



Building a strong programme in sociological aesthetics: Helmut Staubmann's *Sociology in a New Key*

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Abstract

Helmut Staubmann's *Sociology in a New Key* develops a compelling approach to the sociologies of art and the emotions, based primarily on Talcott Parsons' Action Theory and Georg Simmel's formal sociology. This article appraises the key theoretical strategies of Staubmann's contribution, and the insights they afford, with particular reference to recent work in the 'New Sociology of Art' and the 'Strong Programme' of Jeffery Alexander and the Yale school.

Keywords Sociology of art · Sociology of the emotions · Action theory · Affect · Cultural sociology · Strong programme · Sensory sociology · Art history

Helmut Staubmann's *Sociology in a New Key* draws together the threads of a research programme which he has developed over the past thirty years. His 1993 monograph *Die Kommunikation von Gefühlen* remains the most systematic account and elaboration of the aesthetic-expressive dimension of Talcott Parsons's theory of action. This was followed by edited volumes of new contributions to action theory, and HS's publication, with Victor Lidz, of some key manuscripts from the Parsons archive, most notably, in the context of the current volume, *Actor, Situation and Normative Pattern* (Parsons, 2010). Alongside this, HS has published, with Alan Scott, a translation of Simmel's *Rembrandt* (2005), and several essays on Simmel, as well as papers on Siegfried Kracauer's *The Mass Ornament* and a collection of essays on the *Rolling Stones*. *Sociology in a New Key* brings these extremely diverse theoretical and empirical engagements into relationship with each other in new and fruitful ways, whether bringing Parsons and Adorno (an unlikely couple, one might have thought) into dialogue in their discussions of heteronomy and autonomy in the arts, or taking

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us back to the under-appreciated contributions of Jean Marie Guyau (1854–1888), whose sensory sociology has been cast in the shadows by the classic status of his slightly younger contemporary, Emile Durkheim, as one of the founders of the sociological tradition.

It is impossible in a brief essay to do justice to the full range of HS's thought, or the many implications it has for social theory in general and for many specialised fields within sociology. My brief response comprises three elements. The first is simply to sketch what I see as the most significant lines of argument which HS develops, and the theoretical choices and strategies which inform those arguments. Second, I will seek to place HS's research programme in relation to work with which it seems to me to have significant parallels and important differences, notably recent research in the sociology of art - loosely grouped in terms of what de la Fuente has described as "the new sociology of art" - and the so-called Strong Programme in cultural sociology associated with Jeffrey Alexander and his school. Lastly, I discuss some ways in which HS's programme could be developed further, particularly in relation to my own area of expertise, the history and sociology of art.

Part 1: The New Key

HS's starting point is his criticism of what he describes as the 'substantive' definitions of the 'social' in mainstream sociology, in which the social is conceived as "what distinguishes humans from animals" (p. 4) - namely meaning, and normativity. Such a definition, HS argues, has turned the roles of the body, emotions and sensory perception into theoretical blind spots for social theory. While they might be addressed, it is only in terms of their social and cultural construction, not in terms of their constitutive role in social life. Feelings, for example are analysed in terms of how they are regulated through "feeling rules" (Hochschild, 1979). Even in recent work on sensory sociologies, like Karen Cerulo's (2018) study of smells and olfaction, the sensory as such, and the active role of the sensory in its own right in shaping social interaction, falls by the wayside in the context of too exclusive a focus on the cultural meanings or semantics superimposed on smell taken as a purely biological phenomenon. HS sees the shape of such research as still too much informed by the substantive definitions of the social which were articulated by founding fathers of sociology like Durkheim and Weber in their efforts to carve out a disciplinary space for sociology - against economics, psychology and the *Geisteswissenschaften*. The old polarities of base and superstructure, *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, ideal versus material are replayed in the dualisms which continue to inform contemporary sociology both between and within programmes, whether the disjunction between action theory and systems theory in Habermas' theory of communicative action, (cultural) semantics and (biological) perception in Luhmann, or the conflation of cultural and the social (all in the last instance reducible to an economic logic) in Bourdieu's accounts of the translation of forms of capital across social fields.

HS's theoretical strategy is characterised by a search for conceptual differentiation and the replacement of substantive concepts by analytical ones, an approach modelled on the formal sociology of Georg Simmel (with its distinction between the

forms and the contents of interaction) and the action theory of Talcott Parsons, with its insistently interdisciplinary orientation, synthesising sociology, psychology and cultural theory in his general theory of action. The relationship between Parsons's action theory and Simmel's formal sociology has been the subject of much discussion in recent years, in particular concerning Parsons's ultimate decision to exclude Simmel from consideration amongst the key thinkers informing his famous convergence thesis in *The Structure of Social Action* (Parsons, 1937). Since the publication of two substantial essays written by Parsons immediately before and after the publication of *Structure* (Parsons, 1998a, b), there has been significant debate about the reasons for the exclusion of Simmel from *Structure*, and some of its entailments (Buxton, 1998; Nichols, 2001). In *Sociology in a New Key*, HS uses a renewed dialogue between Parsons and Simmel to deepen the sensory underpinnings of action theory and to develop certain aspects of the intrinsic logic of action theory more consistently than Parsons himself always did. He thereby seeks to transcend the normative reductionism which characterizes some moments in Parsons's work and has long been a focus of criticism in various post-Parsonian strands of social theory. This effectively positions *Sociology in a New Key* as a radical alternative to what are often seen to be fundamentally opposed theoretical traditions, namely Bourdieu's rationalistic and reductive programme, focussing on actors maximising diverse forms of capital whilst competing in institutional fields, and the 'strong programme' in cultural sociology, led by Jeffrey Alexander, with its emphasis on meaning, derived from Max Weber's interpretive sociology, reinforced with the theoretical resources of French structuralist theory and a strongly cognitive strand of phenomenology, represented by Alfred Schutz and the ethnomethodology of Harold Garfinkel and his successors.

HS lays out the fundamental significance of the senses to social action through a return to some of Simmel's early essays. He starts from Simmel's excursus in his *Soziologie* on the sociology of the senses, which explores the ways specific sense organs, above all the eye, shape social interaction. Mutual eye contact establishes reciprocity, in place of the mere observation of another. Furtive glances can orchestrate a conspiratorial relationship, whilst shame is often linked to gaze aversion, concealing one's confusion from the person with whom one is interacting, and in the process articulating a rupture in the relationship. Sense impressions afford not only cognitive knowledge of another (comprehension), but also affective appreciation (whether positive or negative): in addition to the contents they communicate, the sounds of speakers' voices also have different qualities, which "quite as much as the appearance of a person, may be immediately either attractive or repulsive" (Simmel, 1969, 357). HS draws on Simmel's essay "Sociological aesthetics" to explore how the aesthetic reaches beyond dyadic sensory interactions into broader social structures, contrasting the symmetry of military and despotic social formations - in which the elements (people) "are defined by the totality of the form, with little room for developing an identity and dynamics of their own" (p. 19) - with the irregularity and diversity of liberal societies with their valorisation of individual difference. Social structures have formal aesthetic properties, Simmel suggests; indeed, without the senses and aesthetics there would be no society. Consequently, HS argues, the idea of "sensory orientation" needs to be developed as a key concept, and the sensorial mediation of action as a key analytic moment, in our understanding of social and cultural processes, an

essential addition to the meaningful orientation, and cultural mediation, inherited from Weber and the phenomenological tradition.

While Simmel's sociology of the senses offers microsociological foundations for HS's sociology in a new key, it is to Parsons that he turns to elaborate the broader significance of Simmel's insights. HS explores how the expressive-aesthetic dimension of human action emerges in the interstices between instrumental and normative traditions of sociological thought which Parsons sought to synthesize. HS suggests the expressive-aesthetic dimension functioned as kind of constant irritant which played a central role in driving forward the development of action theory, without its status ever being fully satisfactorily resolved – notwithstanding that Parsons's relentless drive for analytic abstraction and interdisciplinary synthesis brought him to a much deeper, and theoretically richer, account of aesthetic-expressive action than competing theories. Towards the end of *The Structure of Social Action*, Parsons (1937, 678) addressed the phenomenon of taste as a component of action that looked normative but involved no external sanctions if its rules were infringed. Similarly, ornamentation, whether in Maori decorative bird nets or Catholic performances of the Mass, seemed anomalous in the terms of the voluntaristic theory of action Parsons was developing, since it could be explained neither in instrumental nor evaluative-normative terms (HS 2022, 31–2). In subsequent work, Parsons attributed an increasingly significant role to the expressive-aesthetic dimension of human action, although without ever fully satisfactorily resolving its relation to normativity. In his structural-functional phase, Parsons developed the idea of an affective-cathetic dimension of human action, alongside the instrumental and the normative. Central to this was Parsons's Durkheim-Freud synthesis, and his articulation of the development of the mother-child relationship as a model for the generalisation of the mutual cathexis of partners in social relationships, and the notion of a reward system (involving attitudes such as approval, esteem and love) alongside money and power as bases of social stratification. A cluster of concepts – expressive culture, expressive interests, expressive orientation, affective competence – provided the basis for a systematic exploration of not only the interweaving of the expressive-aesthetic dimensions of action with the instrumental and the normative, but also for sketching the differentiation of autonomous institutions of art as significant evolutionary moment in the development of modern societies, discussed first in *The Social System* (1951) and elaborated in relation to the idea of an 'expressive complex' and the 'expressive revolution' as a counterpart to the study of the 'cognitive complex' and the 'educational revolution' in *The American University* (Parsons & Platt, 1973).

The interpretive insight and the explanatory power that *Sociology in a New Key* might offer is illustrated in a number of brief case studies, sketched out at various points in HS's book, ranging from discussions of Rembrandt's portraiture to the sociological significance of Bach's *Well-tempered Klavier* (as conceptualised by Adorno, Bourdieu and HS himself). Perhaps the most indicative exemplification of the empirical potential of sociology in the new key is HS's own account of the English rock-legends, the Rolling Stones (pp. 71–85). In this case study, HS demonstrates what sociology in a new key can accomplish, refusing the formalism of musicology on the one side and the reductionism of much sociology of culture (above all the production of culture perspective and Bourdieu's field theory) on the other. HS describes the

social and cultural processes through which the characteristic musical style of the Stones was formed: encounters with African-American blues music in Chicago, creatively redesigned through openness to other traditions, such as Indian and Arabian music, in the context of the “accelerated social differentiation and global interlacing” characteristic of the post World War II period. The result was a music with an extraordinarily high level of energy, and a performance style which embodied a fundamental reevaluation of the body and the senses, encapsulated in the transgressive androgynous persona projected by Mick Jagger. The entire expressive style of the Stones – music, lyrics, dance – resonated with emerging youth culture and afforded the energy that motivated and permitted the breaks with the traditional gender identities and sexual mores of their parents’ generation, breaks which characterised the youth movements of the sixties and seventies. The analysis is rich, far beyond what can easily be summarised in a brief review, but has a number of unusual features by comparison with most work in cultural sociology and the sociology of art: the ability to move all the way from specific analysis of cultural forms (music, lyrics), through the social contexts and interactions within which such forms were elaborated (whether concert performances, or changes in the character of the music industry), through to their impact on broader social practices (gender roles and identities, attitudes to the body, sexual practices), in the context of broader macrostructural social transformations (accelerated social differentiation, globalisation, new mass media technologies). Drawing on the insights intimated above all in the work of Simmel and Parsons, but never fully realised in their research programmes, HS offers a model of analysis which, whilst acknowledging the various contexts, cultural and social, within which the music of the Rolling Stones was realised, does not reduce it to those contexts, but on the contrary shows how that music articulates elements from those contexts into something which emerges with its own expressive-aesthetic agency, with determinate effects on those contexts from which it has emerged, as part of an infinite and recursive process of mutual constitution and transformation.

Part 2: The New Key the ‘New Sociology of Art’ and the ‘Strong Programme’ in cultural sociology

How does *Sociology in a New Key* compare with competing programmes in cultural sociology and the sociology of art? In many respects, HS’s approach parallels that of what Eduardo de la Fuente (2007, 2011) has called “the new sociology of art”. Like Staubmann, the scholars who Fuente classifies as practitioners of the new sociology of art criticise the reductionism of much mainstream sociology of art, whether the production of culture perspective of Howard Becker with its strong opposition between social organizational and aesthetic approaches (Becker, 1982, xi) or Pierre Bourdieu’s ‘science of art’ (1993), with its aspiration to replace the claims of art history and aesthetics with the underlying ‘social truth’ that the motivations for social practices such as visiting art museums are simply euphemised transformations of more fundamental economic and political dispositions involving the accumulation of cultural capital by means of which, through strategies of conversion into the underlying economic base, social hierarchy can be transmitted across generations (Bourdieu, 1984). New sociologists of art have taken the social agency of art more seriously,

seeing art as something more than merely the end product of social determinants or the repeater of more fundamental social processes such as class reproduction.

As in HS work, this shift of focus has been closely tied up with a rethinking of exactly what is meant by ‘the social’, and a concern to develop less reductive or essentialist concepts of both art and society. Halley (2023), for example, has criticised what he sees as reified concepts of society and social structure as fixed entities, preferring, with Bruno Latour to see them “always in the process of being assembled and reassembled” (p. 70), and exploring the agency of avant-garde art in that remaking. He draws on critical theory in the tradition of the Frankfurt School to develop an account of Dadaism, in which practices such as collage in pictorial art or montage in film function as “dereifying practices”. Such practices shock the receiving subjectivity into crisis, releasing the viewer from the hegemonic control of the formulaic productions of the culture industry (Halley, 2023, 74–6), and thus having an emancipatory function in intriguing respects parallel to that claimed by HS for the rock revolution of the Rolling Stones.

Similarly, Heinich (2012a, 189) has trenchantly criticised social studies of art which are conceptualised in terms of the relationship between ‘art and society’, “an absurd formulation that implies art is something which *a priori* stands outside of society”. Rather, than focussing on how social structures determine art, she draws on Actor Network Theory and pragmatism to study the various mediating elements – practices, institutions, individuals, material supports – through which the objects which come to be esteemed as ‘artistic’ are produced, disseminated, and received. A brilliant early study mapped the transformation of Van Gogh from at best a rather miserable ‘also ran’ in the late nineteenth century art world to the mythologised saint of painting who is the focus of artistic pilgrimage today (Heinich, 1996). More recently Heinich’s focus has been on the field of contemporary art (Heinich, 2014). She talks about her contributions as being “sociology from art” rather than “sociology of art” and is particularly critical of any kind of sociological aesthetics (Heinich, 2005, 13–14). She chooses to bracket off all direct engagement with the objects themselves and their artistic agency (left to critics and art historians), in favour of mapping the intermediaries, or ‘regimes of valorization’, through which objects as apparently unpromising as “a few old posters stored in a studio”, are transformed – “by framers, transporters, insurers, restorers... attendants, lecturers”, using objects such as “picture rails, spot lights, gloves, thermometers, labels” - into consecrated ‘artworks’ (2012b, 697–8). Illuminating though these studies are, however, strikingly missing is very much sense of the entailments of such artefacts achieving the status of Art for the social world beyond the rather restricted confines of the autonomous field represented by the world of Contemporary Art. Heinich’s studies trade on our modern taken for granted concept of ‘Art’ – definition of an object as ‘Art’ being one of the stakes played for in the field of contemporary Art – rather than developing any more analytic concept, like that of art as ‘expressive symbolism’, taken by HS from Talcott Parsons’s action theory, in which the modern conception of ‘Art’, along with the relatively autonomous field with which it is associated, can be seen as simply one institutionalisation of a strand of sociocultural practice – namely the expressive aesthetic. For HS, as for Parsons, aesthetic-expressive action is intrinsic to the human condition and, whilst it can be institutionalised in an unlimited variety of ways, functions

in comparable ways across those diverse institutionalisations, namely shaping the cultural articulation and social distribution of affect in systems of social relationships.

Like that of Heinich, Antoine Hennion's work is very much indebted to pragmatism and Actor Network Theory, although in practice it goes in a rather different direction than that of Heinich, seeking to be more "object friendly" (2016, 290), and to specify the character of aesthetic experience, and its constitutive role in many domains of social and cultural life. Hennion addresses the enjoyment of objects – the love of art, music or wine, for example – which are reduced to evaluative discourse in Heinich (idealist) or the products of external social determinants (class, education) in Bourdieu (reductionist). He shows how the cultural object itself gives rise to pleasure not self-sufficiently, as in formalist art history or musicology, but as the result of material devices and corporeal practices that articulate the relationship between the person of taste and the object of their pleasure. Central to this endeavour is his use of the concept of 'attachments', borrowed from the perceptual psychologist J.J. Gibson, in order to split the opposition between internalist analysis of the musicologists and art historians and the external analysis of most cultural sociology. Hennion's focus, like Heinich's, is on 'intermediaries', but ones which allow the amateur to grasp the sensuous affordances of the object in question, and thus derive pleasure from it: correctly shaped glasses, combined with the technique of swirling the glass to aerate the wine, and release its bouquet, before allowing a sip of the precious fluid to play over the tongue, all accompanied by the appropriate critical discourse, 'smooth texture, hints of cinnamon', (versus the casual pub drinker, knocking back a glass of plonk). Such "formats and procedures" have the "capacity to transform sensibilities and create new ones" (2005, 132), across a wide range of cultural domains. The sensory and emotional engagement with Bach's Saint Matthew Passion in a church has a very specific character: as part of an act of worship, framed by the ritual calendar, liturgy and the focalisations articulated by the priest, drawing our attention to the theological meanings of the Mass, all in the context of further religiously focussed art works, paintings, sculptures and the like. The character of engagement with the performance of the same mass in a concert hall is very different, on account of the different institutional context and the material and other intermediaries that go with it: the acoustics of the building, the design of the auditorium, and concert etiquette facilitate a more purely musical immersion in the performance, perhaps focussed and enhanced by programme notes, facilitating a critical musicologically informed engagement. Listening to the Matthew Passion as recordings at home, on the hifi, permits listening without the disturbances of church or concert hall, perhaps repeating and comparing different renditions of the same aria by different performers in different recordings. Each of these modalities of listening facilitates a different kind of engagement with the musical affordances of the Matthew Passion, and allows the music to act on the listener in a different way, whether intensifying involvement in religious culture (as a devotee of Jesus), giving oneself to the music as such in the concert hall (as a devotee of Bach), or coming to appreciate the specific qualities brought to the music by an individual singer or conductor, as a fan of Karl Böhm or detractor of Neville Martinson (Hennion, 1997). Hennion's general approach has significant affinities with HS's sociology of music, whether his discussion of Bach's *Well-Tempered Klavier* or his account of the Rolling Stones. Both advocate a sociology of music in which its sen-

sory and affective character takes center stage, and music has a specific social agency. HS's analysis engages in less detail with the material supports for what Hennion refers to as the varying "modalities of listening" (2008, 41) but takes much further the transformative effects that music might have on its listeners in these contexts, and how these ramify out into a broader social world, changing the ways in which young men and women sensuously and affectively interacted with each other, and simultaneously transforming (in some degree) traditional gendered roles and hierarchies.

Also close to HS's insistence on a *sensory* cultural sociology, are the projects of Robert Witkin and Tia de Nora, ultimately colleagues at University of Exeter, but approaching the question of the agency of art from rather different directions, respectively macro- and micro-sociological. Like HS, Robert Witkin, in his *Art and Social Structure* (1995) puts sensory experience and the body centre stage, seeking to integrate the style analysis of German idealist tradition (Alois Riegl) with an evolutionary Durkheimian account of structural differentiation, mediated through the perceptual psychology of J.J. Gibson and the cognitive psychology of Jean Piaget. He sees transformations in aesthetics and artistic style as central to the creation of modernity, with the cognitive operations implied on the parts of both artist and viewer in the production and reception of the art of Cezanne and his successors entailing a level of reflexivity equivalent to that involved in modern social organisation: such art, which explores "seeing as such, the constitutive processes through which sensuous and perceptual relations are made" (79) provides what Witkin regards as the semiotically necessary means for the functionally adequate sensuous thinking through of the reflexive character of modern social relations.

Just as HS pushes for more analytic, less concrete, conceptions of 'art' and 'society', Tia de Nora (2000, 2003, 2005) rejects both the formalism of musicology and the implicit reductionism of the sociology of music, criticising the way in which both "perpetuate a notion of music and society as separate entities" (2003, 151). Instead, she advocates a programme of following music 'in action', in which embodiment and emotion are conceptualised as central aspects of music's agency, and aesthetic and social factors are treated as mutually constitutive (2005, 147-9). De Nora (2000) develops her approach through a series of ethnographic studies of the ways in which music shapes interaction in everyday life settings. From the dynamic rhythms for aerobic sessions, to the classical music in upmarket wine-stores, or the slow dance ending an evening disco, music functions, through the body, to "recalibrate" actors as "emotional beings" (2005, 154) and thus shape patterns of social interaction. Like HS, De Nora gives a particularly strong emphasis to the ways in which, in such social settings, the properties of music – tone, rhythm, volume, pitch etc. – have an intrinsic agency as "a medium against which the body comes to be organised in terms of its own physical and temporal organisation... aligned and entrained with the physical patterns the music profiles" (2000, 124). Although articulated with the social practices performed in such settings, music is not reducible to language based semiotics in terms of which it might be decoded as some kind of discursive message.

These important contributions are travelling in very much the same direction as HS's research programme, though apparently with rather limited mutual awareness. It would be interesting to know what they make of each other. For my own part, I would see Tia De Nora's work as an exceptionally rich empirical exemplification

of the kinds of arguments made by HS, but lacking the theoretical scope, coming from action theory, which enables the easy movement from microsociology of musical performance to broad macrosocial societal transformations exemplified in HS's account of the Rolling Stones. Robert Witkin's work engages seriously with stylistic transformations of art from the earliest human civilisations through to modernity, but his reliance on the cognitive psychology of Piaget leaves no place for the affective dimension which comes through so strongly from the Freud-Durkheim synthesis which informs the tradition of action theory, elaborated by HS. Correspondingly, Witkin's account of art has a strongly rationalist character, and it is difficult to see what independent agency the sensuous thinking through involved in art has from that of other cultural systems, such as law or even sociology itself, which also are concerned to think through and thus participate in the reproduction and transformation of modern reflexive social relations.

Another strand of theorising in cultural sociology which HS's work should be placed in relationship to is the so-called 'strong programme' associated with Jeffrey Alexander and the Yale Center for Cultural Sociology. The 'strong programme' is particularly pertinent to HS's project because it positions itself as a "genuinely post-Parsonian cultural sociology" (Smith, 1998, 3; Alexander and Smith 2003, 16), in which Alexander and his followers distance themselves from the neofunctionalist programme with which he was so strongly associated earlier in his career. The approach draws heavily on Durkheimian sociology, embracing the resources of "European structuralist and post-structuralist thought to address meaning" and strengthened through "a synthesis of an American pragmatist tradition that emphasized individual experience and local contexts and a German phenomenological tradition which understood meaningfulness primarily in cognitive, not evaluative terms" (Smith, 1998, 3–5). The strong programme has given rise to a wealth of significant and influential studies in cultural sociology, on binary codes and the discourses of civil society, the centrality of narrative to political discourse and action, and cultural traumas such as slavery, genocide and child abuse.

These achievements are duly celebrated in Alexander and Smith (2018) 'The strong programme in cultural sociology: meaning first'. But as the last two words of the title suggest, in certain respects the strong programme seems too easily to revert to the radical and concrete opposition between the meaningful and the material, rather than the seeing these always as analytic dimensions as HS, building on Parsons, argues. Alexander and Smith (2018, 13) "insist that the deepest foundations of social life are ideal, not material". As HS would predict, this gives rise to particular difficulties when exploring art and aesthetics. Jeffrey Alexander's development of a theory of 'iconic consciousness', for example is consistently formulated in idealist terms, in part because he imposes a Saussurean structuralist account of signification on visual and material culture, rejecting Peirce's more multidimensional account of iconicity, indexicality and symbolicity (Alexander, 2008, 12–13). Consequently, the agency of visual art is effaced in favour of what for Alexander is the really real, namely the discursive and moral meanings that lie behind the surface forms, "cultural meanings encased inside aesthetically shaped material shells" (Alexander, 2020, 383). In so far as art has agency, it comes, following Durkheim's sociology of religion, from the religious charge attached to the polarities of the sacred and the profane, and the moral

codes which these inform. Elaborating on Roland Barthes' analysis of the filmic face of Greta Garbo, Alexander (2010, 324) suggests "behind the aesthetic structure of Garbo-surface there is the moral structure of Garbo-depth. The Garbo-icon is a sign, consisting of signifier and signified. 'Garbo' stands not only for beauty but for the sacred. It/she has a religious significance, committing us to moral ideals".

Although much reference is made to the ways in which affect might be mobilised by surface forms, exactly where affect and emotions come from is left unexplained (a classic 'residual category' in Parsons's sense). In the strong-programmers' handbook for material culture studies (cf. Alexander and Smith 2018, 18), Woodward (2007, 137–40) asks how we can move beyond "meaning centered" approaches to objects, focussed on "communication" to a framework of analysis that can also address "motivations, drives and attachments". His answer is to introduce approaches "recently charted by sociologically oriented psychoanalytic theorist Nancy Chodorow (1999, 2004)", exploring how "people create and experience social processes and cultural meanings psychodynamically – in unconscious, affect-laden, non-linguistic, immediately felt images and fantasies" (Chodorow, 2004, 26). It is worth bearing in mind that this approach was developed as early as the 1970's, in Chodorow's (1978) *The Reproduction of Mothering*, in which Talcott Parsons's synthesis of Freudian psychoanalysis and sociological theory is extensively acknowledged as one of the key starting points and foundations for Chodorow's own work, radically revised, of course, in the context of contemporary feminist scholarship. In trying to positively theorise affect, and its sensory mediation in social relations, the strong programme ends up reinventing an action theoretic wheel. In developing a sociological aesthetics, we may do better to follow HS and return to more limpid original sources rather than thrashing about in the conceptually muddied waters downstream, offered by the strong programme's 'theory of iconic consciousness'.

Part 3: Variations on the *New Key*

The strengths of HS's book lie in its demonstration of the significance of the roles that the sensory and the aesthetic play in social interaction, in particular in the affective grounding of social relationships from childhood socialisation onwards. An extremely coherent and compelling theoretical framework is developed, above all on the basis of Parsons and Simmel, for the relative autonomy of the expressive-aesthetic dimension of action, and its irreducibility either to supposedly more fundamental dimensions of social structure (Bourdieu on stratification, capital conversion) or to systems of semantic meaning, understood primarily in terms of language, as in the 'strong programme', the phenomenological tradition, or the work of Luhmann, largely inherited from Max Weber.

What I was left less clear about was exactly the shape of formal analysis of aesthetic-expressive culture that HS would advocate. Although he offers a number of case studies which imply or involve such analysis, he is also somewhat ambivalent about them. Kracauer's analysis of the geometrical style of wrought iron ornamental latticework in seventeenth to nineteenth century Germany informed his later account of ornament in mass culture, enriched with influences from Husserl's phenomenology, and seeking to comprehend the inner logic of style developments. HS criticises

Kracauer for ultimately failing to rise beyond the dualism of the ideal and the material (51–60). Although HS's own case study of the Rolling Stones is clearly musically informed, the emphasis is placed on the articulation of the Rolling Stones' music and performance with transformations in contemporary culture and social structure, "going outward to society and culture", rather than "inward to the music of the Rolling Stones as an object for musicology" (73). I wonder whether, in practice, this repeats exactly the kinds of dualisms of which HS is so critical elsewhere.

Perhaps the strongest instance of the analysis of aesthetic-expressive culture which HS offers is Simmel's essay on Rembrandt (106–12). Simmel's analysis engages very closely with the specific aesthetic-expressive forms characteristic of Rembrandt's painting, and one can see why HS finds so much to admire here: the brilliant analysis of the changing role of the gaze in portraits of old age; the notion of the creative process of a work of art, unfolding like a germ with an intrinsic logic related to the materiality of the medium, rather than the rationalistic account of the concretisation of a preconceived idea or meaning; the richness of Simmel's critical engagement with Rembrandt's painterly technique and the ways in which the aesthetic forms realised through such technique orient the viewer towards the subject matter. But Simmel's *Rembrandt* also manifests the increasingly strong philosophical and normative orientation of his later work, sometimes at the expense of sociological insight. The differences between Renaissance portraiture (Raphael, Titian) and that of Rembrandt is characterized as the expression of two radically different views of life, the one rational and mechanical, the other organic, grasping the human being as a whole. The whole critical framework is set up to favour the latter – as part of Simmel's criticism of what he sees as undesirable aspects of modern life – at the expense of any sympathetic engagement with the former, or any attempt to make sense of them in their own social and cultural context, except as negative exemplars to contrast with the great art of Simmel's hero, Rembrandt (Simmel, 2005, 61–101, esp. 81–91).

Perhaps an alternative basis for sociological analysis integrating systematic formal analysis of aesthetic-expressive culture could be developed by returning to sources on which Simmel himself was partly dependent. Although he does not specifically reference him, it is hard to believe that Simmel was not aware of and influenced by the Viennese art historian Alois Riegl's classic study *The Group Portraiture of Holland* (1999; o.v. 1902). Like Simmel's, Riegl's work was also deeply influenced by Dilthey and *Lebensphilosophie* and is characterised by the holistic aesthetic perception, the interest in empathy, and a germinal rather than a rationalist model of creative process (the notorious but not always well understood concept of *Kunstwollen*). Riegl's analysis lacks the strongly normative character of Simmel's, and develops a much more differentiated set of critical categories. One result of this is that he is better able to recognise the ways in which some Dutch group portraits, including Rembrandt's *Nightwatch*, integrate what Simmel sees as radically antithetical traditions (Italian classicism and Dutch realism) and to explain the social circumstances (the changing social organization of corporations of civic guards) which allow us to make sense of this transformation (Riegl, 1999, 140–1, 210–11) and to see the role played by the commissioning and display of such art in the affective construction of new solidarities.

If we were to follow this genealogy, in place of Kracauer we might look towards the art history of Heinrich Wölfflin (much admired by Weber – Hart, 2012) and the Vienna School – above all Otto Pacht and Karl Sedelmayr – who sought to give art historical analysis a rigorous foundation in the Gestalt psychology of Max Wertheimer and Franz Koffka (Verstegen, 2012). We might also wish to revisit the sociology of Karl Mannheim, also influenced by Gestalt psychology and integrating Riegl’s theory of style into a general sociology of culture, most notably in his study “Conservative Thought” (discussed Tanner, 2009). This tradition of thought remained lively up till the 1960s, in particular in the work of Rudolf Arnheim (1904–2007), the psychologist of art, but it fell into disfavour with the rise of structuralist and post-structuralist models of cultural analysis, inspired by Saussure’s model of the radically arbitrary and conventional character of the linguistic sign. Recent years have seen a revival of this tradition, partly arising from a dissatisfaction with structuralist models in art history, partly as a result of the confirmation of some of the findings of Gestalt psychology – for example the primacy of aesthetic-expressive wholes, isomorphism between dynamic forces in perceived objects and the structure of the observer’s psychic response - in recent work in neuro-aesthetics, notwithstanding the often very reductionistic agenda of the latter (Kesner, 2014; Freedberg and Gallese 2007). It is not easy to see how this could be integrated into the Strong Programme of the Yale School, with its emphasis on discursive meaning and structuralist models of signification, but it does seem to have a remarkable, partly genealogical, affinity with the action theoretic programme in sociological aesthetics developed in HS in *Sociology in a New Key*.

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