

# The senses as a resource of meaning in the construction of the Stranger: an approach from Georg Simmel's relational sociology

Olga Sabido Ramos

Volume 21, Number 1, 2017

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1041335ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1041335ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Georg Simmel Gesellschaft

ISSN

1616-2552 (print)  
2512-1022 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Sabido Ramos, O. (2017). The senses as a resource of meaning in the construction of the Stranger: an approach from Georg Simmel's relational sociology. *Simmel Studies*, 21 (1), 15–41. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1041335ar>

Article abstract

This article explores the analytical relation between senses, space, and the stranger in Simmel's relational thought. We can say that Simmel provides an analytical framework for thinking of how we create *forms of socialization* that take place from the senses. The senses mark areas of familiarity and strangeness among people and, the senses are a resource of meaning in the construction and exclusion of the stranger. Specifically, the article recovers Simmel's reflections regarding the relationship of estrangement that develops from the gaze, smell, and hearing, supplemented by recent empirical research in these fields and some examples related to Latin American cities.

Olga Sabido Ramos

## **The *senses* as a resource of meaning in the construction of the Stranger: an approach from Georg Simmel's relational sociology**

### **Introduction**

The area known as the “Sociology of the Senses” is rooted in the Simmel’s piece “Excursus on the Sociology of Sense Impression”, among others classical social theories. It is important to point out that the excursus is found in Chapter 9 “Space and the Spatial Ordering of Society” of *Sociology. Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms* with the “Excursus on the Stranger” (Simmel, 2009 [1908])<sup>1</sup>. Both texts were written within the context of Simmel’s reflections on the city: “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1950a [1903]). That is not a coincidence, for Georg Simmel the metropolis is the locus *par excellence* of strangeness and the encounter with the Stranger. Also, the Stranger is not a person but rather a *form of socialization* or *social form*<sup>2</sup> that could be of various types, one type it could be seen as a sensitive relationship.

It is common to interpret Simmel’s work as fragmented. However, I will focus on his theoretical-methodological sociological

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<sup>1</sup> Henceforth I will use the English version of *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung* [1908].

<sup>2</sup> The term *Vergesellschaftung* and its translation is not easy. Lionel Lewkow who recently translate *Über soziale Differenzierung. Sociologische und psychologische Untersuchungen* to Spanish version, has point that the term its refers to emergency of society not to integration of individual (Lewkow in Simmel, 2017: 69 note of translator; Lewkow 2017a and 2017b). For the translators in English version of *Sociology*: “Sometimes Simmel means by *Vergesellschaftung* to refer to social interaction, but at other times he is referring to the creation of social entities” (Blasi, Jacobs and Kanjirathinkal, 2009: XV). I will use *forms of socialization* or *social forms* considering that’s precisions. I appreciate the comments and suggestions of professor Lewkow to this point.

approach as a whole. That makes it possible to rescue lines of research drawn by the author as a whole and not in an isolated fashion. In that way, I seek to show how the experience of the Stranger is related to the sensitive dimension. In other words, the Stranger is possible because it results from a sensitive experience that is made through the senses and affects that the Other(s) causes on us.

The article proceeds in the following way. In the first section, I introduce the characteristics of Simmel's relational perspective. In the second section, I expose the relation between space and the senses in Simmelian thought, and some critical reception. Then, in the third section, I move on to discuss the relation between the metropolis, senses and the strangers. Finally, I will draw on Simmel's reflections about *making strangers* through the senses (e.g. gaze, smell, and hearing). I will illustrate this discussion with recent empirical research and with some snapshots concerning some Latin American cities.

## **A Relational Sociology**

Since the 1980s, the response to Simmel's work has had an important upturn within different areas of sociological thought. One reason is the need to transcend substantialisms and antinomies and, at the same time, to offer analytical tools for thinking about relations and reciprocal effects. On this Emirbayer points out: "Georg Simmel, [is] the classical sociologist most deeply committed to relational theorizing" (1997: 288). Against so-called substantial approaches, the current theoretical scene seeks for "viable analytic alternatives" (Emirbayer, 1997). Hence, several authors have noticed how Simmel's proposal is that of a relational sociology and, more generally, of "relational thought", which escapes substantialism (Vernik, 2003; Pyhtinen, 2009: 121; Crossley, 2011; Lee and Silver, 2012: 128; Fitzzi, 2012; Cantó-Milà, 2012; Lewkow, 2017a; 2017b).

However, what does this relational sociology involve? We can distinguish two analytical dimensions: an ontological dimension and a theoretical-methodological dimension<sup>3</sup>. Regarding the ontological dimension, it has been suggested that a key characteristic of Simmel's thought, is that: 'to be' is always a matter of being-with-others (Vernik, 2003: 85; Pyyhtinen, 2009). That is, we are with others, against others, or for others. As Olli Pyyhtinen explains, for Simmel: "The existential-ontological fact that being-in-the-world is necessarily being-with-others" (2009: 116).

This relational conception of being human is also found in *Philosophy of Money* (2004 [1900]) where Simmel suggests that instead of the *zoon politikon*: "Perhaps we might add to this series that man is the exchanging animal" (2004: 291). The rationale behind the latter idea is that humans are always conditioned to each other; they exchange symbols, objects, sensations, and gestures (e.g. glances). In Pyyhtinen's words: "Simmel thinks that the being of an individual is always *being-with* a you, that our existence is essentially coexistence" (2009: 109).

For Simmel, the object of sociology is not the action or the structure, nor the individual or society. The object of sociology is the *forms of socialization* or *social forms* (*Vergesellschaftung*). The social is not *within* people, but in what happens *between* them. For Simmel, society is like an invisible net, and thus sociology's task is to make such a net visible. Society is not the people or collective entities; it is "the sum of individual *forms* of relationship" (Simmel, 2009: 26). This means that whereas, on the one hand, the object of sociology is to capture the "reciprocity of effects" (*Wechselwirkung*)<sup>4</sup> or "reciprocal effects" (Pyyhtinen, 2009: 116) between one, two, three or more individuals or groups; on the other hand, society is

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<sup>3</sup> However, some authors suggest that Simmel's relational thought and his relational conception of individual life also purports ethical implications (Lee and Silver, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that according to Lewkow *Wechselwirkung* is not only a sociological term, but also an ontological and epistemological principle (Lewkow in Simmel, 2017: 43 note of translator; Lewkow 2017a and 2017b).

not something that was given, but something that *is being made* with others.

By the end of his life, Simmel took on a vitalist philosophy and reinforced this sociological principle: “[...] society [...] is constantly being realized, always signifies that individuals are connected by mutual influence and determination” (1950b: 10). In this sense, for Simmel: “[...] society certainly is not a ‘substance’ nothing concrete, but an *event*: it is the function of receiving and effecting the fate and development of one individual by the other” (1950b: 11).

Society for Simmel: “[...] takes place every day, every hour; social interaction among people continuously making connections and breaking them off and making them again, a perpetual flowing and pulsing” (2009: 33). These *forms of socialization* are thus exposed to connect and re-connect in a “perpetual flow” that submits to no end or direction. The *forms of socialization* also could be sensitives, like “sensual ways that connect individuals to social existence” (Vannini, Waskul, and Gottschalk, 2012: 21).

By such notions of the individual and society, Simmel has to pursue a sociological method that gives room to a relational conception that, in turn, captures the “reciprocity of effects”. As Pyyhtinen states: “Instead of starting from isolated actors or from the hyperexistence of society, methodologically Simmel begins with a theory of relations” (2009: 121). It is in this way that Simmel studies the *forms of socialization*.

For Simmel, the *forms* in which we relate to each other may be symmetrical (e.g. sociability), or asymmetrical (e.g. domination, subordination, conflict). Likewise, in certain cases, those forms of relation unite us, or separate and distinguish us, confront us, transcend us in time, and accommodate us to hierarchies. Simmel thinks that the *forms of socialization* allow registering the “reciprocal effects”, which can be established between two or more individuals, groups, institutions, nations, or even between people and symbols (e.g. the money). By this reason, Simmel sees the poor, the enemy, and the Stranger not as people but as *forms of socialization*.

To summarize, the study of *forms of socialization* Simmel's relational perspective considers three analytical traits: the first feature suggests that when individuals, groups, institutions or countries enter a relation, they are *affected reciprocally*. The second analytical trait has to do with the fact that those *social forms* can be lasting or fleeting. The third suggests that the social forms can adopt symmetrical or asymmetrical shapes. Depending on the modality of the *form*, it will unfold into different modalities and degrees of emotional intensity.

Considering these analytical traits, I contend that Simmel's sociological research of the senses is not only limited to what people can feel, but also how these sensitive experience and feelings give place to *forms of socialization*. The Stranger is a *social form*, and he or she makes sense in its relation to others: those who belong to a social circle of which the Stranger is not part. Additionally, the body contact with the Stranger and the sensitive experience that he or she generates, can lead to the creation of a combination of emotional forms and affects (e.g. attraction or repulsion, familiarity and estrangement, acceptance or rejection).

### **Space and the Senses: Sensitivity in the Interaction order**

For Simmel, and due to his Kantian heritage, space is a topic of enormous relevance. However, his reading is sociological, not philosophical. In chapter "Space and the Spatial Ordering of Society", he states that: "every boundary placement is arbitrary" (Simmel, 2009: 549) because a human being is a frontier with no boundary. In that same chapter, Simmel also argues that people and their relationships establish limits and borders, although once established it is difficult to overthrow them. For Simmel space *in itself* produces no effect at all; rather it is the relationship between people what gives meaning to it. Closeness is not the result of physical proximity just as physical distance is not the cause of foreignness. Thus, according to his relational perspective, the

“reciprocal effects” are the ones provide to space the specific meanings.

In the section devoted to “the perceptible nearness or distance between persons who stand in some kind of relationship to one another” (Simmel, 2009: 565), Simmel mentions that by closeness is not meant social nearness; that it is possible to be physically near yet socially far away, as in large cities where anonymity is common currency. This type of distance also has affective and emotional manifestations that may include indifference and, in extreme cases, indolence.

It is precisely at the point of proximity and distance that Simmel introduces his “Excursus on the Sociology of Sense Impression.” Several authors have highlighted the relevance of this piece (see: Synnott, 1991; Weinstein and Weinstein, 1984; Le Breton, 2002 [1992]; Stewart, 1999; Urry, 2008; Low, 2009; Vannini, Waskul and Gottschalk, 2012: 11, 21). David Le Breton also notes that Simmel leaves an open-ended area of research and an “ambitious and original field, which remains uncharted” (Le Breton, 2002: 57).

In the excursus about the senses, Simmel discusses what kind of relationships between people are generated from the senses. He suggests that they range from the exchange of glances and the meanings attributed to the face, to olfactory impressions, the hearing impressions, and sensitive proximity in shared spaces. Simmel’s departing point is that in moments of spatial proximity between people, a sensitive grasp of the other is also experienced via the senses. In short, Simmel suggests that the presence of another person has a sensitive impact that surpasses the limits of the body.

This understanding of the body is also present in “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1950a), Simmel notes: “Man does not end with the limits of his body or the area comprising his immediate activity. Rather is the range of person constituted by the sum of effects emanating from him temporally and spatially” (Simmel, 1950a: 419). Just like in the case of space, for Simmel the limits of the body are those established by society and not by its physical

confines. In that way, the same distance may be pleasant for certain people, and unpleasant for others. Likewise, according to Simmel the sensitivity is socially constructed and is not determined by the limits of the individual body<sup>5</sup>.

In chapter “Space and the Spatial Ordering of Society” Simmel writes: “the consequence of proximity for the form of association lies in the importance of the individual perceptions by which the individuals perceive one another” (Simmel, 2009: 570). Stewart points out that: “‘Perception’ is a key term” (Stewart, 1999: 4). Not only because Simmel revealed a particular attention to how perception gets transformed into large cities (Jazbinzek, 2003) but also for his theorization and marked interest in “physiognomic perception and expression” (Stewart, 1999: 4). According to Stewart, this is related to “his conception of the body as the site of representation of thoughts and emotions” (Stewart, 1999: 5). But according to a relational approach, is not only the individual perception itself but also is the perception of the others and mutual perception.

It could be argued that, in the text about the sociology of senses, the problem of perception is linked with feelings and knowledge. With feelings because: “the sense impression of a person brings about feelings in us” (Simmel, 2009: 570). And with knowledge because: “the sense impression proceeds as soon as it becomes the means of knowledge of the other: what I see, hear, feel of the other is simply the bridge over which I would get to where that person is an object to me” (*ibidem*). For Simmel, the mutual perception that takes place from the senses is the site where emotional experiences (feelings) and meaning attributions (knowledge) to the presence of the other are exchanged. It is important to note that Simmel does

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<sup>5</sup> For example, he addresses the importance of the public transportation for the exchange of glances in modern societies (Simmel, 2009:573). The importance of Christianity and the hiding of the flesh as a possibility of the relevance of the face (Simmel, 1951). The refinement of the olfactory appreciation (Simmel, 2009), and table manners (Simmel, 1997), both are related to the process of individualization in West.



not talk about the study of the senses and, more precisely, of perception in an isolated and individualistic fashion. Rather, he wonders what type of linkage and reciprocal actions create the attribution to what we feel through our senses. That is to say, Simmel moves from the forms of perception to the social forms via perception.

The starting point of Simmel's "sociology of vision" is not the individual eye or the isolated sense of sight, but "the mutual glance" (Weinstein and Weinstein, 1991). Hence, for Simmel the exchange of glances is the prototype of the "reciprocal effects". As we saw, according to Simmel's relational conception of human beings, his relational and dynamic conception of society, the exchange of glances represents the "vivid reciprocal action" that leaves no objective footprint. There may exist relationships in which glances are their only condition of possibility; thus, insofar as they disappear, so does the relationship. The exchange of glances, as a feature of the forms of relationship related to the possibility of symmetry and asymmetry, may unite, separate, embarrass, or turn us into accomplices<sup>6</sup>. In regards to its reciprocal conditioning, the exchange of glances may have differentiated effects on individuals, they could cause interest at someone or embarrassment to others.

Simmel notes that the glance is directed to the face. In "The Aesthetic Significance of the Face" (1959 [1901]) he suggests that the face is the most relevant center of meaning of the human body: "Within the perceptible world, there is no other structure like the human face which merges such a great variety of shapes and surfaces into an absolute unity of meaning" (Simmel, 1959: 277). James Siegel, in this vein, points out that for Simmel: "the face is able to signify as no other part of the body can" (1999: 103). For Simmel, the glance is directed to the gestures of the other and interprets them. Like John Urry points out about Simmel's insight

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<sup>6</sup> Simmel highlights the bodily aspects of our visual interaction within the classroom or auditorium. He notes how students create a community through the exchange of glances (Simmel, 2009: 576).

“The look is returned, and this results from the expressive meaning of the face” (Urry, 2008: 389). That explains the relevance of the body as a source of meaning. Simmel insists that the face is “the most remarkable aesthetic synthesis” of individuality (1959: 280). Also, Simmel is aware of the relevance of the sense of sight as a form of binding in large cities (Simmel, 2009).

A critical approach to Simmel’s perspective is found in Weinstein and Weinstein (1991). The authors suggest that such a perspective lies in a subjective tendency given that the sense of “vision constitutes a direct relation of union among subjects” (Weinstein and Weinstein, 1991: 169). However, they add, that this perspective could be complemented with an objectivist perspective, one that considers the power relations that occur in the exchange of glances<sup>7</sup>. Likewise, it has been contended that matters close to cultural codes cannot be ignored, especially those in which exchanging glances is regulated in a different fashion than in the West (Siegel, 1999: 104).

For Simmel, other social relationships may rest on the sense of hearing, creating a “community of sense” around what we hear with others. In this regard, Stewart points out that some of Simmel’s contemporaries held discussions around “the body as a purely optical object, neglecting other important bodily functions which play a part in perception like the ‘human voice’” (1999: 6). Contrary to this opinion, Simmel shows how in the case of music concerts and assemblies, hearing becomes the element that unites all those who are present. In the same way, in his posthumous *School Pedagogy*, Simmel paid attention to the tone of voice and the effects it may provoke in others (Simmel, 2008: 66).

Some authors have advised that olfaction mediates our interactions (Synnott, 1991; Low, 2008). In the same way, for

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<sup>7</sup> In a similar way, Urry points out the relevance to pay attention to visibility and power: “In the twentieth-century, most powerful systems of modern incarceration involve the complicity of sight in the routine operations of power” (2008:390).

Simmel certain *forms of socialization* based on our olfactory perceptions are possible in proximity with others. In regards to olfaction, he suggests that olfactory appreciation is built and that the process of individualization takes place through the body to the extent that people become more sensible to short distances<sup>8</sup>. For Simmel, the smell is a “dissociating sense” related with repulsion (Simmel, 2009: 579). Following Simmel, for Urry: “This became more pronounced during twentieth-century as domestic hygiene has been very unevenly introduced, so reinforcing class attitudes of social and moral superiority based upon smell” (2008: 394). I will return to this.

It is important to observe that Simmel’s contribution can be enhanced in so far as historicity and cultural contextualization are considered. On the other hand, it is true that Simmel’s sociology of the senses conforms to a Western hierarchy of the senses in which olfaction is underrated (Synnott 1991; Classen, 1997; Low, 2009). Unaware of this, Simmel talks about the sense of sight as a “superior sense” and about the sense of olfaction as an “inferior sense”. There exists an overvalue given to the sense of sight to the detriment of other senses like hearing in the crowded cities. Simmel’s perspective is thus enhanced when it considers the social and historical conditions that make the appraisalment of certain senses possible. In other words, a sociology of the senses becomes stronger in so far as the social and historical conditions of possibility are considered analytically (Howes, 2014).

Finally, Simmel refers to regulations regarding sexual feelings and its relationship with space, which are associated with the attraction that can emerge from having proximity with others. Simmel denotes that regulations and conventions regarding cohabitation between relatives are fundamental to sustaining the

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<sup>8</sup> A similar argument is developed in “Sociology of meal” (Simmel, 1997) where it is shown that individualization is manifested on the existence of a single plate, which disregards eating from a common source.

prohibition of incest. That is, due to contact and proximity with others, society has given room to the regulation of spatial coexistence.

In light of a contemporary revision of Simmel's contributions to sociology, it can be stated that Simmel enriches what Erving Goffman called the interaction order. As I have argued elsewhere (Sabido-Ramos, 2012), following Simmel the presence of bodies establishes a kind of "sensitive proximity", a way of sensitively perceiving others in proximity. This concept refers to a specific relation between the body (sensitivity) and space (proximity) (Simmel 2009). Simmel writes:

Towards the spatially near, with whom one is reciprocally involved in the most varied situations and moods without the possibility of foresight and choice, there tends to be then definite feelings so that this proximity can be the foundation of the most exuberant joy as well as the most unbearable coercion (Simmel, 2009: 569).

According to Simmel, there exists a process of mutual perception that takes place from the senses, and that builds frames of meaning and feelings within the interaction. When two or more people are present they look at each other; they experience each other's smell and attribute meanings to it. Likewise, they listen to each other and regulate their bodily contact. For Simmel, this is why through interaction we not only give meaning to the gestures and overall appearance of others (garments, movements, poise), but we also feel them. This creates emotions and *affects* that can range from pleasure to disgust, from attraction to repulsion.

### **The Metropolis, the senses and the Stranger**

Simmel's sociology of the senses is intimately related to his reflections on the metropolis. Simmel is known for his work suggesting that the exchange of glances is a guidance resource within modern streets. Therefore, given the unlikelihood of verbal exchanges, the glance of the other, and, in particular, the glance

towards the dressed body, turns into a sign of guidance. Moreover, sometimes the insistence of being watched may become a sign of resistance. In “The Metropolis and Mental Life” Simmel writes: “Finally, man is tempted to adopt the most tendentious peculiarities, that is, the specifically metropolitan extravagances of mannerism, caprice, and preciousness” (1950a: 412). Certain social figures had adopted bodily styles that can be deemed urban, like the dandy (Entwistle, 2000) or bohemians (Jazbinsek, 2003) whose distinctions rested on how they could be seen.

Jazbinsek notes that “The Metropolis and Mental Life” is a short essay and probably immature, but this text is to be regarded as “The Urban Manifesto” (Jazbinsek, 2003: 104). There, Simmel argues that certain social conditions in the city have an impact on the personality of the urbanite. More precisely, Simmel notes: “[...] how the personality accommodates itself to the adjustments, to external forces” (1950a: 409). Authors like David Frisby suggest that this text is a diagnosis of modern experience (Frisby, 2002). In this sense, it is not fortuitous that transformations in the forms of perception and the sense are one of its key aspects.

Throughout the text, Simmel describes some of the traits of the transformation of the sensitive order in modern society. For him, “the *intensification of nervous stimulation*” is an alteration produced by the urbanite experience. The rhythm of the city and its constant hastening increase as is evident in the “crowding of changing images” (Simmel, 1950a: 410) to which the metropolitan type of individuality is exposed. Nowadays, in the city, this aspect has been radicalized: “This visual sense is moreover increasingly mediatised, as it shifts from the printing press to electronic modes of representation, and from the camera to the circulation of digital images” (Urry, 2008: 390).

Simmel notes that large cities create psychological conditions and “the sensory foundations of psychic life” (1950a: 410). That is reflected in the perception of time acceleration: “The metropolis exacts from a man as a discriminating creature a different amount of consciousness than does rural life. Here the rhythm of life and

sensory mental imagery flows more slowly, more habitually, and more evenly” (Simmel, 1950a: 410). Unsurprisingly, such a perception of time includes the use of everyday life technology such as the pocket watch.

Simmel is aware that the movement produced by the dynamic of monetary exchange has an impact on the urbanites’ senses, motivations, explorations, and experiences. Simmel refers to that in *Philosophy of Money*: “The lack of something definite at the center of the soul impels us to search for momentary satisfaction in ever-new stimulations, sensations and external activities” (2004: 490). The modern experience is characterized by a transformation of perception, which can be seen in the exposure to new media entertainment and consumerism. In “The Berlin Trade Exhibition” (1991 [1896]), Simmel explores: “The way in which the most heterogeneous industrial products are crowded together in close proximity paralyses the senses” (1991: 119).

As a way of individual resistance, Simmel identifies the “blasé attitude” as a form of perception indifferent to city stimulation<sup>9</sup>. Such indifference amongst urbanites is not the result of an absence of relationships. Rather it is a different way of building relationships. The rupture of the affective distancing framework as well as of any physical contact or body contact (which includes mutual perception and senses) would lead to violent relationships that would reveal: “[...] a slight aversion, a mutual strangeness and repulsion, which will break into hatred and fight at the moment of a closer contact, however caused” (Simmel, 1950a: 416).

In large crowded cities, bodies are exposed to a physical proximity and an unexpected bodily contact could cause sensitive irritation. Simmel notes: “This is because the bodily proximity and narrowness of space makes the mental distance only the

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<sup>9</sup> “The essence of the blasé attitude consists in the blunting of discrimination. This does not mean that the objects are not perceived [...] but rather that the meaning and differing values of things, and thereby the things themselves, are experienced as insubstantial” (Simmel, 1950a: 414).

more visible” (Simmel, 1950a: 418). Therefore, Simmel suggests that “fear of contact” is another characteristic of modern life. Because the body contact with anonymous is a form of the transgression of sensitive boundaries.

In “Excursus on Social Boundary” (2009 [1908]), also part of chapter “Space and the Spatial Ordering of Society”, Simmel suggests that boundaries are always relational; a boundary makes no sense if it is not there to delimit one person from another. Likewise, “thresholds” are constitutive of social relationships. By “threshold” is understood a social limit determining which aspects can be part of a relationship and which must remain on the margins. In the “Little Sociology” Simmel calls them “sociability thresholds” (Simmel, 1950c: 46-47). These limits may be physical, symbolic, or even sensible, and they called thresholds because they may be crossed.

We can talk about “sensitivity thresholds” when the perception of the body of a person transgresses sensitivity expectations set by society beforehand in order to distinguish pleasant from unpleasant experiences. It could be said that in the interaction order, the possibility to cross and transgress sensitivity thresholds is common currency given our sensitive proximity with others. For Simmel, “fear of contact” is strongly related to this. The forms of strangeness and exclusion are established through sensitive and bodily contact in which the other will be considered as unpleasant or undesirable.

The metropolis is thus the site *par excellence* where the encounter between strangers takes place. Strangers with their bodies that make us feel also. Jazbinsek points out that between 1904 and 1908 Simmel witnessed of a number of publications dedicated to the study of urban culture and which focused: “not only on the subculture of the bohemians but also on gamblers, esoteric, pimps, professional criminals, anarchists, and homosexuals” (Jazbinsek, 2003: 115). Although we find allusions to various historical references in “Excursus on the Stranger”, it

should not surprise us that Simmel kept the Stranger of the metropolis in mind.

When Simmel wrote “The Metropolis and Mental Life” Berlin had already been established as the capital of the new German Empire after 1871. Jazbinsek points out that although the development of urban proletarian dwellings was incipient, a Social Democratic Party deputy was quoted saying that: “The smell of diapers is typical of all proletarian dwellings. And just as young children contribute more to the bad air, which also suffer most from it” (quoted in Jazbinsek, 2003: 106). Simmel was witnessing the transformation of cities and its repercussions for the forms of perception. He was also attentive to how the sense of impression gave place to experiences of strangeness and social construction of strangers.

In “Excursus on the Stranger” this last is defined by a peculiar relationship with space: “being a stranger means that the distant is near” (Simmel, 2009: 601). The Stranger needs not to be a foreign person or an immigrant. The Stranger is someone who is not part of the social circle to which he or she is close. Accordingly, the Stranger exists thanks to his or her nearness. The Stranger is not the “the inhabitant[s] of the star Sirius”, the unknown distant; he or she is a stranger because contact with others is unfamiliar. The exclusion of qualities particular to a social circle of belonging and the inclusion of a point of encounter is what constitute the Stranger. That is why Simmel sees the Stranger not as a person but as a *form of socialization*.

For Simmel, categories such as “the stranger, the enemy, the felon, even the poor [...] are somehow excluded from the society for which their existence is important” (2009: 45). The “Excursus on the Stranger”, is part of a larger framework asking the following question: how do we establish a relationship with those whom we consider to be simultaneously outside and inside society? Nothing is entirely “outside” society, though. Hence, the existence of the Stranger contributes to consolidating and fixing sentiments of internal cohesion and belonging. For Simmel, what



matters is the *form of socialization* that supports such categories, which cannot be explained by themselves but rather through their relationship with others.

Similar to the case of the *forms of socialization*, there may exist perpetual strangers like “the history of the European Jews” illustrates (Simmel, 2009: 602) or fleeting strangers, like those found in large cities. In the same way, relationships with the Stranger can be positive or negative. Sometimes the Stranger can be perceived as someone worth of admiration or trust, similar to a judge who will be objective in his or her ruling. But the Stranger can also be seen as someone submissive, rebellious, exotic, inhuman, or barbarian. In other cases, the Stranger may become fashionable. The very possibility for the Stranger to be considered as someone worth of respect – even admiration – in some cases, or subjected to a “radical foreignness” in others, makes Simmel pay attention to the dynamics of attraction and repulsion concerning the Stranger. Simmel’s reflections on the Stranger cannot be separated from his thoughts concerning with specific senses. In the next section, we proceed to discuss this connection.

## **The senses and the Stranger in the Metropolis: Some Latin-American snapshots**

### ***The sense of sight and the stranger***

For Simmel, the sense of sight and, in particular, the exchange of glances in large cities are a form of communication. A characteristic of the urbanite is the evasion of the glance of the other: “The power of the glance to bind individuals to one another mutually is acknowledged in impersonal public situations in which people wish to avoid involvement with one another. Hence, people hide behind newspapers on buses and subways and look up at the floor lights in elevators” (Weinstein and Weinstein, 1991: 173).

The glance is a social form because it affects reciprocally: “The most important feature for Simmel of the mutual glance is its reciprocity or bidirectionality” (Weinstein and Weinstein, 1991: 170). However, and just as there may exist symmetrical or asymmetrical social forms, whereas the glance may produce shame in certain people, it may produce contempt or pride in others (Simmel, 2009).

Within urban contexts, Simmel notes that appearance, fashion, and life-style as well as the insistence of being looked at are relevant to people. His interest on people extravagant and capricious about their appearance and dressing style stems from here (Simmel, 1950a). In “Excursus on Jewellery and Adornment”, Simmel argues that ornaments enable the exchange of glances amongst people. From tattoos or garments, the ornament lets individuals go beyond because its aim is to be looked at by others. Furthermore, its supra-individual character is related to style, to conventional ways through which the use of ornaments is shared by many (Simmel, 2009: 332-336).

The city is the site where to be looked at becomes a strategy of resistance against massification, just as in the case of the bohemians depicted above. In that way, Jorge Capetillo-Ponce has developed the relation between Simmel and the Mexican writer Octavio Paz and his novel *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. For Capetillo-Ponce “There are, indeed, many parallels between ‘The stranger’ and the Pachuco” (Capetillo-Ponce, 2004: 7)<sup>10</sup>. According to Paz: “they act like persons who are wearing disguises, who are afraid of a stranger’s look because it could strip them naked [...] they can be identified by their language and behavior as well as by the clothing they affect” (Paz in Capetillo-Ponce, 2004: 7). The Pachuco is defined as a “grotesque dandy”

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<sup>10</sup> The Pachuco is a social type that stars the first chapter of *The Labyrinth of Solitude* and is defined as “an individual of Mexican origin who has lived in the United States for many years or even for generations – and someone who is definitely not an ‘authentic’ North American, and yet also feels ashamed of his origin.” (Capetillo-Ponce, 2004: 7).

(*ibidem*). In this case, like Capetillo-Ponce remarks, the Stranger feels ashamed of his origin. Also, like a relation type, he feels fear of the look of others strangers.

In a similar way, but from the side of the resistance, pride, and dignity, we could refer to Darío Blanco research of the “colombias”, a group of young working-class men in the city of Monterrey in Mexico. Blanco notes that despite being discriminated by the upper classes, due to their “colombian style” – their music and colourful Caribbean outfit, the colombias “wears the stigma” in so far as they vindicate their clothing style, their music and dances. They conceive all of them as signs relevant to their identity (Blanco, 2008).

Nonetheless, in cases where body appearance and “excess in ornaments” transgress certain sensitivity thresholds as well as sensitive expectations, the exchange of glances and their meanings contribute to the creation of the Stranger. Transgression of gender-differentiated dressing codes may become the target of discrimination and violence towards those who wear them. Carlos Figari’s shows that in the streets of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil: “it was not unusual to see middle and upper-class youngsters from Copacabana, having fun aiming their air or rubber bullet rifles against travesties” (Figari, 2009, 135-136).

### ***The sense of smell and the stranger***

As shown by several authors, through olfactory perception and the meaning attributed to it, we could establish forms in which people are negatively framed. That certain odours are considered morally negative (Synnott, 1991; Low, 2008) has to do with the fact that: “The social question is not only an ethical question, but also a question of the nose” (Simmel, 2009: 577). In fact, some social groups have been characterized by their bad smell. Here Simmel’s words are worth quoting in full:

The reception of Africans into the higher laws of society in North America seems impossible from the outset because of their bodily atmosphere, and the aversion of Jews and Germans

toward each other is often attributed to this same cause. The personal contact between cultivated people and workers, so often enthusiastically advocated for the social development of the present, which is also recognized by the cultivated as the ethical ideal of closing the gap between two worlds “of which one does not know how the other lives” simply fails before the insurmountable nature of the olfactory sense impressions (Simmel, 2009: 557).

When the smell of other crosses the threshold of that which is considered appropriate according to “olfactory norms” (Synnott, 1991), a negative experience of strangeness emerges. According to Simmel: “The stigma if odor has provided a constant basis of stratification” (Urry, 2008: 394). Thus, certain social classes (e.g. “the upper strata”) cannot stand “the physical contact with the people onto whom ‘the venerable perspiration of work’ clings” (Simmel, 2009: 577). All the above is related to the process of individuation that traverses all the senses, and the sense of olfaction in particular, and through which “we become all more sensitive at the shorter distances” (Simmel, 2009: 578). If we add processes of social stratification in which the sense of olfaction serves as mediator in the hierarchization of people, the result is the formation of strangers based on their “bad odour” and the need to keep them away.

Débora Gorbán’s research on garbage collectors in Buenos Aires, Argentina illustrates this. She refers to the so-called “cartoneros” who use public transport as a means of travel in the city to collect cardboard. Due to rejection from train commuters, the government planned a strategy of segregation: train coaches were divided and cartoneros were put on a special coach. Bad odours constituted a major argument in the strategy (see Gorbán, 2005: 5).

The link between dirt and odour enables the construction of strangers and enemies too. On this, Simmel refers to Nietzsche: “Nietzsche often said openly of the type of person most hateful to him, ‘they do not smell good’” (Simmel, 2009: 578). Pilar

Calveiro too offers an illustration of this: one Junta official in Argentina refers to a prisoner by his “dirty smell”. The official said to one victim: “I took your husband, I noticed him on his smell, his dirty smell, he smelled like a montonero”<sup>11</sup> (cited in Calveiro, 2002: 151).

### ***The sense of hearing and the stranger***

According to Simmel, the sense of hearing enables the creation of *forms of socialization* with others, just like in the case of a music concert or an assembly. The importance of the voice and sound is central to the understanding of what is being communicated. In “Excursus on Written Communication”, Simmel notes that “phenomena of the sound and the emphases of the voice, gesture and countenance” (2009: 344) are interpretation resources, unlike the written letter which does not have any of the afore mentioned characteristics.

Yet, as it is possible to create a “community” from the sense of hearing like while attending a music concert, the creation of hierarchies and distinctions is also possible. At this stage, it is important to bring into the picture one of Simmel’s early works entitled “Psychological and Ethnological Studies on Music”. There, Simmel examined the musical practices of different peoples. He notes how perception and appreciation of music changes culturally: “That the Chinese say, when they listen to European songs, that ‘the dogs are howling here’, is characteristic of the judgment concerning what is real and proper music. To European ears, Chinese music is equally incomprehensible” (Simmel, 2003: 25).

All the above is not exclusive to music; it also takes place with speech, accent, and the pronunciation of any language. Simmel considered the radicalization of the Stranger as a non-human: “The relationship of the Greeks to the barbarian is, perhaps,

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<sup>11</sup> “Montoneros” was the name of the members of a political-military organization during the dictatorship in Argentina in the seventies (Calveiro, 2005).

typical of this” (Simmel, 2009: 604). The barbarian is the stranger “that babbles”. There are cases in which a person who does not know the language of the group to which he or she is approaching would be considered a stranger, not only because of his or her low interpretative communications skills but also because of her accent and gestures when speaking.

In Latin American countries so characterized by processes of colonization, exclusion and discrimination of native peoples based on the way they talk is rather accentuated. In this regard, Bourdieu refers to symbolic violence associated with linguistic domination as ever present in independent Nigeria: Nigerians foster a relationship of rejection towards their indigenous language while adopting the “bodily hexis of the British, and keeping what they consider as the British nasal accent” (Bourdieu, 2001: 59fn).

In some cases, to domination based on race we need to add stratification variables that contribute to the radicalization of exclusion. Emilie Doré analyses the perceptions of the inhabitants of a shantytown in Lima, Perú. People coming from marginal neighbourhoods may experiment such discrimination: “Gesture language is very important to capture those nuances, as stated by the people themselves: ‘gestures talk’. A strong accent – just as traditional clothing – attracts mocking glances and disdain. Some places are more conducive to direct racial slurs, though: in schoolyards, racist expressions are frequent” (Doré, 2008: 95-6). As we can see, not only one sense intervenes in interaction amongst people, but a set of elements also gets activated in mutual perception.

## **Concluding remarks**

Departing from a relational and dynamic conception of human beings and society, Simmel’s relational sociology allow us to capture the way in which people are reciprocally conditioned and how they can get to establish *forms of socialization*, which can

either be fleeting or long-lasting symmetrical or asymmetrical. As we saw, Simmel's theoretical and methodological contribution has to do with going from the individual to *the social forms*. In this article, I have shown that within urban contexts where perceptions and meanings are exchanged in fleeting moments of interaction, the experience of strangeness and the construction of the Stranger take place through the senses.

Simmel thus establishes the analytical precedents to the understanding of the body and, in particular, of our forms of perception through the senses as the site of affectivity and meaning. However, due to his relational methodology, Simmel goes beyond the individual dimension of perception and draws on how it is possible to establish *forms of socialization* based on the type of mutual perception and attribution of meaning to the presence of other people. With Simmel it is possible to establish that within the "interaction order" is found a "sensitive proximity" that registers people through their bodies and thus generates emotions, meanings and affects, which may range from pleasure to displeasure or from attraction to repulsion.

The urban space is the site *par excellence* in which Simmel's contribution to the transformations of perception has left some research clues. Perception is shaped by the city and the kind of relationships that emerge from it given its velocity, movement, stimulation and the fugacity of the exchanges therein. Fear or resistance to bodily contact with other people makes of sensitive proximity a rich field for empirical research. In particular, this paper has shown that the experience of strangeness (the near distant) in large cities is related to the moment in which one or more individuals perceive themselves as transgressors of specific standards of sensitivity. They cross what I have described as – following Simmel – "sensitivity thresholds". Nonetheless, the insistence of being perceived or looked at can be seen as a strategy of resistance for those whom are excluded as strangers.

Some aspects need to be taken into account for the enhancement of Simmel's contribution. On the one hand, while

Simmel pays attention to the relevance of the sense of hearing, to the bodily character of the voice, and to the importance of olfaction, he does not step away from “the hierarchy of the senses” (Classen, 1997) under which the sense of sight gets priority. To understand fear of and resistance to bodily contact we need to emphasize variables such as class, gender, and ethnic origin for they contribute to the hierarchization of people related with “hierarchy of the senses” (*ibidem*). Secondly, Simmel keeps a division of labour between the senses (Stewart, 1999: 9). However, the division of labour between the senses obscures the plurality of those senses at the moment of interaction.

On the other hand, there is the need to go beyond the interaction order and incorporate issues related to long-term historical processes as well as with specific cultural codes that enable mutual perception to be in one way and not in another. That may be relevant for the analysis of interactions subscribed within contexts crossed by processes of colonization. Nevertheless, Simmel was sensitive to how the experience of the researcher leaves a mark on the research itself through bodily contact (Jazbinsek, 2003). The fruitfulness of this last point may be explored in so far as we consider the objective historical conditions which give shape to the researcher’s own perception.

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