

Simmel as a "Hidden King"? On his relations to Egon Friedell and Max Raphael

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Simmel as a "Hidden King"? On his relations to Egon Friedell and Max Raphael. *Egon Friedell, a Karl Kraus disciple, who wrote his famous "Kulturgeschichte der Neuzeit" (1927pp.), DOES what Simmel described as the 'hidden King': every epoch, every era - says Friedell - has its specific idea, concept, fashion, even furniture style. He tries to expose this from late Middle Ages up to World War I, with a enormous knowledge, but he doesn't care about empirical validation, just evidence (like Simmel): instead of having no thesis, he prefers to put out even false ones (like, sometimes, Simmel, too). He read Simmel, but found him, strange enough, as "hard to understand". The other case is Max Raphael, art historian and, like Bloch, a Simmel student. Simmel, e.g., managed that he could get in contact with Rodin. Raphael began in "From Monet to Picasso", a dissertation Wölfflin refused because being focused on contemporary art, to demand an "absolute Gestaltung" (total creation) from any particular piece of art. He obviously learned this 'hidden King' from Simmel's "Rembrandt" and overexaggerates it: modern art yet fails, says Raphael, to execute that. Later on, he switched over to Communism, but one still can show that underneath his concept of 'empirical art history' Simmel's ideas on art themselves wound up as a 'hidden King'.*

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Time is flying, so allow me just a loose-coupled meditation on an influence research topic. Jürgen Habermas is right when he states that Simmel's effects are wide-spreaded but in most cases anonymous (Habermas, 1991, p. 161), and indeed, pre-World War I art history, *Jugendstil*, philosophy of life etc. are nearly 'infected' by Simmel (cf. Meyer, 2017b).

The *Imago* editors have found the strange and yet undetected concept of the "Hidden King" (which itself is rather hidden in the 1918 essay "The Conflict of Modern Culture") and asked contributors from various disciplines to check out its explanatory potential: In every great, distinguished cultural epoch, one can find a central notion which not only emanates spiritual movements but attracts them, too; may this era has an general conscience of that notion or future observers use to recognise it as the ideal focus for these movements in all their meanings. Naturally, each such central notion is subject to countless alternations, disguises, and oppositions; but with all that, it always stays the 'hidden king' of its epoch"

(GSG 16, p. 186).¹ In fact, the “hidden kings” identified by Simmel are extremely generalized and such are the eras related to them: For ancient Greece he mentions “being”, for the Middle Ages it is “God”, early modern times move from “natural law” to “nature” itself, idealism and romanticism are centered around “I” (by the way, spirit, *Geist* would fit much better), which leads to “society” in 19th century – up to contemporary discourses on life” (ibid., p. 187f.). I am in doubt if, in this case of the “philosopher's license for very global assertions” (Marquard, 1994, p. 71), Simmel actually has proposed a more convincing framework for understanding history and society than Wilhelm Dilthey did with his late “Weltanschauungstypologie”, meant as a replacement for teleological oriented philosophy of history that stems from dominant idealistic traditions (cf. Meyer, 2017a, p. 86ff.; Marquard, 1973, p. 109ff.). So, stepping out via the emergency exit, let me try to apply Simmel *himself* as a “Hidden King” who brings into shape notable oeuvres from younger scholars and intellectuals. First candidate is Egon Friedell, the Austrian journalist, philosopher, actor/comedian and author of the monumental *Culture History of Modern Times* (1927-1931), the second is Max Raphael, a former Heinrich Wölfflin's and Simmel's disciple at Berlin who, in his mature years, tried to outline a materialistic art history.

As far as we know, Friedell never met Simmel personally and at a first glimpse, his references to the latter seem not very encouraging. The *Philosophy of Money* is “thoughtful, but regrettable hard to read” (Friedell, 1989, p. 1036) – written by somebody who made his Ph.D in 1904 with a book on *Novalis as Philosopher!* Later on, Friedell accepts Simmel's warning that none of the great prophetic ideas in history have worked like they were initially intended – but without their genius, these ideas wouldn't have come up at all (ibid., p. 1271).

In a letter to Paul Ernst from January 14, 1910, Simmel states that he is not keen for antique and Renaissance art, but prefers Gothic style and Rembrandt (GSG 22, p. 774). As a first clue for Friedell's presumed in-depth reading of Simmel, one should remember that in Simmel's *Rembrandt* there is not a single word to be found about the dutch painter's biography, his social relations and historical context, a fact that Beat Wyss, although a great Simmel fan, emphasizes

¹Simmel quotations are from Georg Simmel, *Gesamtausgabe* (GSG), ed. by Otthein Rammstedt, 24 vols., Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1989-2015. „GSG 10: 56“, e.g., means vol. 10, page 56. All translations by me.

critically (Wyss, 1985, p. XXIV). And, in my opinion not accidentally, Friedell presents Rembrandt as an enigma, as the era's "hidden king": "With Shakespeare, he shares anonymity because he vanishes completely behind his life-work" (Friedell, 1989, p. 445). The art of Rembrandt's last period lies beyond "so rude and banal labels like realism and idealism", these pictures as "mysterious creations" dissolve themselves "completely into transcendency [...] no more of this earth, but beyond human capacity" (ivi, p. 446).

So especially the Baroque era prominently allows to regard Friedell applying Simmel's idea of a "hidden king". Devoting 250 pages to it, Friedell obviously admires Baroque the same way than Simmel (ibid., p. 469).² Beside he uses a subdivision of incubation, blossom and decline of eras borrowed from an ancient tradition Herder made popular again in German discourse, Friedell is not short of definition: When rationalism appears as modern times's main trend, Baroque is the early insight that mankind is not capable to live it consequently. Baroque has "aesthetized the whole existence while living it as a play, has tried to overthrow reign under the law of pure logic, has dissolved reality in a dream and conceived it as *theatrum Dei*" (ivi., p. 551). However, Baroque does not move backwards to irrationalism (religion, myth etc. - "one begins to pray and to yawn at once", ivi., p. 513) but offers "a clever therapy" (ivi., p. 465). "Entzauberung" (Max Weber) is irreversible yet, but exactly this paves the way for "probably the one and only triumph of artificiality" in history (ivi., p. 466). Not only theatre and opera, the era's leading art but *every* domain of the life-world, even nature is subject of style, performance, *staging*, because "it is all just theatre" (ivi., p. 467). This way, it is easy to see that Friedell's "hidden king" of the epoch is not just, as a kind of concordate between fact and fiction, duty and spare-time fun, metaphysical and dualistic at well. Research (Wisemann, 1981) has underlined that Friedell, with one of the most common *topoi* of Western culture (cf. Link 1981; Quiring 2013), regards the entire history as a play. Not very original at first sight, Friedell takes the topos seriously, his presentation of the Baroque era *is* the "hidden king", qualifying as the core of his whole enterprise. Not enough, within

²'Gothic' lacks in Friedell's book because it starts – very unusual! – with the Great Plague as the initial for modern times, but he states an analogy between Gothic and Baroque style as both derived from „theatre“, Friedell, 1989: 466.

this “hidden king”, there is another hidden, but key *sentence* for the entire disposition: “Even this œuvre just simulates a history of culture, in fact, it is something completely different” (ivi., p. 482). From a distance, it seems totally clear that Friedell's investigations are about phenomenological metaphysics of human nature, not more or less. Culture history is just the fancy-dress for his basic interest.

Comparable, too, is Simmel's and Friedell's working style. Obviously, both write in an essayistic manner, personal, not 'scientific', and without any references. Max Weber's famous, then unpublished review fragment on the *Philosophy of Money* found it highly inspiring, but thoroughly non-academic, which drove him nearly mad: method and form of presentation must be refused (Weber, 1991, p. 9). Similar to Simmel, who always sheds light on 'both sides' of phenomena, individualism and society, publicity and secrecy of social relations, “tragedy of culture” and modern freedom, Friedell is sometimes described as an dualistic thinker (Innerhofer, 1990: 45). After 1900, Simmel begins to compile his books partially from already published texts, e.g. *Sociology* from 1908 reveals the most intricate, yet not fully examined process of bricolage and collage: the book consists of layers of re-written, altered, shortened and expanded passages, linked or even intertwined with original, but former texts and long new sequences (cf. GSG 11, p. 877ff.).

And so did Friedell, who, like Simmel, had to gain a living from publishing. In 'Culture History of the Modern Ages', Friedell reveals as a master of recycling his former works. The author already recycled his texts working as a feuilletonist: he sold the same article to several journals and he even managed, after a few years, to sell the same article to the same journal, again (Innerhofer, 1990, p. 47).³

Mostly the portraits of famous poets, artists, politicians and scientists in *Culture History of the Modern Ages* stem from formerly published essays, now integrated into the 'master narrative'. More similarities to Simmel: like him, who destroyed his manuscripts and (in his surviving letters) never complained about difficulties during the writing process, Friedell burned his documents and manuscripts just after the Nazi invasion 1938, a few days before his suicide (Viel,

³An essay on Georg Brandes is republished four(!) times in 15 years, cf. Innerhofer 1990, p. 47.

2013, p. 15); similarly to Simmel, one does not really know about Friedell's working routine. Same as with Simmel's, (GSG 20, p. 485ff.), except for a few volumes, his library is lost: no excerpts, no card-index (Innerhofer, 1990, p. 47f.). Simmel disliked biographical interests (H. Simmel, 2008, p. 12); Friedmann, who published since 1904 as "Friedell" but changed not before 1916 legally his name, intentionally wanted to give future biographists a hard job (Viel, 2013, p. 15). Both wrote patriotic essays at the beginning of World War I in an enthusiastic rush and perceived it as mainly a cultural conflict (GSG 16, p. 13f.; Friedell, 1915, p. 11); both were regarded at disciplinary outsiders for a long time.

More similarities can be found in their way of arguing. Simmel's for and against, pro and con, is described as "isothenic" (Boehringer, 1985, p. 304); an anonymous review on the 1960 new edition of *Culture History* remarks that

Friedell's method is the 'stereoscopic view' [...] for which truth is always the result of a doubled perspective. Though that is not simple relativism. This doubled perspective firms as a thoroughly fertile method to shape the epochs' complexity and its tendencies and personalities in a graphic manner (after Wisemann, 1987, p. 33).

Simmel has never written a fully blown culture history, but probably, with its independent views and sometimes over-pointed theses (instead of having none, what Simmel detested, cf. GSG 14, p. 409), he would have estimated Friedell's attempt much more than Spengler's *Decline of the West*.⁴ The Baroque era "knows despite its extreme intellectualism that life is a secret" (Friedell, 1989, p. 562) – without any doubt, Simmel would have underlined this immediately.

But arguing mostly via dichotomic notions can also tend to some unpleasant over-simplifications. Simmel's so fructifying dualism has led him to his late and infamous distinction of 'germanic-creative' vs. 'classic-roman' style, obviously inspired by Wilhelm Worringer's dissertation *Abstraction and Empathy* (cf. Meyer, 2017, p. 108f.). In short, feeling confronted with aggressive French propaganda, Simmel separates a sometimes raw, but always creative 'germanic' style from a more elegant, but flawed, rational and mere mimetic style derived from the Greek and Roman heritage, dating back to Plato's concept of ideas. So Roman

⁴Simmel's admiration of Spengler's first volume is not very well documented. However, Spengler promoted his book with Simmel's 'recommendation', cf. GSG 23, p. 970f.

style can never be truly inventive, only capable to illuminate (GSG 13, p. 315ff.) – this is the worst late Simmel as a chauvinist has to offer. The ramifications of Friedell's dualism are more complex, even more questionable, because Friedell reveals a kind of “jewish self-hatred” (Theodor Lessing) when he adopted not only a Christian name but fiercely attacks Jewishness as a disgusting, irrational materialism lacking any feature of a true religion, just qualifying as hatred against God. For example, he apologizes for medieval pogroms (Friedell, 1989, p. 99f.), Spinoza as a clever “madman” wrote a system of “horrible monstrosity” and “pathological logic”, full of “unbearable coldness” (ivi., p. 460ff.), Jehovah himself appears as a true, annoying Jew, the “ghost of a brutal and resentful, old Beduin chief” (ivi., p. 281). Malicious (but not totally wrong), as *Culture History's* finale and intended as a law of decadence, Friedell portrays Sigmund Freud, who has no sense for the divine (ivi., p. 1475), as the founder of a ridiculous system full of “fake concepts” and ridiculous exaggerations (ivi., p. 1521f.): “Psychoanalysis is an irrational system, grounded on rational methods; a transcendentalism, erected by an extreme positivist” (ivi., p. 1522).⁵

Anyway, a strong and undeniable difference remains between Friedell and Simmel. Friedell is coined as an extreme idealist (Innerhofer, 1990, p. 140ff.); Simmel, though he presumably intensifies his Hegel studies around 1905-1910 (Meyer, 2017a, p. 57), was already too much a sociologist to trust the moving powers of mere 'ideas'. But finally, they go together again. “It is a direct measure of culture, how much possibilities of demanding conflicts the individual has to confront in its social and ideal world” (GSG 14: 141), therefore Simmel can put forth that “it is a philistine prejudice to intend all conflicts and problem for being solved” (GSG 16, p. 206; cf. GSG 6, p. 674), he even highlights “the deep, integrating necessity of being wrong for the whole of a living” (GSG 15, p. 35). And astonishingly enough, the most Simmelean definition of culture ever – simply as “richness of problems”, is Friedell, not Simmel himself (Friedell, 1989, p. 174).

Max Raphael's case is completely different. Shortly disappointed from his teacher Wölfflin – “absolutely meaningless” (Raphael, 1989a, p. 21) – Raphael

⁵One has to keep in mind that Friedell himself uses psychoanalytical interpretations and the 'unconscious' throughout his works. And by the way: would this not match as 'baroque'?

was indebted to Simmel for a visit at Rodin's in 1912 (Raphael, 1989b, p. 30). Not enough, Wöfflin rejected his dissertation *From Monet to Picasso* a year later because of treating contemporary subjects. Beside its unlucky destiny, this book reveals just two explicit Simmel references from *Philosophical Culture* and *Philosophy of Money* (Raphael 1989c, p. 42, 95; cf. GSG 14, p. 328, GSG 6, p. 12), but can be read as a radicalization of Simmel's emphasis of form. Not only in *Rembrandt* Simmel meditates constantly about the meaning of form as 'formation' and the creative process that leads to a piece of art (cf. Meyer, 2017a, p. 252ff.), in his wartime essays and lectures on modern art, Simmel shows how uncomfortable he felt with its recent developments: expressionism and futurism both are in search for 'life itself' but forget 'construction work', resulting in "just a chaos of atomized fragments of form" as a "contradiction against the essence of creativity" (GSG 16, p. 41f.). Impressionism is treated sparsely and uninspired, Simmel mentions Renoir and Degas, Monet just on one occasion (GSG 8, p. 409f., GSG 16, p. 241, GSG 20, p. 237, GSG 21, p. 947), but there is no Sisley, Manet, Pissarro, no Cézanne (form!), no postimpressionists like Seurat or Caillebotte, no symbolists: for Simmel, modern art is mainly Rodin and, astonishingly, the expressionist avant la lettre van Gogh – who is described in terms very similar to Simmel's hail of Goethe, as a highly passionate individual for which painting is a rather accidental medium of self-expression (GSG 16, p. 194, cf. GSG 15, p. 106f.; cf. Meyer, 2017a, p. 263ff.).

Already Simmel's diagnosis is an overall lack of form. And Max Raphael? Impressionistic 'taches' are mere "descriptive phrases instead of created form" (Raphael, 1989c, p. 104f.), van Gogh presents "spatial dynamics of matter instead of created space" (ivi., p. 117), effects, not "pictorial necessity" (ivi., p. 123), Cézanne rediscovered the demands of an specific *Kunstraum* (ivi., p. 147) but has not painted a single perfect picture (ivi., p. 151), even Picasso in his cubistic phase never managed to "build form in the sense of absolute creation" (ivi., p. 189). And so on.

Raphael not only refers to classical aesthetics when he permanently invokes reciprocity of form and content as an equilibrium, he combines this premodern point of view ("organism", ivi., p. 63) with an esoteric theory of creative powers

that treats a “self-induced conflict” as the starting point for every kind of erecting a piece of art (ivi., p. 61). This way, “reality as reality is subdued”, the “demand for totality has immaterialized reality and gave birth to graphic, sensual equivalents. [...] So, a new world which contains its own conditions in itself, is separated from reality. It is free from matter, rests in itself” (ivi., p. 63). Impossible to overlook how Raphael simply paraphrases Simmel's core definitions of the piece of art as the “most unified entity” (GSG 6, p. 629), “world on its own” (GSG 7: 262), “selfsufficient unity” (GSG 16: 267), “cheerful in itself” (GSG 20: 233) with “no ties to its environment” (ibid.), “soaring in the air” (ivi., p. 244).

So Raphael transforms Simmel's sceptical, but moderate view on modern art to his thesis of an incapacity for absolute creation in modern art (Raphael, 1989c: 104, 133, 189) as a “hidden king”. It is not truly a premodern position, but the notion of 'absolute' demands winds up as aesthetic metaphysics, colloquial around 1900. Anyway, *combined* with Raphael's analytic skills as a professional (which Simmel was not) they lead to this hybrid and remorseless conception with no sense for contingency, bricolage, coincidence etc., key concepts of modern art, in short: for the non-organic artifact. Regarded this way, by an category error, contemporary art must fail but Raphael's first attempt to conceptualize art history ends in a deadlock, respectively.

In the meantime, like all of Simmel's disciples from the left wing, Raphael damned his teacher because of his wartime journalism as, in Raphael's variation, as a “coquettisch Talmudist” that “praises the trench as the only way for men to gain dignity” (Raphael, 1989a, p. 150).⁶ This is not the right place to analyze Raphael's very intricate shift to 'materialistic' art history, highly inspiring, but remaining a torso (cf. Meyer, 2017a, p. 282ff.). Already the original title of his late masterpiece, *The Demands of Art*, consisting of five intrinsic interpretations of Giotto, Degas, Cézanne, Rembrandt and Picasso, may signalize Raphael's constant harsh attitude. Raphael here still insists on “unified, organic creation” (Raphael, 1989d, p. 338f.) and avant-garde pieces of art are totally beyond Raphael's range. Picasso's, who was a friend of Raphael's, *Guernica* is a “bad

⁶Ernst Bloch invented Simmel as an outboasting reserve officier of the Prussian army that soonly became iconic among leftist thinkers – by the way, impossible for a jew, cf. Rammstedt, Meyer 2006, p. 194f.

piece of propaganda” lacking “any kind of self-evidence” (ivi., p. 298f.). However, Raphael manages to refine Simmel's “What do we *see* in a piece of art?” from *Rembrandt* toward an approximative realisation via a dialectic distinction of material *Daseins-* against a semantic *Wirkungsform* (ivi., p. 330f.) and unfolds Simmel's romantic, but vague “Totalverhalten” (GSG 15, p. 50, 329) as the “aesthetic feeling”, now depending on historical limitations similar to Michael Baxandall's “period eye” (Baxandall, 1977, p. 42, 52, 54, 111; cf. Raphael, 1989d, p. 321): “Art induces not a an isolated ability but a wholeness with a specific dominance of feeling. Only through this working process of collecting and transforming emotive and cognitive features, aesthetic experience results in aesthetic feelings, as it were its inside” (Raphael, 1989d, p. 320). Partially, this still sounds strange, but Raphael's erratic notes indeed melt together interests in the sensual organization of arts and a historical dimension.

Nevertheless, he could not get rid of his personal “hidden king” even as a materialist.

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