is not interested in discussing the pure forms of time and space within the context of a transcendental philosophy. Simmel is primarily interested in the effects that reality has on the inner life of the subject. This form of investigation therefore requires an analysis of analogies that draw on relations *in* time and space, relations constituted by the things and people around us, i.e. in relation to each other as well as in relation to us. We adopt these relationships in using analogies to describe our inner life. Our inner life is a mirror of reality and highly dependent on external circumstances.

Simmel refers to three analogies used to describe our inner life: first, the spatial relation of distancing called symmetry, second, the temporal relation of rhythm, third, the analogy resulting from the intersection of symmetry and rhythm, the pace of life (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 491-509). If it is necessary to take a detour via reality to talk about our inner life, then human beings clearly have no immediate relation to themselves. We are first and foremost social beings. Our self-knowledge has cultural and social preconditions and it is therefore formed by culture and society. As Simmel puts it, “the observation of the ‘You’” is “the most imperative prerequisite for communal life and individual self-assertion” (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 476). But this fundamental structure and basic social relation has the same preconditions, meaning that the only way to get some idea of the inner life of others is through analogies. Hence every expression we use to describe our inner life and that of other people “is clearly taken from observations of the external world” (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 476). This theorem is fundamental to Simmel’s concept of

the style of life, because it makes clear that every individual is first in relation to others and the things around them before coming to their self.

This is why it is important that “our notions of spiritual processes possess a merely symbolic importance” (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 476). According to Simmel, symbols bridge the gap between our inner life and the outer world, they create an isomorphism that mediates both worlds (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 477). This also means they stand in reciprocal relation. Form concepts like symbols or analogies enable the uniting of different, quite heterogeneous contents, because they are grounded in the “unified form of our ego” (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 477). And perceiving reality as well-structured, i.e. symmetrical and in a harmonious and consistent rhythm, is in our interests: The more the outside world is perceived as a unity that is well-structured in all its parts, the easier it is for us to orient ourselves and to feel comfortable.

The problems that modernity has to deal with thus result from a break with past harmonious and uniform world pictures. In one of his early writings Simmel emphasises that the “Greeks had only one style in life and in art, and this to a great extent facilitated the art of their living” (Simmel, 1989 [1888]: 32; Simmel, 1997b [1908]: 216).¹⁵ We in modernity lack the unity and uniformity of one world picture, which no longer seems to be ‘naturally’ given. It is up to us to create this unity by lending the things around us the unity of our personality, by trying to organize them by means of formal concepts. This is no easy task given that when the outside world no longer appears harmonious and uniform, a subject emerges that also no longer perceives itself as uniform. In *The Philosophy of Money*, Simmel focuses on two forms that seem appropriate for us as individuals in a majoritarian society: on the one hand, money in its symbolic meaning, on the other, the style of life.

¹⁵ My translation.

The reason why it is much easier for most people to focus on money instead of focusing on anything else is that every path in modern culture and society leads through money. Simmel developed his core argument in this context already in his 1889 essay “On the Psychology of Money”, which states that modern culture and society is marked by a “continuing deepening” (Simmel, 1997 [1889]: 233) of teleological structures. Every goal you want to achieve requires more and more steps that need to be taken before the originally intended goal can be reached. Modern bureaucracy is just one of the many examples that provide a good illustration of what Simmel means here. If we want to survive within such structures, we have to concern ourselves with the means for reaching the next steps; in return the goals slip from our attention and finally the teleological structures expand. Our “goals seem to be stationary compared with the inevitable motion in acquiring the means and in the continuing work on foundation building as well as on the elevation of the teleological construction” (Simmel, 1997 [1889]: 233; Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 204-211).

The decisive point is that symbols are able to concentrate and condense the complexity of the teleological structures in modern culture and society, hence “money is the common intersection of various series of ends” (Simmel, 1997 [1889]: 238). This has two consequences that lead towards the concept of the style of life: first, the insight that money shapes the spatial and temporal relations of culture and society; second, that the modern individual subject who is situated within these teleological structures loses an overall view of them and thus loses the centre of their life.

First, in the modern economy, money can shape the spatial and temporal relations of culture and society more than ever. While exchange requires a personal relationship, money is indifferent to personal interests and allows the exclusion of the personality from the economic process (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 211). By removing a personal attachment to things and translating them into monetary value, the “power of money to bridge distances” (Simmel, 2004

[1900]: 334) enables connecting interests across great distances (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 331f., 510). This “*conquest* of distance” (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 482) gives the impression that all things are available for money, regardless of where in the world they were produced. This overcoming of distance in external circumstances also has an effect on the subject’s inner experience and leads to an increasing lack of interest in other people. This results in “a growing distance in genuine inner relationships and a declining distance in more external ones” (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 481). The tendency towards objectification is comprehensive and also shapes people’s relationships. According to Simmel, this is what makes the “modern form of life” (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 483) – the modern style of life – possible in the first place. The crowding in modern cities could not be compensated for in any other way than through this internal distancing (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 479f., 483). At the same time, culture in general means we are, to a large extent, no longer bound to natural processes. For example, humans are no longer confined by a specific mating season and the availability of food under technical conditions is more independent of weather conditions than ever before. We are no longer as strongly bound to a natural rhythm as those in the centuries before us (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 491f.). This liberation from the necessity of naturally given rhythmic sequences enables an increasing individualization of the structure of needs; more than ever “it is possible to buy anything at any time for money and so the emotions and stimulations of the individual need no longer to cling to a rhythm that would enforce a periodicity in order to satisfy them” (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 493). The more things are available for money at any given time, the more we need money to satisfy our needs. But the more we focus on money, the more we focus on the outside world and its temporal and spatial relationships. More than ever our inner life is an echo of the interwoven structures of modern culture and society, a mirror image of the modern style of life.

This leads to the second point that results from the mediation of teleological structures by money. If we only focus on money, we

focus on something that should be a means to an end but has now become an end itself. “If at every moment we had to have our eye on the entire teleological series which justifies an action, then consciousness would fragment in an intolerable manner.” (Simmel, 1997 [1889]: 235) It is easier to concentrate “upon the immediately present step of the teleological process, while the more remote ultimate end sinks away from consciousness” (Simmel, 1997 [1889]: 235). Human consciousness tends to interrupt the teleological series, thus retaining the impression that it is capable of asserting itself under the given circumstances. Money thus becomes an end in itself, the “absolute goal” (Simmel, 1997 [1889]: 251), but at the same time it keeps its status as a means to an end; money “in its perfected forms is an absolute means” (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 211), “the absolutely objective entity, where everything personal comes to an end” (Simmel, 1997 [1889]: 240; Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 122). Money therefore plays a dual role (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 490f.; Schlitte, 2012: 251-257). The more we concentrate on the relationships in the outside world, the more we miss a centre that serves as our orientation in these relationships. If we are no longer able to focus on the ends, we find ourselves enmeshed in all the relations that money puts into circulation and we are in danger of losing ourselves.

According to Simmel, the modern style of life is characterised by the overcoming of spatial distance in the outside world and temporal distancing as a release from a rhythm that is perceived as natural. We are able at any time to acquire more and more things. If this external relationship of space and time turns inwards, it causes the subject to experience an increased pace of life. The more contents the human consciousness tries to process and the more heterogeneous these contents are, the more the subject has the feeling that life is taking place at an increasingly faster pace: “What we experience as the pace of life is the product of the sum total and the depth of its changes.” (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 504; Nedelmann, 1984: 105-109) The result is that the contents of consciousness can

no longer be arranged symmetrically around the self. We do not know any longer how to distinguish between ends and means. Expelled from its own centre, the modern subject is no longer able to concentrate on a final end to the teleological series: “Thus, the domination of the means has taken possession not only of specific ends but of the very centre of ends, of the point at which all purposes converge and from which they originate as final purposes. Man has thereby become estranged from himself [...]” (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 489) With the displacement of the subject from its own centre, the “central point of life” (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 486) is lost. The meaning and purpose of life recede into an indefinite distance. The repercussions that this development has on the subject are primarily manifest in a feeling of permanent restlessness (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 489-491).

At this point, it should be clear why even the style of life does not concern individuality but the general aspect of individuality that connects the individual to the general: Style is a form that allows individual and heterogeneous aspects to be organised *within* this general form; it provides the possibility of orienting oneself and finding calm in times of unrest. In the last chapter of *The Philosophy of Money*, Simmel especially stresses the resulting “effects” money has “upon the inner world” (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 52) and, as we see when we look at the preface, it was precisely this that he ultimately wanted to show. What he describes in this concluding chapter are the restlessness, disorientation and uncertainty it creates in the modern subject who has to deal with the complex conditions of modern reality. Scholars have pointed out that what Simmel calls style of life must absorb this unrest in order to be able to provide orientation again (Nedelmann, 1993: 412f.; Papilloud and Rol, 2003: 182; Harrington, 2020: 38). But the style of life is more of a diagnosis than a therapy. Of course, there must be a way out, and Simmel hints at this, but in this context it lies more in the process of stylization than in the concept of the style of life itself.

On the Stylization of Self and World

For Simmel, the plurality of styles of life is a problem of modernity (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 467f.; Simmel, 1997b [1908]: 216; Geßner, 2003: 158-170; Schlitte, 2012: 295-301). As noted above, Simmel is convinced that a single style of life prevailed in antiquity, one that greatly facilitated the art of living. The fact that there was only one style of life even made it possible to create uniformity within social relationships (Simmel, 1989 [1888]: 32). The plurality of styles of life is brought about through processes of social differentiation which are themselves made possible by the various forms of objective spirit that lack a unifying principle.¹⁶ These are forms like language, science, art, literature, economy and technology as well as others. They are no longer bound by a homogeneous, unifying world picture – and thus stand for the world picture of relativism and its heterogeneity (Steinbach, 2020: 141-167). It thereby became possible for every individual to develop their own style of life. Every individual thus only follows a basic anthropological interest in mediating their own individuality with the general so as to be disburdened and pacified: “Within its own sphere, every essential form of life in the history of our species represents a unique way of unifying the interest in duration, unity and equality, and similarity with that in change, particularity and uniqueness.” (Simmel, 1997 [1905]: 188) The best result in the provision of disburdening and pacification would be through a symmetrical organisation of the contents of consciousness that follow a harmonious rhythm at whose centre the self stands. We must resort to the means of stylization under the conditions of

¹⁶ It is not obvious that a plurality of styles of life is possible in Simmel’s eyes. In his essay *Über soziale Differenzierung* (1890) as in *Bemerkungen zu sozialethischen Problemen* (1888), the concept of the style of life stands for a general, superordinate structure of social coexistence, here with the addition that individuality develops within the style of life of a social community (Simmel, 1989 [1890]: 175).

modernity. As the modern individual no longer perceives their own individuality as unified, they try to form the things around him in order to gain, via a detour, what seemed to have become lost under the conditions of modernity. But an individual of average talent is not able to give the things around him the unity of their personality, which means they must stylize the things around them.

At its core, stylization serves to relieve the individual of their responsibility for their own actions and is therefore highly ambivalent: On the one hand, stylization can disburden the individual because it subordinates them to general and objective structures; on the other hand, the individual seeks to increase their individuality precisely by resorting to the objectively given. Stylization realises the paradoxical structure ideally inherent in the concept of style and mediates between individuality and generality, subject and object. For Simmel, fashion is one phenomenon that illustrates in an exemplary way how this mediation can take place. “Fashion offers [...] this very combination to the most favourable extent, for we have here, on the one hand, a sphere of general imitation, the individual floating in the broadest social current, relieved of responsibility for their tastes and their actions, and yet, on the other hand, we have a certain conspicuousness, an individual emphasis, an individual ornamentation of the personality.” (Simmel, 1997 [1905]: 196) In this way, fashion only brings to life what the concept of style inherits, as the “essence of style” lies in “the unburdening and concealment of the personal.” (Simmel, 1997b [1908]: 216)

We can only gain individuality by subjecting ourselves to the law, to the general. If style bridges the gap between generality and individuality, then stylization is an attempt to subordinate oneself to the rules and laws of generality. For Simmel, the art of acting is the most striking example of an art form that lets us study what it means to subordinate oneself to the laws and rules of the general. In his essay “Zur Philosophie des Schauspielers” (1908), Simmel makes it clear that stylization for the actor means submitting in their individuality to the objective and normative constraints of the role

and it is precisely in this way that the actor builds a bridge between the particular and the general (Simmel, 2020 [1908]: 263f.). The question of the individual law is already inherent in Simmel's investigations of style, since in this context it also concerns the mediation of the particular and the individual with the general and the law, content with form, reality with ideality (Simmel, 2010 [1918]: 99-154). By becoming subordinate to the general and the law, we are relieved of the burden of being entirely on our own. Through this disburdening, stylization creates a tranquillity in the times of an all too restless modernity. By subordinating ourselves to the generality of style, we come to rest; this was already true in antiquity and holds no less of modernity. The difference between antiquity and modernity lies only in the diversity of possible styles of life which means every individual has to search for their own combination of forms that helps them to come to rest. Phenomena like fashion, adornment or even furniture relieve us by leading us to something that transcends us and to which we already belong; we adorn ourselves and seek to reveal our own, very personal individuality by submitting to something general that, however, conceals our individuality (Simmel, 2009 [1908]: 332-342). And what could be easier than wearing an adornment to impress others and give the impression of being unique and individual?

Simmel's descriptions of phenomena are valuable because they present the process and dynamics of stylization, which can provide reassurance. It enables individuals to locate and situate themselves in culture and society. Stylization is a strategy that the ordinary individual in a majoritarian society can also use to find peace and feel comfortable under the conditions of modernity. Simmel argues that this "is the reason why the things that surround us as the basis or background of daily life should be stylized" (Simmel, 1997b [1908]: 215). The more individual we want to be, the less individual the things around us are allowed to be, otherwise they would suppress our individuality. The more they follow the general laws of a style, the more likely we are to find the environment pleasant

because it gives our individuality enough space to unfold: “The principle of calm, which the domestic surrounding of a person must support, has led with miraculous instinctive practicality to the stylization of this environment of all the objects we use, it is probably furniture which most consistently carries the cachet of some ‘style’.” (Simmel, 1997b [1908]: 215)

It is important to emphasize here that the stylization of our environment leaves more space for a person’s individuality the more this environment consists of different things that have their own style. When living spaces have a single style, they form a unity that resembles a work of art. In such a unity, we as individuals would no longer have a place and tend to feel uncomfortable. Our living spaces must instead be stylized in such a way that they appear to have emerged from the unity of our own personality, such that the modern person stylizes different things which, in their combination, bear the mark of their owner (Simmel, 1997b [1908]: 215f.). Simmel argues that when we follow this path, we are following general laws: laws of style, and therefore general laws and structures that do not originate from our individuality. The more the things around us each follow their own laws, the less they form a cohesive unit and they then leave a space in which we can pretend to be individual. Against this background, style is “the aesthetic attempt to solve the great problem of life: an individual work or behaviour, which is closed, a whole, can simultaneously belong to something higher, a unifying encompassing context” (Simmel, 1997b [1908]: 217).

Stylized fashion, adornment and home furnishings tend to give the impression that they follow from our own individual law, but they do not (Harrington, 2020: 51f.). A qualitative form of individuality only manifests itself for Simmel among those who follow their own laws, the law of the individual. These individuals thus have their own individual style (Simmel, 1997b [1908]: 215). However, this does not correspond to the general style – the style of life – that most individuals in majoritarian society have to follow. It is with this in mind that Simmel describes what he calls the “individual style”: “In great and creative people, the individual work

flows from such an all-encompassing depth of being that it is able to find there the firmness and the foundation, the transcendence of here and now, which comes to the work of the lesser artist from an external style. Here the individual is the case of an individual law; anyone who is not that strong must adhere to a general law; if he fails to, his work fails to have style which, as is now easily understood, can only happen in periods with multiple style possibilities.” (Simmel, 1997b [1908]: 216f.) The achievements of those who are strong enough are therefore not without style, but have their own individual style, because they do not follow a general law; moreover, they create such a general law initially and draw it from themselves, from their own individual law. At this point, Simmel’s studies on the concept of style culminate in his conception of intellectual history. The oeuvre functions here as the complement to the concept of style; in an oeuvre the individual law of an intellectual is objectified. Individuality and generality are successfully mediated here. “The subdued and calming quality that emanates from all strictly stylized objects resides in this supra-individual character. In the works of humanity, style takes a middle position between the uniqueness of the individual soul and the absolute universality of nature. This is why people surround themselves with stylized objects in their cultural milieu” (Simmel, 1997 [1902]: 151f.) – or, we could add, they surround themselves with the oeuvres of the great intellectual minds of European culture and history in order to find direction.

The Oeuvre as a Complement to the Concept of Style

Style always decides “the struggle between individuality and generality” (Simmel, 1997b [1908]: 211) in favour of generality. The works of art to which we attribute meaning primarily on the basis of a particular style are part of more general structures, e.g. of epochs or art eras. Works are then not comprehensible and meaningful in isolation, but only through contextualisation. The “question of style” is always bound to “the style of their times”

(Simmel, 1997b [1908]: 211). In contrast, works that are comprehensible on their own refer to nothing outside themselves and they therefore exclude every other individual. They are unique and individual to the highest degree. Such works allow us to forget contextualising questions of style, time, and context. In their individuality, they address something general that is not bound to a specific time and epoch. A genuine work of art is a “work closed in itself” that is never a “means” and therefore “never borrows its law from anything that is not itself” (Simmel, 1997b [1908]: 214). It does not have its end outside itself, but is an end in itself, conferring a unity and coherence that stem from the unity of the personality from which it originates.

It is therefore not surprising that Simmel’s argument, which is central to *The Philosophy of Money*, reappears in connection with his works on intellectual history. The expansion of the teleological series in modern culture and society leads to a loss of concrete goals. Living a life right in the middle of these teleological constructions means missing a centre and thus a direction (Simmel, 1986 [1908]: 4), as he points out at the beginning of *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*. When Simmel says in “The Problem of Style” that an artwork is not a means and therefore does not follow an end but is an end in itself, then the artwork is to a certain extent removed from the ordinary teleological series of everyday life. In analogy to these enclosed artworks, the works of the great intellectuals in our culture can thus serve as points of orientation because they stand beyond the ordinary teleological series. It is of course possible to instrumentalise artworks, for example through the art market or by selling thousands of cheap reprints of a classic (Nedelmann, 1991: 169-193; Müller, 2018: 535-539); but these strategies cannot take away the work’s uniqueness and originality, i.e. the ideal function which serves as orientation.

For Simmel, the achievement of the great poets and thinkers lies in their creating their own world picture in and with their work. They achieve this because they perceive themselves as possessing a personality that is whole and unified. They transcend this wholeness

and the unity of their own personality and thus create a picture of a coherent world that they express in their work. “The world picture has the unity of the ideal of the personality” (Simmel, 2012 [1906]: 190),¹⁷ as Simmel puts it. Such a world picture makes it possible to view modernity, which is experienced by individuals as restless and fragmentary, as being from a certain perspective a whole; the individual phenomena fit into the world picture as into a higher order, they are interpreted as meaningful and thus allow the subject to come to rest.

Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, among others, achieve this feat. Their specific accomplishment lies in the fact that their world pictures concentrate on the concept of life, i.e. on the concept that, according to Simmel, constitutes the secret centre of modernity (Simmel, 1997 [1918]: 74-90). Schopenhauer and Nietzsche’s merit lies in their having transcended two of the great moods of life – pessimism and optimism – and the creation of a world picture from these. For Simmel, this means that each of them has “transformed the contrasting themes typical of empirical life into pure and total representations to life” (Simmel, 1986 [1908]: 14). For Simmel, the value of considering Schopenhauer and Nietzsche together lies in the fact “that humanity has developed such a magnitude of tensions in life-experience and sentiment” (Simmel, 1986 [1908]: 181) and Schopenhauer and Nietzsche spell these out in their own ways. The works of both philosophers allow us to survey and enjoy the conflicts that life itself in its entirety bears. “By sensing the

¹⁷ My translation. By using the translation “world picture” for the German concept “Weltbild” I follow the translation of Tom Bottomore and David Frisby in their translation of *The Philosophy of Money*. In his translation of *Nietzsche and Schopenhauer*, Helmut Loiskandl chose the concept “vision of life” (Simmel, 1986 [1908]: 14) which undermines the terminological sharpness of the concept “Weltbild” as used by Simmel in *The Philosophy of Money* (Simmel, 2004 [1900]: 51, 54) and his monograph *Hauptprobleme der Philosophie* (Simmel, 1996 [1910]: 32, 34f.).

reverberations of spiritual existence in the distance opened up by these opposites, the soul grows, despite, indeed, because of, the fact that it does not decide in favour of one of the parties. It finally embraces both the desperation and jubilation of life as the poles of its expansion, its own power, its own plenitude of forms. And it enjoys that embrace.” (Simmel, 1986 [1908]: 181) According to Simmel, enjoying these conflicts is made possible through our distancing ourselves from the object of contemplation. We view life through the works of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche at a distance and can thus adopt an aesthetic perspective on the object (Simmel, 1997 [1902]: 101). This makes the conflicts of life bearable, even under the auspices of a restless modernity and the relativist world view.

Concluding Remarks

Simmel uses the concept of style in three different meanings or contexts. First, according to Simmel, every epoch has a certain style. Johann Joachim Winckelmann uses the concept of style in precisely this sense, speaking of art and its style as relating to a particular epoch such that entire epochs are seen as having a style (Winckelmann, 1809 [1764]: 76, 111). Drawing on this, Simmel focuses on the style of modernity. As the central concept of modernity is the concept of life, the style of modernity is the style of life. Accordingly, the problems that modern life confronts themselves result from life, which resists every form and unifying tendency (Simmel, 1997 [1918]: 74-90). The result is a pluralisation of different forms on the side of the general and objective and the burden of choosing the right forms for one’s own purposes on the side of the individual and subjective. Hence Simmel claims that the modern style of life is at best an individual selection from the available forms. It is thus not highly individual, but rather corresponds to a submission to general laws of these forms. Simmel calls the concept of the style of life a general style.

Second, Simmel repeatedly thematises the concept of style in his works on aesthetics and art. Beyond the intrinsic value of these

investigations into aesthetic issues and artistic positions, these observations provide him with analogies for illustrating the paradoxical interplay between the particular and the general, the individual and the community. The various examples from art and aesthetics can best illustrate what does not appear in this pure form in the practical realisation of life.¹⁸

If we accept the main thesis of this study, then we reach a third concept of style as Simmel is primarily interested in the concept of an individual style. In this sense, the concept of style bears on Simmel's approach to intellectual history and has much in common with what Nietzsche calls a grand style. Simmel sees Nietzsche not only as being one of the main figures of modernity and one who deals with life as a central concept of modernity, but also as a decisive precursor of his conception of intellectual history. As already shown, Simmel may have been inspired by Nietzsche's *pathos of distance* (Lichtblau, 1984: 231-281; Harrington, 2020: 32; Böhringer, 1985: 300f.). Distancing allows the adoption of an aesthetic attitude and thereby the gaining of an overview. What is interesting in this context, however, is not only that distance opens up a new view of things, but that pathos as a category of classical rhetoric also gives the power to plausibly convey this changed view of things to others (Nietzsche, 1913 [1887]: 20). Simmel is less interested in genealogical motives and questions of power than Nietzsche is. What also plays a role here, however, is that those who adopt an aesthetic distance and attain an overview are able to provide direction to others. Simmel claims that "Nietzsche views only the elevation of the highest point achieved by a human group as decisive for the value of that group. [...] The vanguard of humanity is of importance to him, not the average individual."

¹⁸ This does not mean that Simmel advocates an aestheticism. If this were so, then his remarks on art and aesthetics would have to determine the other forms of knowledge that he analyses from the ground up, as Lichtblau argues (Lichtblau, 1984: 232).

(Simmel, 1986 [1908]: 154) But in Simmel's eyes, it would be a misunderstanding to read Nietzsche as a proto-sociologist. What Simmel calls "social aristocracy" in this context has nothing to do with any understanding of society but rather stands for the drive towards cultural progress in humanity: "For Nietzsche, achievement of the height of human qualities is not a means to any social good or progress, but an end in itself and, not [...] a way of bringing selfish benefits to some persons, but of elevating the human type. And even the maximization of personal values, is, for him, not a means that is somehow independent of these values: humanity moves forward immediately through these values." (Simmel, 1986 [1908]: 155)

The contribution that an individual can make to this process lies in the objectification of themselves. They must disregard themselves in order to contribute to the progress of humanity. Nietzsche therefore does not pose the question of the individual, which would then lead into a sociology, but already sees that an individual has to follow a higher, i.e. their individual, law (Simmel, 1986 [1908]: 162-166). Simmel does not go as far as Nietzsche, who says that that existence and the world are eternally justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon, but he seeks to connect with Nietzsche's aristocratism insofar as he transfers it over to his conception of intellectual history. It is in this light that Simmel refers to Nietzsche's *pathos of distance* and to Nietzsche's grand style in claiming that style arises when we connect with the general and refrain from our own individuality. This is why Nietzsche says that the "grand style comes into being when the beautiful wins a victory over the monstrous" (Nietzsche, 1911 [1880]: 246). On the surface, an aestheticism seems to re-emerge here, but in the background of Nietzsche's talk of the grand style is his aristocratism (Bohrer, 2007: 42-57).¹⁹

¹⁹ Dilthey had already discussed the concept of style in its meaning as an epochal attribution and as an artistic means of expression, but without considering the socio-philosophical level that can be found in Simmel (Dilthey, 1968 [1892]: 242-287).

In this context, it concerns cultural progress and the ideal of humanity to which the great intellectual minds contribute, as Goethe already said in regard to Winckelmann. Simmel was aware of this: “If, in especially gifted people, there is that common need to eagerly seek the counter-images in the outer world to everything that nature has placed in them and thereby(!) to completely raise the inner to the whole and to conscience, then one can be sure that a highly pleasing existence for the world and posterity will spread.” (Simmel, 1992 [1899]: 456)²⁰ This dynamic leads to the subject objectifying itself and, according to Simmel, developing its highest form of individuality. This paradoxical structure shows why we can talk about Simmel, Schopenhauer or Nietzsche as if we were all talking about the same individual person. We see them through their works. The picture we gain from them varies from person to person and depends on our individual knowledge of their works and the historical, cultural and social background of their time. This what Simmel calls intellectual history. It arises where “one *mind* speaks to another” (Simmel 1977 [1905]: 87).

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²⁰ My translation. The exclamation mark can be found in the original.

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