

Challenging Urban Anesthetics: Beauty and Contradiction in Georg Simmel's Rome With Seven Images and Notes “In The Meantime”

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Abstract: *Georg Simmel's essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life” is barely capable of informing aesthetic categories such as Beauty. After all, Simmel's concept of the blasé attitude is so pervasive that it seems to exclude sensory experience from modern city life. Documents from Simmel's stay in Rome in 1898, however, reveal his aesthetic sensitivity as a traveler; he is attentive to the city as a constellation of differences that inspire beauty, and his encounter with modern Rome is a source of sensory contradictions. Topographically, Simmel's Roman essays provide one example: a silent garden overlooking noisy Rome. By revisiting this place in 2018, we trace Simmel's viewpoints and arguments and develop a somaesthetic experience of beauty and urbanity during a springtime afternoon at this site.*

Keywords: *Georg Simmel (1858-1918), Rome, blasé attitude, Blasiertheit, urbanity, urban culture, contradiction, Gegensatz, Giardino di Sant'Alessio, children, happiness.*

Introduction: Aesthetics Facing Anesthesia

One of the foundational texts in the field of urbanity and aesthetics is an essay by the German philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel. Dating from 1903, it is titled “Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben,” which translates as “The Metropolis and Mental Life.”¹ Discovered in the 1950s and 1960s, this essay, which was based on a lecture, establishes a framework for understanding urban culture at the intersection of sensory life, monetary exchange, and spatial density. Simmel also situates human experience at the center of an urban setting that far too often is reduced by instrumental discourses of architecture, urban planning, and engineering. In reality, the city has been the pivotal stage of modern life since the late 18th century.

¹ *Großstädte* means metropolises or big cities. Please note the definite article and the plural in *Die Großstädte*, with which Simmel conceives of big cities without mentioning names, such as Berlin, Paris, London, or Rome. A more accurate translation of the German title would have been the following: “The Big Cities and the Life of Spirit.” However, Simmel's generic approach to big cities and the socio-cultural perspectives of his text survive in “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” which is the Anglo-American title adopted by Kurt H. Wolff in 1950, years before this essay in a 1903 yearbook was republished in a Germanophone anthology of Simmel's texts: *Brücke und Tür: Essays des Philosophen zur Geschichte, Religion, Kunst und Gesellschaft*, ed. Michael Landmann (Stuttgart: K. F. Koehler, 1957). Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. Translated, edited and with an introduction by Kurt H. Wolff (New York, London: The Free Press, Collier-Macmillan, 1950), 409–424.

However, Simmel does not employ the terms beauty or beautiful in his essay. In contrast, he provides a portrait of urban culture that is so remote from the practices of art and contemplation that one may wonder whether Simmel is indicating the *impossibility* of aesthetics in the metropolitan age. Instead of focusing on 'aesthetics', understood as sensory perception, Simmel highlights the pervasiveness of the so-called blasé attitude, *Blasiertheit*, which implies the loss or lack of sensitivity vis à vis things and spaces. *Blasiertheit* designates a cultural and social *anesthesia* rather than a multiplicity of sensory practices in the city.

However, metropolitan *Blasiertheit* sometimes gives way to overwhelming sensory experiences and thereby to aesthetics and even beauty, which Simmel experiences in Rome in 1898. I had a similar experience in Rome, but in 2018, which I will describe below. First, let us consider the anesthetic *blasé attitude*.

I. Bodies, Money, Density: The Blasé Attitude in the City



Figure 1: “Blasiertheit”? Roma I, 2018

Leaving his car right outside the park, he keeps the keys around his middle finger. He will soon leave after turning his back to the panoramic view of Rome and photographing it with his smartphone. First and foremost, however, he gazes at himself while composing this self-portrait with a view which is to be sent to someone, posted somewhere.

Breaking into my view towards the Campidoglio in the center of Rome, this man becomes an image in his own right. In the meantime, I cannot but photograph him as he stands there, photographing himself. Would it be just to see him and his selfie as present-day variations on

Blasiertheit, *the blasé attitude that Simmel conceptualizes at the turn of the 20th century? The man in the picture seems quite focused; he leaves without saying a word, apparently without noticing that he gets another portrait taken by a stranger standing next to him.*

Many readers of Simmel's essay on metropolitan mentality will recall his emphasis on the decline of sensory practices in the big city. Repeatedly, Simmel observes that the city promotes a general absence of attention to the particularity of things. First, Simmel gives a physiological explanation of the *blasé attitude*. This attitude results from the intensity of *impressions* with which every individual must cope:

There is perhaps no psychic phenomenon which has been so unconditionally reserved to the metropolis as has the blasé attitude. The blasé attitude results first from the rapidly changing and closely compressed contrasting stimulations of the nerves. (§ 5, 415)²

Moreover, this physical exhaustion is reinforced by the homogenizing effects of money. Monetary exchange transforms qualitative values into quantitative values. Thus, sensory things are reduced to their price and thus to exchangeability. Their heterogeneous qualities fade, and they are replaced by gray indifference:

This physiological source of the metropolitan blasé attitude is joined by another source which flows from the money economy. The essence of the blasé attitude consists in the blunting of discrimination [between things]. (§ 6, 414)³

Third and last, the *blasé* consequences of sensory overstimulation and price-tagging are reinforced by the *spatial density* of the metropolis. This density makes people surrender to a culture of excitement, which provides only the temporary fix of a short-term solution.

That is why cities are also the genuine locale of the blasé attitude. In the blasé attitude the concentration of men and things stimulate the nervous system of the individual to its highest achievements so that it reaches its peak. Through the mere quantitative intensification of the same conditioning forces this achievement is transformed into its opposite and appears in the peculiar adjustment of the blasé attitude. In this phenomenon the nerves find in the refusal to react to their stimulation the last possibility of accommodating to the contents and forms of metropolitan life. (§ 7, 415)⁴

2 Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," *op. cit.*, 415. In German: "Es gibt vielleicht keine seelische Erscheinung, die so unbedingt der Großstadt vorbehalten wäre, wie die Blasiertheit. Sie ist zunächst die Folge jener rasch wechselnden und in ihren Gegensätzen eng zusammengedrängten Nervenreize, [...]" [II, § 4, 193] Georg Simmel, "Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben," in *Die Großstadt. Vorträge und Aufsätze zur Städteausstellung* von K. Bücher, et al. (Dresden: Verlag Bahn & Jaensch, 1903), 193–195.

3 In German: "Mit dieser physiologischen Quelle der großstädtischen Blasiertheit vereinigt sich die andre, die in der Geldwirtschaft fließt. Das Wesen der Blasiertheit ist die Abstumpfung gegen die Unterschiede der Dinge, [...]" [III, § 5, 193]

4 In German: "Darum sind die Großstädte, die Hauptsitze des Geldverkehrs und in denen die Käuflichkeit der Dinge sich in ganz anderem Umfange aufdrängt, als in kleineren Verhältnissen, auch die eigentlichen Stätten der Blasiertheit. In ihr gipfelt sich gewissermaßen jener Erfolg der Zusammendrängung von Menschen und Dingen auf, die das Individuum zu seiner höchsten Nervenleistung reizt; durch die bloß quantitative Steigerung der gleichen Bedingungen schlägt dieser Erfolg in sein Gegenteil um, in diese eigentümliche Anpassungserscheinung der Blasiertheit, in der die Nerven ihre letzte Möglichkeit, sich mit den Inhalten und der Form des Großstadtlebens abzufinden, darin entdecken, daß sie sich der Reaktion auf sie versagen – [...]" Georg Simmel, "Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben," *op. cit.*, 194–195.

In this triangle of stimuli, money, and space, the blasé undermining of genuine sensitivity is pervasive and totalizing.⁵

In reality, this tripartite conception of *Blasiertheit*—stimuli, money, space—is more than a sudden observation by Simmel; he elaborates his analysis in three different writings spanning fourteen years. Citing the blasé tendencies among rich people in “The Psychology of Money” (1889), Simmel progressively considered the blasé mentality as a general feature shared by “the public spirit” in his seminal book, *The Philosophy of Money* (1900). Finally, in “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903), the urban setting is recognized: the blasé approach to things and environments is generated in *city space*.

While Simmel is sometimes considered a thinker who generalizes and even de-historicizes social phenomena in an inadmissibly impressionist way, such criticism does not apply to his concept of *Blasiertheit*. On the contrary, *Blasiertheit* is the result of Simmel’s recurring attempts to socially, economically, and spatially ground his use of a concept that traditionally has designated a bodily and mental indifference to sensory and material qualities, which are supposed to be most widespread among excessively wealthy people. In Simmel’s view, however, *Blasiertheit* is also an increasingly shared phenomenon that affects most people who are exposed to the big city and its sensory intensity, monetary exchangeability, and spatial and human density.⁶

Indeed, the human body is present in modern cities. However, from the somaesthetic point of view, the body portrayed by Simmel is not an attentive and sensory one because it is occupied by instrumental, quantitative, and rational issues. In summary, the reader has difficulty imagining how the blasé individual’s indifference to city life could be overcome or bring about renewed kinds of sensory attentiveness.

5 For a distinction between three discursive layers which are present in Simmel’s urban-cultural analysis in “Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben”, see Henrik Reeh, *Ornaments of the Metropolis: Siegfried Kracauer and Modern Urban Culture* (Cambridge: Mass. & London: The MIT Press, 2004/2006 [1991]), 22–28.

6 For a genealogy of Simmel’s conception of *Blasiertheit*, see Henrik Reeh, “Réécriture du concept de blasement. Georg Simmel face à l’urbanité moderne” in *Simmel et les normes sociales*, ed. Jean-Marie Baldner et Lucien Gillard (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1996), 141–151.

II: Experiencing Rome: Contextual Beauty and Subjective Liberation



Figure 2: "Schönheit"? Roma II, 2018

Springtime in Rome: Trees are blossoming, and soon their flowers will cover the ground and light it up, adding color to the soil and to the asphalt. Once the street sweepers pass by, these flowers will be removed. In the meantime, I take a picture of the flowers on the urbanized ground. The constellation of these two elements spontaneously evokes the concept of Schönheit (beauty) in my inner view.

Before taking the photograph, I notice and deliberately focus on two cigarette butts inside the frame of the image. On the computer screen at home, I realize that there are more butts, four in total. All belong to the image. Are they beautiful, either in themselves or in this context? After all, they may challenge a certain conception of beauty or add a beauty of another kind.

In the name of traditional beauty, health, and sustainability, these butts would be rubbish: unworthy of being photographed, destined to an ash tray. In fact, they should never have been produced or smoked by human beings. However, the image presents a striking triangle of fallen flowers, cigarette butts, and urban ground. Without the presence of the cigarette butts, I may not have taken this photograph, let alone shown it here. Would Simmel have considered this motif beautiful?

The prevalent role of the blasé attitude toward the urban world does not imply that Simmel understands the body in modern life as a fully homogeneous entity. On the contrary, the

division of labor and differences in lifestyles are striking features in the somaesthetic structuring of bodily subjectivity because they promote a radical *differentiation* that leaves room for variety in our individual lives.

One is not always fixed in the repetitive everyday of naturalized habits. In Simmel's day, modern subjects started exploring the mobility promoted by trains and traveling.⁷ They went away and abroad. When one changes one's location, new ways of perceiving cities emerge. Therefore, the blasé indifference that Simmel ties to the metropolis is occasionally challenged and fragmented.

Leaving one's home city and going abroad radically changes one's approach to material and socio-cultural environments. Instead of submitting urban space to the purposeful habits and instrumental movements that are predominant in one's ordinary environment, the traveling individual explores a city that is other if not in its own right, then at least as a city which is dealt with in more disinterested and less predictable ways than in everyday life.

A foreign city is revealed as a particular and heterogeneous place. Moreover, a city is named and perceived in the symbolic form of this particular name rather than as yet another example of the generic *Großstädte* that Simmel addresses in his essay in 1903.

This change in perspective and perception is not only a theoretical possibility, as one observes in Simmel's short essays on Florence, Venice, and Rome.⁸ His text on Rome in 1898 is particularly relevant in challenging the *anesthetics* of cities. In the late 19th century, Rome is the capital of an Italy that was unified in 1871, which is about to become a modern metropolis.⁹ In addition, Rome remains a powerful historic reference, not only to the Roman empire and the later Christian world but also to the early modern institutions of painting, archaeology, and literature. It is hardly a coincidence that Rome is often identified as *Urbs, the city as such*.¹⁰

In 1898, Georg Simmel and his wife stay in Rome during the month of March and the first half of April.¹¹ In late May of the same year, Simmel publishes an essay, the equivalent of eleven book pages, which reveals his profound fascination with Rome.¹² In fact, his fascination is aesthetic, which is suggested by the title, "*Rom. Eine ästhetische Analyse*" ("Rome: An Aesthetic Analysis"). The approach is indeed analytical, addressing the body and the subjectivity that the visitor experiences in Rome just before 1900.

Simmel's text does not contain stylistic analyses of Roman monuments and art. Instead, the springtime traveler from Berlin translates his visitor's experience of Rome in *sensory-based* reflection. As a result, an ambitious, general *concept of beauty* is launched at the beginning of Simmel's essay, and its wording exceeds not only the experience of Rome but also the issue of cities and urban life:

The most profound stimulation [Reiz] of beauty lies in the fact, perhaps, that beauty is always the form of elements that in themselves are indifferent and foreign to beauty,

7 Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Die Geschichte der Eisenbahnreise: Zur Industrialisierung von Raum und Zeit im 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1979).

8 These brief essays written at the turn of the century were published in a posthumous volume: Georg Simmel, *Zur Philosophie der Kunst* (Potsdam: Kiepenheuer, 1922).

9 Steen Bo Frandsen, *Det tredje Rom: Byudvikling og magtscenesættelse 1870-1945* (Aarhus: Sfinx, 1991).

10 Anne Cauquelin, *Essai de philosophie urbaine* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982), 23–27.

11 Simmel's annotated letters from the spring of 1898 are published in Georg Simmel, *Briefe 1880–1911, Gesamtausgabe, Band 22* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag).

12 Georg Simmel, "Rom. Eine ästhetische Analyse", first published in *Die Zeit*, Vienna, 15, 28 May 1898, and, posthumously, in Georg Simmel, *Zur Philosophie der Kunst, op. cit.*, 17–28.

*and that acquire their aesthetic value only from their proximity to one another.*¹³

As in many of his essays—a genre that Simmel cultivates and turns into a modern form of writing—Simmel starts with general statements that soon appear to be grounded in a particular object or experience, which in the present case is a stay in the city of Rome. Despite the notable reservation regarding the generality of his statement, in which Simmel employs *vielleicht* (perhaps) as if to indicate the hypothetical or associative status of his definition, beauty is outlined as profoundly *contextual*. The individual elements of sensory reality are devoid of a distinct value, whereas it is their *adding-up-to-a-unity* (i.e., to a form) that makes beauty possible and effective. Beauty occurs thanks to a *constellation of non-beautiful units*.

In this view, a genuinely urban conception of beauty unfolds. Not individual parts or single elements but their coexistence and reciprocity allow for beauty to occur in a city, which is the coexistence of multiple entities—material, social, and bodily.

Accordingly, the beauty of Rome lies not in its intentional artworks or monuments but in the accidental collaboration of individually purposeful structures that grow into a surprising unity:

*In the cityscape of Rome such a fortunate and fortuitous growing-together of human purposeful structures into a new unintentional beauty seems to achieve its highest stimulation [Reiz]. [...] What makes the impression of Rome so incomparable is that the distances between times, styles, personalities and life-contents which have left their traces here, span as widely as nowhere else in the world, and that these [traces] nevertheless grow into a unity, a mood, and a sense of belonging together as nowhere else in the world. (§ 3, 31-32)*¹⁴

The unity of impression resulting from Rome's inner differences is exactly what Simmel identifies as *beauty*. It is a beauty that sometimes refers to visual traces. However, beauty also stems from the intense human life in the city, and it depends on the communion of the present with previous times. Space, life, and time vitalize the city and thus invite *the aesthetic experience of the individual to unfold*.

A *Großstadt* implies the increasing domination of so-called objective culture (e.g., institutions and technology) over subjective culture, the size and role of which are diminishing.¹⁵ However, in Rome, the traveler overcomes the exhausted state that is typical of the blasé attitude:

13 Translated by Ulrich Teucher and Thomas M. Kemple in *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2007, vol. 24 (7-8), 30-37. The translation has been slightly corrected; the position of “perhaps” was moved from the beginning to the center of the sentence.

In German: “Der tiefste Reiz der Schönheit liegt vielleicht darin, daß sie immer die Form von Elementen ist, die an sich gleichgültig und schönheitsfremd sind und erst durch ihr Beieinander ästhetischen Wert erwerben; [...]” (§1, 16). Please note that “Reiz” is the term invoked by Simmel, as he first conceptualizes “Blasiertheit” in “Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben”, as the emblematic feature of the modern individual who is exposed to the intensity of impressions in the big city: “Nervenreize”, as Simmel terms these impressions in the initial quote above (US transl., § 5, 415). A little later, Simmel employs the term “Reiz” in the plural: “Die so entstehende Unfähigkeit auf neue Reize mit der ihnen angemessenen Energie zu reagieren, ist eben jene Blasiertheit, die eigentlich schon jedes Kind der Großstadt im Vergleiche mit Kindern ruhigerer und abwechslungsloserer Milieus zeigt.” Quoted from Georg Simmel, “Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben” in G. Simmel, *Das Individuum und die Freiheit* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 1984), § 7, p. 196.

“Reiz” may be translated into English by a multitude of terms, such as “charm,” “appeal,” “attraction,” “stimulus,” “attire,” “excitement,” “attractiveness,” “fascination,” and “stimulation”. See *Reverso – translate and learn*, Theo Hoffenberg, accessed 5 February 2020.

14 Translation modified. In German: “In dem römischen Stadtbilde scheint solches glücklich zufällige Zusammenwachsen menschlicher Zweckgebilde zu neuer, ungewollter Schönheit seinen höchsten Reiz zu gewinnen. [...] Das ganz Unvergleichliche des Eindruckes von Rom ist, daß die Abstände der Zeiten, der Stile, der Persönlichkeiten, der Lebensinhalte, die hier ihre Spuren hinterlassen haben, so weit gespannt sind, wie nirgends in der Welt, und daß diese dennoch in eine Einheit, Abgestimmtheit und Zusammengehörigkeit verwachsen, wie nirgends in der Welt.” G. Simmel, “Rom [...]”, *op. cit.*, §§ 3-4, 18-19.

15 Georg Simmel, “Die Großstädte ...”, *op. cit.*, towards the end of the essay.

If in Rome one does not feel overwhelmed but rather that one has arrived at the height of personality, then this is surely a reflex of the enormously increased self-activity of the inner human being. Nowhere else in the world has good fortune ordered objects for our mind so adequately, so that they call for a deployment of forces to gather these objects across the immense distances of their immediate conditions into such a complete unity. That is also why Rome leaves such an indissoluble impression in our memory. (§ 8, p. 35)¹⁶

Instead of becoming a blasé person as in the everyday of an ordinary *Großstadt*, the visitor to Rome experiences a strange transformation; he or she suddenly witnesses what it is to be an active subject that is finally capable of realizing its own inner potentials. Simmel traces this subjective realization back to the successful communion with the urban objective world. This communion, which “probably” (*sicher*) has to do with an inner dynamic that mirrors the outer world, signals that Simmel’s encounter with Rome generates an overwhelming and *city-based return of the aesthetic as a realm of sense-based experience and reflection*. After all, a big city may occasion the opposite of a blasé feeling of indifference and instead promote the conviction of objective cohesion in the outer world as well as a subjective intensification within the individual’s spirit and body.

III. Beyond Unity – Simmel on the Aventine Hill



Figure 3: “Gegensatz”? Roma III, 2018

¹⁶ In German: “Wenn man sich in Rom nicht erdrückt, sondern gerade auf der Höhe der Persönlichkeit angelangt fühlt, so ist das sicher ein Reflex der ungeheuer gesteigerten Selbsttätigkeit des inneren Menschen. Nirgends in der Welt hat der günstige Zufall die Objekte unserem Geiste so adäquat geordnet, daß sie ihn zu der Kraftentfaltung aufrufen, über so gewaltige Abstände ihrer unmittelbaren Gegebenheit hinweg sie zu einer so völligen Einheit zu sammeln. Das ist auch der Grund, weshalb Rom sich der Erinnerung ganz unauslöschlich einprägt.” G. Simmel, “Rom [...]”, *op. cit.*, § 8, 26.

Discovered from the street, this place—Giardino di Sant'Alessio—looks like a detour. However, it is also a public garden that opens new horizons. It is an untraditional park; there are orange trees, but they are not staged. The ground is covered by simple soil, gravel, or grass that has not been mowed for months. The grass keeps growing and has little yellow flowers in it until a noisy and smoky garden tractor goes into action. Maneuvered by a seated gardener, it introduces an element of contrast or contradiction—Gegensatz—into the experience of this place.

In the meantime, one realizes how exceptional this garden is, framed by rose abbey walls, devoid of guards and left to the visitors themselves: tourists slightly off the beaten track, dog owners walking their dear friends, people who need rest or want to explore a view of the city from above.

A space for breathing and relaxation, this place is an unstable spot where people constantly arrive and depart along the central path or follow their individual itinerary across a variety of irregular surfaces. In this metropolitan garden, orange trees grow in a way that makes the oranges themselves disappear. The oranges are there, still hanging in the darkness among branches and leaves. Don't they hide their beauty to people who pass too fast, and, in turn, promote the impression of a nice yet untidy place with no ambition of grandeur? At sunset, a brother or superintendent from the neighboring church arrives, closes the gate toward the street, and locks the garden for the night.

Although it is short, Simmel's "Rome" is an experimental text that attempts to *make sense* of an ecstatic encounter with this city. The mediation between parts and totality seems to have no limits, when Simmel claims the existence of "a full, organic unity of the impression" of this city.¹⁷ However, Simmel employs many adverbs and conjunctive forms of verbs that not only suggest but also justify a series of risky comparisons and hypothetical interpretations. Maybe things are not as evident as the elegance of Simmel's prose would have us believe. Simmel mobilizes an impressive rhetorical and conceptual energy in his text which delivers a focused and convincing attempt to translate the experience of Rome into the harmonious coexistence of part and totality and of subject and object.

One may thus notice the degree to which non-identity and non-mediation are absent in this essay, which does not provide an analysis of topographic or social phenomena in Rome's cityscape and urban lifeworld. The absence of contradiction and empirical elements makes the reader wonder whether Simmel is capable of addressing the contradictions of modernity, which undeniably exist in Rome at the end of the 19th century.

In order to address my suspicion, I now introduce a second text by Simmel on Rome, which is a one-page fragment entitled "*Gegensatz*," which was published in 1899 in the literary and artistic journal *Jugend* and signed by a pseudonym, "G.S."¹⁸

In prolonging a site-specific observation of Rome, this secret text adds an element of contrast or contradiction (i.e., *Gegensatz*) to the experience of Rome.¹⁹ In fact, Simmel evokes

17 In German: "Versucht man, die ästhetische Wirkung Roms psychologisch zu zergliedern, so mündet man von allen Richtungen her auf diesem Zentrum, auf das zunächst sein äußerliches Bild hinzeigt: daß aus den größten Gegensätzen, in die sich überhaupt die Geschichte der höheren Kultur gespalten hat, hier eine völlige organische Einheit des Eindrucks geworden ist." (G. Simmel, "Rom [...]", *op. cit.*, § 3, 19)

Translation into English [modified]: "If one tries to dissect Rome's aesthetic effect psychologically, one will arrive from all directions at this centre to which its outward image first points: from the greatest oppositions into which high culture [has] split, a complete organic unity has grown." (G. Simmel, "Rome [...]", *op. cit.*, UK translation, 32)

18 Otthein Rammstedt, "On Simmel's Aesthetics: Argumentation in the Journal *Jugend*, 1897-1906" in *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 8 (1991), 125-144.

19 There are no named and observed places in Simmel's official essay on Rome, "Rom. Eine ästhetische Analyse."

a particular Roman experience that is visual and auditory as well as bodily and sensory and hence *somaesthetic*. The experience involves at least two different situations that are not fully harmonious; accordingly, they may be closely related to Rome in the age of modernity. Staging an urban site in not only the most green and organic but also the least noisy and least constructed *monte* among the seven hills of classical Rome *intra muros*, Simmel writes:

*On the Aventine Hill lies an abbey church, Sant'Alessio, with a small, dark garden, in which there is silence about centuries. So silent can it be in Rome only, just as only those people know to be deeply, heavily, and maturely silent, who would know how to speak likewise.*²⁰

The place on which Simmel comments is defined by the Sant'Alessio church, which has a garden to which the public has access. Thus, the narrator has been there, either alone or with a few people who were not noisy. Under these circumstances, the place is a garden of contemplation and introspection, in which a retreat *from* and a confirmation *of* Rome as a city of subjectivity and reflection is provided.



Figure 4: "Gegensatz"? Roma IV, 2018

The narrow garden has brick walls on its long sides, which give a certain impression of darkness at the back. The other two sides, however, allow for human visibility. First, the gate and the fence

20 Translated from the German by Henrik Reeh. In German: "Auf dem Aventin liegt eine Klosterkirche, S. Alessio, mit einem kleinen, dunkeln Garten, in dem es von Jahrhunderten schweigt. So still kann es nur in Rom sein, wie nur *die* Menschen tief und schwer und reif zu schweigen wissen, die ebenso zu reden wüßten." G. S. [Georg Simmel], "Gegensatz" [1899], now in Georg Simmel, *Gesamtausgabe*, Band 17 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2004), 381.

toward the street attract the gazes of passers-by. Second, the wall at the far end of the garden, stops at elbow height and invites visitors to stop, look, watch.

Approaching the wall, one already feels that something is lurking there. Indeed, the wall orients one's vision. From this point, one sees monumental buildings in odd positions where one would not expect to find them. Because this site is elevated, the wall is more than an invitation to a 180-degree panorama; one also looks down toward the river, which winds in such a curly way that the four points of the sky seem to turn around as well. One watches monuments in order to figure out not only what one is looking at, but also from where. As the perspectives within the city fold on each other, one cannot say with certainty whether a church tower is located on one side of the river or the other.

In the meantime, traffic is passing down below; the insistence of urban sounds adds up to a metropolitan noise that Simmel points out in his *Gegensatz* fragment of 1899. To a contemporary visitor at the wall, the contrast generated by the noise and movement converges in the feeling that one is on the verge of leaving the garden and returning to the city.

The *hortus conclusus* (enclosed garden) that Simmel depicts is a fragment of the city. From inside this garden, one is sometimes confronted by neighboring urban fragments as well as by modern urbanity's practices and utterances. Such activities may exceed their localities and mingle with sensory experiences in other spatial fragments. This is indeed what the visitor's sensory body becomes aware of, visually and auditorily, as he changes position and moves about and away from the protected center of the garden toward its exposed periphery, which is situated on the steep outer slope of the Aventine Hill.

*Out from the edge of the garden one sees below oneself the Tiber and, below it, the noisy street toward S. Paolo fuori le Mura, with the cracking tramway, the loudly speaking children, the foreigners with their sudden and squared movements.*²¹

In fact, the Sant'Alessio Garden—*il Giardino di Sant'Alessio*—is not defined and surrounded only by the church. It also gives sensory access to the city of Rome, which one overlooks from the wall on the edge. Here, one can lean one's body at elbow height while absorbing visual and auditory impressions from the outer cityscape. The location and the panorama one faces are specified thanks to a name, the Tiber, which is nearly as powerful as the name Rome because it refers to the river that traverses *Urbs* from the North (from where many travelers, such as Goethe,²² arrived on their Grand Tour in the 18th and 19th centuries) before linking Rome to the Mediterranean Sea.

However, the Tiber is much more than a peaceful river; it is an urban harbor and

21 In German: "Vom Rande des Gartens aus sieht man unter sich den Tiber und unter ihm die lärmende Straße nach S. Paolo fuori le mura, mit der knatternden Trambahn, den laut sprechenden Kindern, den Forestieri mit ihren plötzlichen und eckigen Bewegungen." G. S. [Georg Simmel], "Gegensatz", *op. cit.*, 381.

I wish to thank Italian philosopher Andrea Borsari for the reference to Simmel's second text on Rome – a text *other* – which is now accessible to readers in the recent Simmel *Gesamtausgabe* but which Borsari himself had studied in the original edition from 1899, as documented in an article from 1997. Andrea Borsari, "Persistenza e transitorietà nell'immagine. Nota alle « Istantanee sub specie aeternitatis » di Georg Simmel", in *Controtempo*, 2, 1997, 122–130

22 "Kaum wagte ich mir selbst zu sagen, wohin ich ging, selbst unterwegs fürchtete ich noch, und nur unter der Porta del Popolo war ich mir gewiß, Rom zu haben." Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, "Rom, den 1. November 1786" in *Italienische Reise, Hamburger Ausgabe* (München: C. H. Beck, 1981), 125.

thoroughfare. Moreover, people move along this river in order to reach particular destinations. For centuries, pilgrims have traveled to the *Basilica San Paolo fuori le Mura*, which in 1511 was the first destination on Martin Luther's journey to all seven prescribed pilgrimage churches in the course of a single day.²³ As its name indicates (*fuori le Mura*), this first stop is located outside the city walls of Rome and several kilometers south.

At the time of Simmel's visit, the itinerary linking Rome to *Basilica San Paolo fuori le Mura* was no longer exclusively religious or a road of contemplation and silence. On the contrary, this road was characterized by Simmel as "the noisy street" (*die lärmende Straße*).

Indeed, the noise itself is composite and urban. First, Simmel writes,²⁴ it involves public transportation represented by the "cracking tram" (*mit der knatternden Trambahn*), indicating the auditory specificity of tramways, which make high-pitched, squeaking noises emanating from iron wheels on iron tracks. Moreover, trams occasionally generate flashing sounds from the electric cables in the air, which also enrich the technological soundscape of the city.²⁵

In addition to technological entities, such as tramways, human bodies make noise in their everyday movements. In observing urban life in Rome, Simmel is the opposite of a blasé tourist, as he singles out the presence of "loudly speaking children" as a distinctive and disturbing feature. Children, too, break the silence of the garden and add to the noisy street.

In addition to auditory disturbances, the visual appearance of people contributes to disrupting the initial silence. In fact, Simmel highlights the *Forestieri* (foreigners) who distinguish themselves visually by their "sudden" gestures and "squared" way of moving their bodies. Roman citizens walk in the street as a habitual practice, which appears natural and evident to Simmel. Walking foreigners, however, look strangely hectic and inorganic in the eyes of Simmel who – himself a foreign visitor – overlooks the Tiber and the street from the elevated wall of the Sant'Alessio Garden.

The silence in the dark and secret garden is contradicted as soon as one stands there overlooking the Tiber and the city. In particular, one encounters an auditory element of disharmony, which is due to movement, to city life, and to technology. This disharmony affects the urban traveler in the abbey garden, who no longer savors a "full, organic unity of the impression," as promised by Simmel in his "Rome: An Aesthetic Analysis."²⁶ Instead, elements of conflict and non-mediation stand out as if they were the very condition of the delight that the narrator just felt inside the silent garden on the hill:

In the delight of this silence, however, lies something like cruelty, since we only perceive it [silence] by paying the price that we look down on the movement and haste, that all noise and unrest trembles again inside us, as background of its opposite [Gegensatz].²⁷

23 For a cartographic sketch of Luther's itinerary as a pilgrim in Rome, see Ebbe Sadolin, *Vandring i Rom* (Copenhagen: Carit Andersens Forlag, 1959), 93.

24 Rome's first busline, the horse-driven line to San Paolo fuori le mura, was authorized by the Pope in 1845. From 1895, the tram lines in Rome were progressively electrified.

25 Simmel's observation regarding the noisy tramway applies to the Rome of the 21st century as well. When tramway line number 3 reaches its terminus at Piazza Thorvaldsen and makes a U-turn on a wide circle of tram tracks, the squeaking movement is distinctly audible at the Accademia di Danimarca up the hill, several hundreds meters away. Ordinary automobile traffic doesn't resonate quite as much, and the U-turning trams are about the only sounds capable of breaking into the meditative sight and soundscape, up here on the back side of the slopy and green Villa Borghese area.

26 In German: "eine völlige organische Einheit des Eindrucks". Georg Simmel, "Rom [...]", *op. cit.*, § 3, 19.

27 In German: "In dem Genuß dieser Stille aber liegt etwas wie Grausamkeit, denn wir empfinden sie nur um den Preis, daß wir auf jene Bewegung und Hast hinunterschauen, daß aller Lärm und Unruhe des Lebens in uns nachzittert, als Hintergrund ihres Gegensatzes." G. S. [Georg Simmel], "Gegensatz", *op. cit.*, 381.

The visitor's experience of delight depends on its Other and therefore on the recognition of everyday cruelty—*Grausamkeit*. Hence, Simmel's interpretation of Rome transgresses the utopia of the organic unity that prevailed in his official essay on Rome. In "*Gegensatz*" ("Contradiction"), which may be regarded as an unofficial postface, Simmel acknowledges that certain forces of contradiction are integral parts of urban sensory experience.

Indeed, Rome may be *Urbs* per se and an urban reference spanning millennia, but in Simmel's lifetime, the city is also a modern metropolis. A contextualist aesthetics that was already outlined by Simmel remains at work in "*Gegensatz*," but a modernist twist is added, in which instrumental movements or disturbing noises become central to the experience of Rome.

As the *Gegensatz* fragment on Rome as experienced *on and from* the Aventine Hill progresses, Simmel increasingly argues as a *dialectician of simultaneities*. First, his text seems to describe a temporal process in which the pleasure of the site, silence, and meditation give way to movement, noise, and distraction as soon as the narrator moves his attention from the darkness of the central garden to the panorama on the edge. However, in the sentences just quoted, Simmel outlines the *simultaneous coexistence* of delight and cruelty; *one feels delight only when taking into account its opposite*, whether the view of movement and haste ("*Bewegung und Hast*") or the repercussion of noise and unrest ("*Lärm und Unruhe*").

Just as he states in his 1903 essay on the *Großstädte* that a human being is a being of differences ("*Der Mensch is ein Unterschiedswesen [...]*"),²⁸ Simmel postulates in his *Gegensatz* fragment, "that we can only enjoy each thing in its difference from its Other" ("*daß wir jegliches Ding nur im Unterschiede gegen sein Anderes genießen können*").²⁹

The reciprocity of differences is fundamental both in the "*Großstädte*" essay and in "*Gegensatz*." Similarly, the sensation of beauty that Simmel presents in his essay "*Rom. Eine ästhetische Analyse*" also stems from a constellation of diverse elements, none of which are beautiful in themselves.

Accordingly, the sensation of delight and pleasure in the garden on the Aventine Hill would not be possible without the experience of the contrary. Pain and displeasure are present, both at the site, the here and now, and in the mental space prolonging a particular location, the Sant'Alessio Garden, in the writer's mind and in his narrative.

28 Georg Simmel, "Die Großstädte [...]", *op. cit.*, §2, 188.

29 Cited in full, and translated into English: "Isn't this the real curse of all that is human that we can only enjoy each thing in its difference from its Other?" In German: "Ist es nicht der eigentliche Fluch alles Menschlichen, daß wir jegliches Ding nur im Unterschiede gegen sein Anderes genießen können?" G. S. [Georg Simmel], "*Gegensatz*", *op. cit.*, 381.

IV. Experiencing Urban Metamorphosis in the Sant'Alessio Garden



Figure 5: “Schönheit/Gegensatz”? Roma V, 2018.

This image may have been taken in the wintertime. Flashy oranges appear on a tree, behind a wall in front of a façade once limewashed in ochre. White arches frame the windows, while Roman tiles cover the roof of this villa, which is located on one of the city’s foundational hills. On the right-hand side, there are lemon trees, too, smaller and in a position of retreat but symbolically as powerful as the orange trees.

In the middle of the city, ripe lemons provide an invitation to the passers-by, both foreigners and locals. Who would not dream of living here, in this city, Urbs, but also in this very house? Such beauty—Schönheit—may be savored as a promise of happiness. In the meantime, one cannot overcome a slight feeling of contradiction—of Gegensatz. There are few such houses, and obviously, they are not meant for us who remain distant onlookers.

Simmel’s approach to social and cultural reality has sometimes been questioned because it seems to generalize eccentric and local observations by stripping them of their historical specificity and, instead, granting them an eternal status.³⁰ A similar observation might be advanced vis à vis Simmel’s two essays on Rome.

30 Writings by Georg Lukács, Theodor W. Adorno, David Frisby, and others inform such a critical position vis à vis Simmel’s essays and thinking. D. Frisby, *Sociological Impressionism: A Reassessment of Georg Simmel’s Social Theory* (London: Heinemann, 1981).

Basically, Rome is a city that Simmel considers a source of beauty and complete unity. In his supplementary side-note, Simmel further signals a fundamental contrast between silence and noise as well as between pleasure and cruelty.

In his first essay, however, Simmel does not cite topographical names or other specific examples. Hence, it is hard to evaluate his observations in a culture-analytical manner that highlights the somaesthetic contribution of his 1898 sojourn in Rome to his thinking and concepts expressed in "Rome: An Aesthetic Analysis."

In "*Gegensatz*" (1899), Simmel's second essay, he points to a particular phenomenon in a particular place, and thereby makes his speculation less totalizing, less absolute. As we shall see in the following section, an empirically updated dialog with his site-specific observations may be possible and thus allow us to add an event-related and autobiographically self-reflective layer of urban-cultural somaesthetics to Simmel's portrait of a local public garden, which I will now situate in a particular somaesthetic context, temporally as well as processually.

Indeed, although it is not always indicated as a green area on tourist maps or in guidebooks, the Sant'Alessio Garden provides an urban space that is open to the public during the day seven days a week. It is not a spectacular garden and not at all as spectacular as the *Giardino degli Aranci* (the Orange Garden), which is a bigger and much more well-maintained park with genuine orange and lemon trees. Neighboring the Santa Sabena Church, the latter remains the major iconic garden and panoramic viewpoint on the green Aventine Hill.

In 1976, guided by our mother, my brother and I happened to pass by the Sant'Alessio Garden around Christmas during our first visit to Rome, which was also my first trip abroad.³¹ The *souvenir of lemons hanging on the trees in the middle of the wintertime* fuels my mental image of Rome. Moreover, this particular image remains closely related to my memory of the Aventine Hill, where green trees and gardens contribute to the exclusive, nearly suburban and park-like splendor, which is remarkably different from the urban and densely built parts of Rome.

Is this encounter with fresh *yellow lemons* the reason that in 1976, I made a radical switch from photographing with black-and-white negative film, which had run out after some 36 images, and then loaded a color diapositive film for slides? It may have been done consciously or not. Diapositives are meant to be projected on a screen in a darkened room, thus allowing for the *color aspect of photographed reality* to stand out intensely as light. However, I search in vain for the lemon motif on these slides taken on the Aventine Hill in general and the Sant'Alessio Garden in particular. As I now look at them against the sky or a lamp, I do not see any yellow lemons in the original slides. Nonetheless, I still recall the Aventine Hill as my encounter with lemons, rather than oranges. Those lemons have become a decisive utopian feature in my mental image of Rome: *the city where one may encounter lemons on the trees in the middle of the wintertime*.

In returning to Rome at Christmas and New Year more than forty years later, this *image of lemons*, vague yet persistent, pulls me back toward the Aventine Hill. Here, oranges seem to predominate in the marvelous *Giardino degli Arancia* (the Orange Garden) at least. The geography also appears different and a little confusing compared to the inner and imprecise memory of walking on a path outside the gardens overlooking the Tiber. The initial walk took

31 Arriving by metro from the southern suburbs of Rome, we walk from the city wall towards the centre of town. We thus may have visited the Sant'Alessio Garden with the intention of actually exploring the orange garden further down the street. Located next to the Santa Sabina Church, this second park is a spectacular garden with pines, orange and lemon trees, and a genuine panorama platform. Tourists usually walk in the opposite direction, following the itinerary proposed by the guidebooks, which starts at the center of Rome and finishes at the periphery; they therefore enter the Sant'Alessio only by chance on a hasty detour.

place four decades ago; and in fact, there is no such path there.³² However, oranges and lemons do grow on the Aventine Hill in the wintertime; it is magic.

Just a few months later, I am back in Rome, which I explore in a partially new mental light because, *in the meantime*, I have read Simmel's second and secret text from the city. This text adds symbolic weight to the Sant'Alessio Garden, which I hastily revisited at New Year's 2017–2018 but without recognizing the place. As I arrive in mid-April 2018, no longer in the winter but in the sunny and warm springtime, I immediately head for the *Giardino di Sant'Alessio*.

In order to mentally prepare myself, I respectfully follow our original 1976 itinerary, which I reconstruct by locating and intuitively redoing the black-and-white images that conduct me all the way to the Aventine Hill, now carrying a digital camera that produces images in color. At the end of the day, surrounded by evening darkness, I arrive in front of the Sant'Alessio Garden where the original black-and-white film ended. A guard from the neighboring church is about to lock the gate; he gently lets me into the garden and allows me to go all the way to the wall for a brief visit. The noise along the Tiber, which was noticed by Simmel before 1900, is still here, even remarkably so, in the evening darkness.



Figure 6: “Gegensatz/Schönheit”? Roma VI, 2018

32 Nearly half a year later, I realize that a pedestrian road framed by walls does exist. However, at the time of my return to Rome, in winter 2017 and spring 2018, this street is not accessible to the public, protected as it is by a locked gate at one end and by a combination of “no trespassing” signage, video cameras, and private guards at the other end. Indeed, this oblique path, which was paved but without automobile traffic, was open to pedestrians forty years earlier, as I realize while scrutinizing two color slides I took there in 1976, one from above, and another one from below the steep path linking the Aventine Hill to the road along the Tiber.

A second memory: my first revisit (early January 2018) was a last-minute family walk just a few hours before our departure. Because we started at the city center of Rome, this winter walk followed a direction opposite the initial one (Christmas 1976), which started at the Aurelian city wall, at which my mother, brother, and I had arrived from the suburbs.

Darkness has invaded a city that will soon go to bed. Already this panorama escapes the visitor's topographic deciphering and turns into the signature of an evening city. This cityscape may be particularly breathtaking to somebody who has just been let into the closing garden for a brief view from the wall at the far end. The city itself is disappearing in obscurity, but in the meantime, it emits sounds, noises, and vibrations. Together, they recall the cyclical world of human work and routine. Even this beautiful spot on Earth is pervaded by the constraints of everyday life.

Contradiction (Gegensatz) animates beauty (Schönheit), which survives, visually as well, by way of powerful elements: the Dome in the horizon, the Façade, broad and mighty, appearing further down in the visual field, and the river, dark and reflective, which occupies the middle field of the image and represents the axis around which the entire city circulates. The river also orients the traffic lanes at the bottom of the image. A particular soundscape arises from there and captures the attention of the person at the wall above.

Returning on the following afternoon (my third re-visit after four decades of absence), I record the soundscape as it is continuously encountered by pedestrians like me, who start their walk at the bottom of the hill on the linear boulevard with cars, buses, and trams below. Climbing noble and clerical streets bordered by palace-like bourgeois villas, I approach the Sant'Alessio Garden on the Aventine hilltop. A positive surprise: the neighboring Sant'Alessio church is open to the public, and so is the courtyard in front of it, which features a distinctly audible fountain at the wall toward the *Giardino di Sant'Alessio*, which must be entered through a gate from the street.

During my walk up the hill, I hold a small sound recorder in my hand and wear leather-padded headphones over my ears, through which I take in the amplified environment. I orient my body by way of the instant playback of my continuous recording. Because of this auditory concentration on a microphone reality that is conveyed via sound-insulating headphones, it is not until I enter the Sant'Alessio Garden itself that I realize that here, a genuine metamorphosis is taking place on this late afternoon.

The garden no longer appears silent, dark, and relatively empty as it does in Simmel's 1899 text as well as in my image-borne memories of 1976 or New Year 2017–2018. Instead, it is noisy, bright, and full of people. Perhaps a hundred children as well as many adults, who could be parents or relatives, populate the Sant'Alessio Garden. Instead of the solitary contemplation that pervades Simmel's text and my last-minute visit the previous evening, vital expressions emanate from children who are climbing the smaller orange trees or spontaneously playing football against the plastered walls of the Sant'Alessio church and courtyard.

The intensity of the children's voices accompanying their bodily action, emphasizes the auditory dimension of space, which I savor and absorb. The play taking place before my eyes and the sound invading my ears are all I sense and acknowledge as long as the children and their parents are still present *en masse* in the garden. Eventually, I decide to sit down on a bench at a certain distance from the epicenter of ball-playing, and I have my base there for several hours.

Whereas Simmel described children screaming in the streets outside and below the garden as a disturbing factor—a contradiction—I myself perceive the presence of children and parents inside the garden as a positive contribution. Is this not an unexpected suggestion of the possibility that, below the surface, a powerful human lifeworld may exist in Rome? Generally, the Aventine Hill looks noble and sacred, while tourists outnumber local residents in the streets, parks, and squares. Now, however, an urban lifeworld, which typically develops around childcare

institutions such as kindergartens and primary schools,³³ suddenly surfaces and nearly explodes in a setting where one would hardly expect this to happen. There is a public school for young children just across the street behind an ochre wall; in reality, civic institutional life is not that far away.

The contextual beauty that Simmel praised in Rome on an objective and external level as well as a mental and subjective one is now augmented by a *community* layer that enriches the somaesthetic feeling of urbanity, at least in a foreigner like me, who is visiting the Sant'Alessio Garden on a late Wednesday afternoon. In particular, the children's way of combining bodily play and high-pitched voices adds an entirely new dimension to the deep and narrow park. This place, which is a little neglected, is usually a quiet refuge for local dog-walkers or tourists on their way from central Rome to the Aventine Hill. Here, they may add a second panoramic view to the one they already had from the splendid orange garden down the street. Like Simmel in 1898, they inevitably sense the sound of the city and its traffic below the Sant'Alessio Garden along the course of the Tiber.

In this moment, however, the *Giardino di Sant'Alessio* is a public space in which the practices of playing and talking are suggestions of a vital urban culture that may, in turn, inform feelings of beauty. In fact, the somaesthetics of the young children playing and of their parents absorbed in mutual conversation are impressive, and they cannot be ignored by other visitors, local or foreign.

In retrospect, this experience in the Sant'Alessio Garden was initiated by Simmel's naming in "*Gegensatz*" of the place that he ties to the principle of contradiction in contemporary culture. Reading Simmel encouraged me to recall this particular site as well as the urban-cultural and photographic images that I have associated with it since 1976. However, an active attempt at retrieving the place itself in urban space has led me to discover a twin somaesthetic realm.

First, I practice a spatial and bodily *mimesis* of past practices to find my way back to the place itself. Along the way, my walk is enriched by elements of rephotography and sound recording. Thus the active search involving the eyes and ears of a body walking was the basis of a perceptive surprise, nearly a shock, which was released at the arrival into the Sant'Alessio Garden. In reality, this surprise or shock was informed less by my own perceptive attention than by the bodily expressions of other people. The remarkably active presence of playing children and their parents in mutual conversation profoundly affected the urban place that I, a foreign visitor, happened to share with them.

Accordingly, my individual somaesthetic *experience* was reinforced by the somaesthetic *expression* by which children and parents added a community-based dimension to a public garden and its slightly neglected physical reality. In this context, the following question arises: How may one practice an attentive analysis of place in a way that remains faithful to beauty and urbanity at the levels of both somaesthetic experience and expression?

33 Lars Gemzøe, who is an urban scholar in Copenhagen and a close colleague of Jan Gehl, the author of *Life between Buildings* (1971), once noted in passing that one discovers a whole new city when one has children, mainly because of kindergartens and schools they attend. This observation highlights the degree to which childcare institutions contribute to civic life in the contemporary city. Such institutions certainly belong to a formal and rationally managed system, as conceptualized by Jürgen Habermas in his *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1981). Simultaneously, crèches, kindergartens, schools, afternoon activity clubs, etc. are sources of a *Lebenswelt*, a communicative "lifeworld" (in hermeneutical and Habermasian terms). Non-instrumental relationships between people evolve not only at the level of children (friendships for now, sometimes forever) but also among their parents, who have many things to share in addition to the life and upbringing of their children. This welfare-induced urban lifeworld should be taken into account if one wishes to understand everyday urban culture in general; my observations below attempt to do so in Rome, and they reflect the viewpoint of a foreign visitor who happens to be present in a public park during the late afternoon along with local users.

V. Presence and Representation – Beauty and Urban Culture

Elements of a reply will be provided thanks to another visitor in Rome who, unlike Simmel, considers children the opposite of a disturbing factor. Indeed, their spontaneous play in public spaces is recognized as a source of knowledge and somaesthetic learning. I refer to the Danish architectural writer and architect Steen Eiler Rasmussen, who visited Rome in the spring of 1952 and later immortalized a small group of ball-playing schoolboys in a seminal book, *Experiencing Architecture*.³⁴ Rasmussen may allow us to formulate the particularity of my own approach to expressive urban life in a public garden of Rome two-thirds of a century later. In his book, Rasmussen describes an improvised football game on the upper stairs outside and against the apsis of Basilica Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. At a polite distance, he observes how the boys practice urban architecture and claims that these boys *experience* architecture to a degree that goes far beyond that of typical visitors who arrive and leave on tourist buses.

In Rasmussen's view, the children's play belongs to another order of perception that is different from that of tourists. Their active bodily expressions make the observing architect think that thanks to the children's game, he also experiences something essential and new. Accordingly, one may claim that a somaesthetic realm is established, which unites the children playing with their football and the foreign architect equipped with a sketch book and camera. In *Experiencing Architecture*, Rasmussen publishes two photographs of the boys playing football in front of the Santa Maria Maggiore apsis. These images and the story underlying them remain the most frequently remembered elements of the entire book, which is a modern treaty on architecture and in which somaesthetic components are foregrounded.³⁵

Recalling Rasmussen's account in *Experiencing Architecture*, I will describe the situational components of my own experience in the Sant'Alessio Garden on that afternoon and early evening. Having arrived inside the local garden on the Aventine Hill, I feel *surrounded* by myriads of children who dynamize and accelerate the space—trees, walls, grass and paths—in such a hectic and engaged way that one would not be surprised if the branches of orange trees broke under the weight of climbing girls and boys or if plaster started peeling off the façades after being hit by a football. This scenery is not only radically opposed to the meditative silence and contemplation that Simmel associates with the Sant'Alessio Garden; it also differs from the situation in which a relatively distant observation of others, such as children, is possible during Steen Eiler Rasmussen's visit to the Santa Maria Maggiore staircase on a weekday morning.

Once inside the garden, I stand in the way of various footballs that fly around not far from my headphones, recorder, and sound-innervated body. Thus, distant observation and photographic representation become problematic. So close to the children playing ball in the Sant'Alessio Garden, photography, as practiced by Rasmussen, feels risky. More importantly, however, it appears inadequate to represent the actors in the garden in photographs. The very act of photographing the children, even casually and discreetly, may neutralize the ways in which their sounds and movements affect the visitor's perceptive presence. Intuitively, at least, the very idea of taking pictures of their bodily practices appears alien to the happy *surprise of being somaesthetically present in a place of such intense somaesthetic expression*. Here I am, surrounded by life, and in the beginning, I am not even looking at it from the secure distance that would allow it to be framed as a motif.

34 Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Experiencing Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1959 [1957]), 16–18.

35 For a comparison of habit and experience in Steen Eiler Rasmussen, Danish architect, urban planner and writer, and Walter Benjamin, German philosopher and cultural critic, see Henrik Reeh, "Rumsansning mellem vane og oplevelse. Walter Benjamin og Steen Eiler Rasmussen" in *Fejder. Studier i stridens anatomi i det intellektuelle liv*, ed. Frederik Stjernfelt et al. (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanums Forlag, Københavns Universitet, 2004), 233–246.

Soon, I seek refuge in the outer part of the garden, half way to the wall overlooking the Tiber and the street below. The traffic along the river gently enters the recorded soundscape, which, later, reveals little noises that stem from the pictures taken by my reflex camera. Admittedly, during my prolonged stay in the garden, I finally do take a few pictures, but I never integrate the children playing or their parents into the motifs. Consequently, I will be unable to document my observations of play and conversation in suggestive photographs as in Rasmussen's *Experiencing Architecture*. Instead, I deliberately drop the idea of making documentary photographs, and as an alternative approach to representation, I allow the sound recording to continue.

Vision is one thing and auditory representation is another. Perspectival photography is objectifying and overly referential, while a sound recording certainly leaves objective traces, but the latter are distinctly processual and more ambiguous in their rendering of the environment. Because of the recording, the auditory presence of a perceptive body is privileged and pictorial representation is abandoned.

Sitting on my bench, I listen to life; I let time pass. Listening and life are united for about an hour and a half (according to the time indications of the sound recording). It is not until that moment that I move all the way to the wall overlooking the city, and I first attempt to rephotograph the color slide motifs I took here in December 1976. Are the children and their parents about to leave? This may progressively be the case and justify my change of occupation from meditative presence to active representation by way of photography.

Nonetheless, I do not interrupt the sound recording. The voices of some tourists at the wall occasionally become audible; in the sound recording their utterances are fully distinct despite the complex noise of the traffic below, which also reaches the ears of the person standing next to the wall, which is me. Insofar as children and parents are still around, they now operate in the background both spatially and auditorily.

Recording, arriving, hearing, standing in the way, seeing, sitting down, listening, standing up, moving, looking, and photographing: all these practices, and probably more, compose my being there in the late afternoon and early evening at the same time as the children and their parents are, but I am increasingly on my own, and I am now at a certain distance. Nevertheless, the children and their intense playing continue to support my way of being present at the site.³⁶

During my visit to the public garden, I have trouble believing that this scenery is real. The exceptional intensity of life in the park does not immediately fade, but I know that it will neither last the entire evening, nor come back every day. In this situation, however, I feel tempted to associate the lively somaesthetic co-presence in the park with an experience of urban beauty.

Certainly, the question remains regarding the possibility of talking about beauty in a society that is not fully just. The question echoes a short text by Siegfried Kracauer on Christmas markets in Berlin of 1932.³⁷ In "*Weihnachtlicher Budenzauber*" ("The Magic of the Christmas Stalls"), Kracauer concludes that however much the smooth surfaces of the rational and commercialized city are broken up and challenged by stalls and street musicians at Christmas markets, the intriguing music of a beggar playing will not sound joyful until the figures of social injustice

36 Does this temporary atmosphere correspond to a wider, shared dream of Rome, of Italy, of urban life, and of urbanity? This is a large question that one should certainly elaborate in the appropriate context.

37 Siegfried Kracauer, "Weihnachtlicher Budenzauber," published on 24 December 1932 in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, a liberal German daily, and later in his *Straßen in Berlin und anderswo*, 1964. "Hinter einem Tannenwaldbündel sitzt ein Bettler, der sich ausdrücklich als einem »Zivilblinden« bezeichnet. Er bringt auf seinem Harmonium Melodien hervor, die das Hennengegacker und die Flötenimitationen übertönen. Sie werden erst dann lustig klingen, wenn alle diese lebensgroßen Elendsfiguren klein geworden sind wie die springenden Püppchen, mit denen wir spielen." Siegfried Kracauer, *Straßen in Berlin und anderswo* (Berlin: Das Arsenal, 1987 [1964]), 32.

have been overcome.³⁸

The argument according to which urban beauty relies on social justice might be advanced vis à vis the ecstatic children and their parents in friendly conversation in the Sant'Alessio Garden, and I am inclined to interpret the very scene as *beauty informed by urban life*. However, there is one obvious difference from the situation described by Kracauer in crisis-ridden Berlin of the early 1930s. At first sight, these parents on the Aventine Hill in Rome and their children from the public school across the street do not suffer from poverty or immediate social injustice.³⁹

The relationship between Steen Eiler Rasmussen's experience on the staircase of Santa Maria Maggiore and my own in the Sant'Alessio Garden may be summarized as follows. Rasmussen observes, photographs, and identifies with boys playing ball on the staircase, expecting them to have an intense experience of urban architecture, which then intensifies his own sensation of the place. My situation, however, is different. At first, I am surrounded by the children in the Sant'Alessio Garden; I see them climbing the trees and playing football while they constantly move about and emit all sorts of cries and gestures. However, I refrain from photographing them and their somaesthetic expressivity. In turn, I withdraw to a bench on which I maintain an acoustically condensed connection to the animated public garden surrounding me before turning to the project of rephotography, which is the reason for my visit. Deciding to continue the sound recording, I maintain a somaesthetic mode of experience, which I spontaneously connect to the categories of beauty and urban culture.

Hence, my approach to the environment and the practices within it differs from Rasmussen's approach. My approach is less directly objectifying, yet I remain conscious of both the children's expressive playing and my own perceptive position, which I interpret as an experience of beauty.

VI. Beauty and Children's Happiness

Undeniably, the atmosphere in the Sant'Alessio Garden is far from the integral silence and instantaneous muteness praised by Georg Simmel in his "Gegensatz" fragment. It is also different from Steen Eiler Rasmussen's encounter with ball-playing boys on the apsis staircase of the Santa Maria Maggiore Basilica. However, the foreign visitor's experience of being present remains in close contact with Simmel's speculative lines:

That was the greatest and most wonderful [quality] of Paradise, that it offered its joys ["Freuden"] without this condition – like, in a totally weak echo ["Nachklang"], the happiness ["Glück"] of children still lives without contradiction and comparison.⁴⁰

Simmel attempts to moderate the contradiction between silence and noise, which he previously considered an eternal condition in human life. Having acknowledged that human experience is contradictory, as it takes place after the expulsion from Paradise, Simmel

38 Siegfried Kracauer was trained as an architect, but he also cultivated wider interests in philosophy and sociology, including the writings of Georg Simmel. In fact, Kracauer finished a book manuscript, probably the first monograph on Simmel, in 1919, barely one year after Simmel's death in September 1918. The book was published in its entirety in 2004. Siegfried Kracauer, "Georg Simmel. Ein Beitrag zur Deutung des geistigen Lebens unserer Zeit," in his *Werke, Band 9: Frühe Schriften aus dem Nachlaß* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2004).

39 Contemporary society in Rome still has social contradictions and shortcomings at many levels that keep reminding us of the question: Under which conditions is it possible to consider something beautiful? A reasoned answer might easily exceed the realm of aesthetics and enter that of social theory and criticism. Please note that Kracauer does not address the issue of beauty but of joy ("sie werden erst dann lustig klingen," he writes in the quote above [32]). However, the issue of joy may run parallel to that of beauty; both are related to the ethical basis and implications of aesthetic judgments. On Kracauer's text, see Henrik Reeh, *Ornaments of the Metropolis, op. cit.*, 142–144.

40 In German: "Das war das Größte und Wunderbarste des Paradieses, daß er seine Freuden ohne diese Bedingung bot – wie, im ganz schwachen Nachklang, noch das Glück der Kinder ohne Gegensatz und Vergleichung lebt." G. S. [Georg Simmel], "Gegensatz," *op. cit.*, 381.

nonetheless cultivates a certain nostalgia toward life in its original state of non-division and non-alienation. This nostalgia seems to have a possible foundation in contemporary life, which Simmel designates “children’s happiness” (“*das Glück der Kinder*”). In modernity, too, the happiness of children sometimes seems full, unreserved, and absolute: “without contradiction and comparison” (“*ohne Gegensatz und Vergleichung*”).

Indeed, Simmel’s understanding of children as representatives of happiness-beyond-contradiction was an external judgment formulated by an adult who no longer quite remembered, or recognized, the inner doubts and conflicts that pervade a child’s existence (e.g., the subjectivity that Walter Benjamin depicted in his *Berlin Childhood around 1900*).⁴¹ Sitting on a bench in the park next to playing children, however, I expect them to be inhabited by all sorts of alienating powers, and I would hardly consider their *Glück* unconditional nor absolute. To me as an observer and a stranger, the joyful presence of children and their parents nevertheless inspires a *surprised feeling of happiness* that is rare in a big city and in life in general, even on a late springtime afternoon in Rome.

In terms of age, I am no longer a child. In the Sant’Alessio Garden, I do not play like a child with a football or climb orange trees. Nonetheless, in my position as a somaesthetically present observer, I am struck by a feeling that I *hold onto*, assisted by Simmel’s formula, “*das Glück der Kinder, ohne Gegensatz und Vergleichung*” (“the happiness of children, without contradiction and comparison”). Thus, the children present in the *Giardino di Sant’Alessio* contribute to an imaginary, perhaps illusory, yet striking *feeling of happiness*.

Conditioned by the unexpected somaesthetic presence of children, the place that I now rediscover under the sign of Simmel’s naming and reading in “*Gegensatz*,” takes on a new quality. The entire atmosphere here, in that very moment, adds a particular relief to the objective features and everyday functions of the Sant’Alessio Garden. Does this place suggest metaphors of an urban-cultural paradise albeit only for a brief and noisy time?

After all, the idea of an urban-cultural paradise is at stake in the associations that the Sant’Alessio Garden evokes in me, as I am back for the third time within a few months. Even if, according to Simmel, its atmosphere of *Glück* (supported by human life around me in this place) should be only a “totally weak echo” of the Garden of Eden in the *Genesis* of the *Old Testament*, my encounter with the Sant’Alessio Garden on this particular day pursues a contextual conception of beauty like the one described in Simmel’s “*ästhetische Analyse*” of Rome, a conception of beauty that also permeates his observations in the “*Gegensatz*” fragment about the singular Sant’Alessio Garden.

However, differences remain. In mid-April 2018, the equivalent of Simmel’s urban “noise and excitement” (“*Lärm und Unruhe*”) is generated by children playing inside the garden, who effectively ascribe new meaning to this place. Far from simply disrupting a rare beauty, as in Simmel’s experience of the city beyond the garden wall, the playing children in present-day reality reinforce the vital somaesthetic dimension in my experience of a contradictory beauty in Rome. In this particular context, Rome recalls its second name, *Urbs*: the city par excellence, to which this afternoon and early evening add a particular flavor.

41 See for instance Benjamin’s chapter “Mummerehlen” (ca. 1938), in which mimesis and misunderstanding converge and allow for a distorted yet independent imagination in a young boy. Walter Benjamin, *Berliner Kindheit um neunzehnhundert*, in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. VII (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1989), 417–418.



Figure 7 “Das Glück der Kinder”? Roma VII, 2018

Just before leaving the Sant’Alessio Garden, I pay tribute to a location that so far has been invisible, while it allowed me to sense the place and to orient in it.

On this bench, I line up my tools: a magnifying glass, a sound recorder (in a small cotton bag), next to two bags containing my camera equipment, a smartphone, a water bottle, a cap, and other utensils that allow me to withstand the pressure of heat and noise in unknown environments throughout the day.

My body feels increasingly exhausted, but it is also reinvigorated by the ongoing urban exploration. In this context, the bench becomes a site of happiness—Glück—that, quite luckily, shows up, as I reach my destination: the sole place that Simmel names inside Rome, a place of silence and pleasure. To be sure, this public garden also implies contrasting experiences that stem from the view of movement and haste as well as from the bodily reverberations of noise and instability. However, thanks to their intense playing after school, the children that I come across in the Giardino di Sant’Alessio may connect us to a certain Glück, that is, to happiness and luck. Does not Simmel point out that the Glück of children is a reminiscence of unconditional pleasure in Paradise?

The bench in the photograph invites me to be present next to the garden’s playful children. After initially hearing, sensing, and seeing them so vividly thanks to their movements, I increasingly perceive them as a supportive background that animates the place in general. In the meantime, I rephotograph pictures where I first took them in 1976. More than forty years later, I bring the original slides back to the site. They are lodged in a small box on the bench next to the magnifying glass through which I call forth some of the details in the colored emulsion of the film, such as a bench similar to the one where I now sit.

Conclusion

Rome allowed Simmel to challenge the intimate link between big cities and the *blasé* attitude. Rome is a city of both difference and unity; it is a city of beauty and self-realization. However, it is also a city where delight is accompanied by cruelty as when silence encounters noise. In this way, Rome provides a cityscape for the rediscovery of aesthetics, including the elements of conflict and non-identity, which epitomize modernity and characterize many contemporary works of culture and art.

Returning to a singular topographical site—the Sant’Alessio Garden on the Aventine Hill—which Simmel named and interpreted, the author of the present text recognized many of the features that Simmel described more than a century earlier. However, by 2018, the Sant’Alessio Garden suddenly appears to be more than a secret and discreet place. On one occasion, it even becomes an irresistible illustration of Rome as a city in which everyday urban life makes an essential contribution to urban space, if not to Beauty itself, as well as to *Glück* (happiness and luck).

Instead of being reduced to a city of tourism, Rome continues to exist as *Urbs*, the city per se, as it did on the very spot once visited by Simmel, and on the day I happen to return to it. This garden brings together children, parents, citizens, and a foreign visitor—the author of the preceding pages—who absorbs everything around him by way of headphones and a sound recorder. I happen to have read Simmel recently and to have been in this park during my first visit to Rome. As a teenager, I photographed the Sant’Alessio Garden on the Aventine Hill in color slides, which have become visual echoes of an imaginary dialog with the memory of yellow lemons. My discovery of yellow lemons growing in winterly Rome suggested another way of urban living than in North-European cities such as Copenhagen in the mid-1970s. Is Rome still capable of contributing to a utopian conception of urbanity?

Well into the spring evening of 2018, the visitor, seated on his bench, considers that the time has come for a panoramic view from his temporary position in the *Giardino di Sant’Alessio*. Now, long after local family life has faded from the park, in which light is also fading, photography may finally be relevant. Stretching out his arm with a smartphone camera in his hand, he makes a slow 360-degree movement to retain a clockwise testimony of the site surrounding him. His somaesthetic experience in this place will soon end. Five minutes later, just before sunset, fourteen images are stored in the digital memory of his smartphone.

All photographs (1–7) are by the author.

Summary

Georg Simmel, a philosopher and sociologist in the Berlin of 1900, searched for a conception of anesthesia that was capable of addressing the reality of consumption, money, and metropolis. Based on Simmel’s hypothesis, according to which the *blasé attitude* (*Blasiertheit*) pervades life in big cities, one might expect the roles of aesthetics, sensory experience, and beauty to be minimal. This observation certainly applies to Simmel’s everyday environment of modernity in Northern Europe, such as in his home city of Berlin. However, modern subjects are on the move, as was Simmel during a prolonged stay in Rome in 1898, a place (*Urbs*) that invited him to reconsider the relationship between city and beauty as well as that between elements and totality in his aesthetic analysis of Rome (1898). Beauty is derived from the unity of non-beautiful elements, he claimed. An anonymously published fragment by Simmel (1899) went even further. Here,

in relating a particular experience of Rome, he revealed contrasts and fostered a principle of contradiction that inaugurates a conflictual register in the aesthetic experience of modern urban culture. Following Simmel's footsteps in Rome 120 years later, one may visit the site that Simmel visited—the Sant'Alessio Garden on the Aventine Hill—to explore and comment on it according to somaesthetic and urban-cultural guidelines. While many may expect tourism to have taken control, reality proves more complex. An urban lifeworld is unfolding and generates a surprised feeling of beauty in the foreign visitor who re-visits this site. Listening to the children's voices and sensing their playful movements in urban space thus becomes a somaesthetic experience of both beauty and city.

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