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Approaching a Sociology of Aesthetics:

Searching for Method in

Georg Simmel's *Rembrandt*

Michelle Nixon

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

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## ABSTRACT

Approaching a Sociology of Aesthetics:  
Searching for method in  
Georg Simmel's *Rembrandt*

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Art leaves the viewer with an aesthetic experience. Through art, “a truth is experienced that we cannot attain in any other way” (Gadamer 1975: xxii-xxiii). Traditional sociological methods of studying art negate both this experience and the concept of aesthetics altogether. This thesis attempts to find a method to approach the sociological study of aesthetics that acknowledges its existence and the aesthetic experience by studying the work of sociological founder, George Simmel, in his recently translated monograph *Rembrandt: An Essay in the Philosophy of Art*. Even though it has recently been translated into English, among German-speakers, it was the most circulated of his texts in his lifetime. An analysis of the text is included in this thesis. The editors forewarn that the text is ‘reactionary’ and follows automatic thinking processes, but upon reading Simmel’s essay it appears that the term reactionary may not be appropriate. Instead, Simmel is *moved* by the work of Rembrandt, which is more than undergoing an automatic reactionary process because it requires the utilization of one’s faculties. Simmel’s insight to his formalistic sociology originated with these initial impressions toward art, which he finally converted to writing close to the end of his life. His text explains that all intellectual achievement is partly fashioning, and partly creating. The concept of art can be reframed to include all activity in the ‘creative’ side of this dichotomy. Thus, the method to study “The Sociology of Aesthetics” is to first be *moved* by *art*. This process can be used to guide innovations and discoveries in other fields as well.

Keywords: sociology, methods, art, aesthetics, Georg Simmel, Rembrandt

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## CHAPTER 1

A picture is worth more than a mere thousand words. Try to replicate the Mona Lisa with only words, describe every brushstroke down to the eyelash, and it will not conjure up the image or impression that the actual painting produces. Nor does a painting reach the readability and the collective comprehension and clarity that the written word is able to bring about. They are two separate processes. If this is the case, what import could an analysis of the work of an artist, like Rembrandt, possibly bring? That is, how can one use a collection of words to explain the experience that a picture can procure? Though it does not replicate the same substance that the work itself would bring, in Simmel's (2005) words, its task would be to "lower a plumb line through the immediate singular, the simply given, into the depths of ultimate intellectual meanings" (3). Simmel examines the work of Rembrandt to pierce what is given, not to replicate, but to bring about greater understanding.

One of the primary reasons Simmel gives as the basis for his study is that the artistic experience illustrates a limit in methodology, or in systematic or scientific approaches, which is why Gadamer studies it in his book *Truth and Method* (1975). The conflict between what is known as "truth" and what is known as "method" is demonstrated in his discussion on aesthetic interpretation. He states, "The fact that through a work of art a truth is experienced that we cannot attain in any other way constitutes the philosophic importance of art" (xxii-xxiii). Simmel agrees that something occurs in the experience of art that cannot be measured or identified using method. Even though the 'Sociology of Art' has been addressed, the mainstream, traditional sociological view addresses it in the methodological way of which Gadamer warns

against. These methods used are analytical and virtually ignore the aesthetic experience that is present when viewing a piece of artwork. Although any type of analysis cannot replicate the ‘aesthetic experience,’ rather than ignoring and dismissing it, as in traditional methods, Simmel’s philosophy acknowledges and brings understanding to it.

## **Introduction**

I explore how art fits into sociology, by examining Rembrandt through the matured theories of a master of sociological thought, Georg Simmel. Using primarily his book *Rembrandt: An Essay in the Philosophy of Art*, I study the concepts he identifies in order to achieve a better method to capture and understand aesthetics from a sociological perspective. This “Sociology of Aesthetics,” is a social reality and part of the human social experience, but one that is not accessible by more traditional methods. The analysis of Simmel’s *Rembrandt* both identifies an appropriate method of the “Sociology of Aesthetics” and uses this method in the analysis. I use the material gleaned from *Rembrandt* and other pertinent material in order to develop the concept of a “Sociology of Aesthetics.”

## **Impact**

Georg Simmel is an eminent, if often overlooked, sociological theorist. Out of the pool of sociological forefathers, he is the one who concentrates most directly with the realm of art. His book, *Rembrandt: An Essay in the Philosophy of Art* was written two years before his death, and has been only recently translated into English in 2005. A study of this book spans the disciplines of sociology, philosophy, and art. Art is an essential element of material culture and even non-material; not only is art considered

being reflective of the nature of a society, but Simmel has stated that it shapes how a society perceives of their physical world. Thus, there is need for the sociological study of art. However, because of the nature of aesthetics, which nature is acknowledged by Simmel, the study of aesthetic nature of art is not accessible when operating under the traditional methods, which are more commonly used in the discipline of Sociology. Thus, I propose the need for a “Sociology of Aesthetics” which method is different than traditional analytical methods, and uses Simmel’s sociological/philosophical approach found in *Rembrandt* as its core.

### **Art as a Social Reality**

There is strong connection between art and sociology, a connection that has been acknowledged by numerous sociologists. Maffesoli (1996) maintained that “being aesthetic is the prevalent mode of social existence in our societies” and that it is “a way of feeling and experiencing in common” (31). The creation and the experience of art are social phenomena, and as such, ought to be examined through a social paradigm.

Many sociologists believe that art is a valuable part of culture, and that art offers significant insight into the social realm. John Smith and Chris Jenks (2000) pointed out “what counts as environment, in this case visual environment, is a variable part of the homodynamic that sustains various species in relation to their surroundings” (28). They examined the importance of the social context in art and show that many in their field believe that “certain classes of social phenomena (art, culture) are dependent upon *other* social phenomena (the economy, political narratives, gender, technology, religion) in an almost causal way” (23-24). Much social phenomena, like art, are part of a society’s material culture, and the association between a society and their material culture offers

insight to the nature of that society. Tim Dant (2005) said, “The relationship between material objects and human bodies is characteristic of a particular culture...The material stuff of a people provides a document of the culture and...its documents...are material objects too” (20). Art can be thought of as one such “documents of culture.”

Simmel (2005) goes even further than these sociologists, and because this study is an investigation of Simmel’s work, what he discloses is of particular importance. He stated, “It is not art that imitates nature, but nature that imitates art. That is to say, in each epoch people see nature in the way their artists have taught them to” (150). Artists have shaped what culture notices and what it ignores about the physical realm. He continues by saying, “In the field of vision we glimpse the colors and forms suggested by our respective painters and are completely blind to other inner visual formations, and so on” (150). Simmel’s belief that Rembrandt’s influence was particularly significant and perhaps one of the most influential is confirmed with Simmel’s respect and focus of Rembrandt’s work in his monograph. If a master in sociological thought has devoted such concentration and consideration to a topic within an important but neglected work of his, such a work may be worthy of further investigation in our time as well.

Art is a topic of interest to sociologists because of its relationship to society. Sociologists have examined this relationship with varying judgments of the degree of impact of the former to the latter. Because art is a social object there exists the ‘Sociology of Art.’ However, the position of Simmel and others, including this study, differs from the views held by mainstream sociology.

## **The Sociology of Art: The Traditional Methods**

Eduardo De La Fuente (2010) states that *Distinction* and *The Field of Cultural Production* by Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1993) and *Art Worlds* by Howard Becker (1982) are the most cited works in the field of the sociology of art. De La Fuente states, “Sociological accounts of art have often tended to focus on factors other than the artwork itself” (4). This mainstream sociological account of which Bourdieu and Becker are its leaders is “dominated by the ‘production of culture’ perspective and [is] heavily focused on contextual factors such as the social organization of artistic markets and careers, and displays of ‘cultural capital’ through consumption of the arts” (3). Art and aesthetics according to this way of thinking are epiphenomenon to other social processes; they are byproducts of culture.

Becker identifies the facets of the art world responsible for its creation and elevation. In his book *Art Worlds* (2008) he talks about “patterns of collective activity we can call an art world... [which] produces...and understanding of the complexity of the cooperative networks through which art happens” (1). Becker (2003) says, “I’ll only remind you here of the list of credits at the end of a film. That list is conventional in film, but similar lists are not conventional in other arts, though they could of course be made” (5). If we were to look at the ‘credits’ of a piece of art there are a lot more involved than just the artist and the viewer. There is a large amount and variety of social players involved in the history of a work of art including those forces and people who influence the artist, the art, and the perception of what ‘artwork’ and ‘artist’ are. He says,

Starting with the material to be analyzed, we can look back at the steps that produced it. A good way to do this is to think of everything that

happens to the work, and is then incorporated into it, as a choice somebody (or somebodies) made, even though often enough the choice is not conscious and deliberate but instead the use of a material or technique or idea that is so conventional as to be almost “unconscious” (2).

This upstream study of how a piece of art came into being can be followed by a downstream analysis where “you would study its continuing history, what happened to it after whatever date you decide is appropriate to consider it “done”... That is after “it” is done, what happens to it?” (1993: 1). Becker’s perspective of the sociology of art is analytical and seeks to emphasize its socio-historical progression identifying all the participants in its creation and perpetuation.

Pierre Bourdieu (1993), the other leader in this movement, states, “any art perception involves a conscious or unconscious deciphering operation” (215). This deciphering operation is learned. He continues, “Any deciphering operation requires a more or less complex code which has been more or less completely mastered” (218).

*Figure 1* shows Bourdieu’s model of art perception. According to Bourdieu, the cultured as well as the uncultured perceive art, and decipher it. The code in which they decipher it will be according to what they have been taught through culture. Those who have received more exposure to art, usually found in a higher social class, perceive a piece of art and decipher it with complete mastery with a complex coding system.

Bourdieu (1993) says that any type of aesthetic satisfaction is “only accessible to those who are disposed to appropriate them because they *attribute a value to them*” (227). If we examine a particular artist, Mozart, as an example, Bourdieu points out that an appreciation for Mozart comes to a privileged class, which exposes itself to the classical

music of Mozart. Those of a lower class who have not heard classical music will not appreciate it. Thus, there is not something intrinsically valuable, which causes people to enjoy it; society propagates the belief that Mozart contains value. Prolonged exposure leads to both conscious or unconscious experience and codification of Mozart. Through exposure and interaction, culture has given those experienced the tools necessary to analyze and appreciate Mozart. These codes, categories, and tools to appreciate are fabricated and taught by culture, and the music itself is nothing more than a cultural object.

Allen Dunn (1998) states, “Both the producers and the consumers of art are driven by an unremitting struggle for social distinction” (88). According to this view, the value of a piece of art is like the value of the emperor’s clothes in the children’s fable *The Emperor’s New Clothes*. For those unacquainted with this tale, a couple of con artists say that they will make the emperor a special set of clothes. Those who are stupid or unfit for their job will not be able to see the clothes. The con artists pretend to make clothes and then leave with the money. The emperor and counselors and all the people of the kingdom pretend to see the clothes so that the others will not think that they are stupid or unfit. According to mainstream sociological theory, aesthetics do not exist; they are an illusion. Those of a higher culture pretend it is a force that exists in its own rite and worthy of merit. The appreciation of art is an appreciation of something society has told us that high culture is able to appreciate and understand and if one does not, one is of a lower cultural standing.

Other sociologists use Bourdieu and Becker’s theory as a premise. Dunn (1998) discusses how an artist’s creativity is merely a facade; he says, “Artists themselves are



created by the social conditions in which they live and that the ideology of creativity serves only to mask the forces of social determination” (88). In a functional approach Michael Ames (1986) says, “Art may be used to express and authenticate the established or official values of images of a society in several ways, *directly*, by promoting and affirming the dominant values, and *indirectly*, by subordinating or rejecting alternative values” (9). Ben Agger (1992) describes art as reaffirming social status and points to “the use of images to decode the hegemonic messages of the cultural industry that permeates every nook and cranny of lived experience” (5). Albert Bergsen (1984) states, “Art is a language. Art objects are therefore decipherable into...codes that carry and communicate social information” (187). In the mainstream direction of the sociology of art, the direction supported by Bourdieu, Becker, and others, art is a cultural object.

### **A Different Direction**

There is another direction which has begun to emerge besides the social deterministic model of Bourdieu and Becker. De La Fuente (2010) states, that the sociology of art “needs to show that it can demonstrate that the sociology of art is much more than the study of things that are socially valued as art” (8). He cites Alfred Gell’s account of “Slasher Mary” who in order to demonstrate a political motive she slashed a valuable work of art. She treated “the artwork as one might a real person...She acted ‘as if’ the painting itself had the potential for agency” (4). Here the artwork was more of a reflection of a social fact; it was treated as if it were its own social actor.

Alfred Gell (1998) moves away from treating art like a language full of symbols. He suggests a higher calling, or at least a different calling. He moves away from “seeing the art-object as a projection screen for discursive and other socio-historical forces” (4);

This is echoed in Mitchell 2005). Instead, he says, “In the case of art objects, what we have, therefore, is a type of causality or displaced agency where the function of the artwork is to fascinate, compel, and entrap as well as delight the spectator’ (16). He points to art as having some kind of agency, which Gell defines as having “casual consequences’ (16); it is something which is related to what Durkheim called ‘sui generis’ or what Smith and Jenks (2000:4) refer to as ‘autopoietic’ or self-structuring phenomena. These sociologists suggest that there is something within artwork that is separate from being mere epiphenomenon of societal process. That it obtains some sort of transcendence, or if that is too strong a word, then a type of independence which may be affected by society, but which also may in turn affect society.

Mainstream sociological theory rationalizes art as a by-product of culture, completely relying on the social factors, or represented as symbols of social trends. This other direction of the sociology of art begins to give credence to art as having some sort of separateness, or agency; that it is ‘su generis’ or ‘autopoeitic’.

In the Bourdieu style, if there is no intrinsic value for Mozart besides replicating class inequality by accruing the tools of appreciation only to the higher and more cultured class, then Mozart and other fine art should be ignored in favor of class equality.

However, this ignores the fact that listening to Mozart before taking a test has been shown to improve test scores and other cognitive reasoning skills (Jausovec et al 2006; Young 1993). Those who listen to Mozart may be doing so to proffer themselves social distinction, however, the effect that is demonstrated by these studies suggests that there may be more to Mozart, and other fine art for that matter, besides just social distinction.

## **The Aesthetic Distinction**

What is it, then, that brings about this independence and separateness to art—a distinction of itself, not just of those actors who take part in its social aspects? Nick Zangwill (2002) states,

A theory that purports to explain art in terms of some unknown sociological or psychological factor (art as social control, art as play, etc.) will not be able to provide a plausible explanation of *why* we value the arts...The difficulty then is to explain the ubiquitousness and universality of our valuing the arts. How is it that human beings are so widely and deeply deceived in so many different cultures, classes, races, creeds, and eras, although this is never apparent to them? The delusion we would have to believe is just too widespread and too deep-seated in our psychology to be believable (216, emphasis added).

The distinction is linked to the *aesthetic* quality that art possesses; the reason we value the arts is because they are aesthetic. That which makes art more than a societal symbol is not what or whom it portrays, but *how* it is portrayed, the formalistic elements, which make it affective to the viewer.

### ***A Hypothetical Illustration***

In the tradition of mainstream sociology of art, imagine a piece of art which is only socially valued as art with social meanings and symbols but little aesthetic value. This hypothetical well-circulated piece of art consists of the words “Young Enigmatic Woman” printed on a paper (*see Figure 2*).

We know what “woman” is. Our minds have made this connection. Seeing a ‘W’ followed by an “O-M-A-N” connects in our brains and we say, “Ah, woman. I know

what woman means, I have been taught to take these symbols called ‘letters,’ connect them to sounds to make a specific sound called ‘word’ and I know what this specific word means.”

According to Becker, if we were to look at the list of credits for this piece it would contain an entire myriad of social people and groups. For example, the ‘artist’ would have been influenced by various socio-historical factors leading his or her choice of these specific word symbols. The reception of this artwork would be quite a bit different than an identical paper with the same words but *not* labeled as a piece of artwork. The ‘artwork’ is an object of high culture, and those of a higher culture will fabricate deciphering mechanisms to discuss its impact or the lack thereof. Viewers of different classes will have different responses based on their own socio-historical background ranging from, “Brilliant!” to “I don’t understand it and therefore it must be unimportant” to “It is labeled as art so it must be worth something.” The meaning and value is not inherent in the piece, but a product of how society treats and interprets the symbols attached to the piece, such as “young,” “enigmatic,” “woman,” “artwork,” “feminism,” “conflict theory,” “gerontology,” or others.

What makes this “Young Enigmatic Woman” rendering of the Mona Lisa differ from the actual rendering (*Figure 3*)? The actual portrait may contain the entire social context and meaning discussed previously, but, as stated in the introduction, the actual portrait brings about a different experience than the hypothetical one. Artwork unavoidably carries varying degrees of social context and meaning, however, there is an experience unique to art.

The difference between “Young Enigmatic Woman” and the actual *Mona Lisa* is

aesthetics. It is *how* the piece looks unattached to a specific symbol, relying on more formalistic elements, which affect the viewer.

### **The “Aesthetic Experience” Defined**

In Simmel’s preface he discusses what he labels as the “aesthetic experience.” In a review of the book Mary Leontsini explains that we currently label what he is speaking of as artistic consumption, which she defines when she says, “In a work of art we experience what is given from the realm of art itself, what is carried on without external control, without borrowing supplemented information from life, which derives from an external sphere” (2006: 494). It is the experience that one receives when one is viewing art. It is the “primary, indivisible fact that the work is present and exercises a direct effect upon the recipient” (Simmel 2005:1). A piece of art produces an impression and response from a viewer in a way that cannot be replicated by analytical means.

It should be acknowledged that it is possible to use method or “the methodological means proper to science” (Simmel 2005:xxii) to *study* art. A ruler can be used to measure the distance between figures in a composition, color tones and paint formulas can be detected with instruments, and a viewer’s eye movement can be tracked. These numbers can be recorded to compare between paintings classified among genres or time periods. Someone could write a book describing the color, length, and direction of every brush stroke and how each element fits together to form the entirety of the piece. However, Gadamer and Simmel agree the incident of being exposed to any type of methodological technique, like reading a book previously described, and the incident of viewing the actual piece would produce two different types of experiences. They would further exert that the type of experience that comes about from actually coming in contact

with the piece is something that methodological means cannot accurately replicate. Gadamer further exerts that art is one of the most “insistent admonition[s] to scientific consciousness to acknowledge its own limits” (xxii-xxiii). Although someone is able to use methodological or scientific means to analyze art, such means would fall short of replicating artistic consumption, or the “aesthetic experience.”

In one of his earlier works Simmel speaks on the aesthetic and the creative as having its origins in practical purposes. The purposes that they were originally erected for fade as they develop, and their creation becomes a purpose unto itself. It is at this stage in the process that “artistic forms of valuation are applied to the products of creativity,” and the concept of aesthetics arises (De la Fuente 2008:348). Simmel (1950) states that art comes from the “interpretation of realities, concrete or abstract, in terms of spatial systems, or of rhythms or sounds, or of significance and organizations” and after the original purpose is no longer needed the new purpose is simply its own perpetuation and the satisfaction derived from it (42). Susanne Langer (1953) agrees with this in her evaluation of music, and how its origins can be traced to specific purposes (“shouts, hunting-calls and military signals,” etc.), but these purposes are superseded by its more modern purpose of simply enjoying musical sound (246-47). To better understand this concept Simmel compares it to law. He states, “Although lawful behavior has its roots in the purposes of social life, law, properly speaking, has no “purpose,” since it is not a means to an ulterior end. On the contrary it determines, in its own right and not by legitimation though any higher, extrinsic agency, how the contents of life should be shaped” (43). Though there may have been practical purposes in the origins of art, the purpose now is the aesthetic experience.

Social Psychologist David G. Myers (2008) quotes the philosopher-mathematician Blaise Pascal when he observes, “The heart has its reasons which reason does not know” (84). The intuition that one uses to experience art is different from rationale, and the “gut reactions” that people use to judge the outer world may be more telling than one may originally give it credit for. Myers speaks of a person who has had brain damage and has lost the ability to form “new explicit memories”; this person was introduced to her physician anew every time that she came into contact with him, and she would shake his hand. On one occasion the doctor put a tack in his hand before they shook hands. The next time they were introduced the patient did not remember the physician but she would not shake his hand (85). Myers states, “Our thinking is partly controlled (reflective, deliberate, and conscious) and—more than psychologists once supposed—partly automatic (impulsive, effortless, and without our awareness)” (84). The intuitive feelings and impressions that one experiences when viewing a piece of art is a distinctive incident that cannot be experienced through an analytical analysis.

A study done by Timothy Wilson and his colleagues (1993) supports this premise. They had participants evaluate and choose which of five posters they wanted to keep. The first two were of paintings done by Monet and Van Gogh and the other three had more humorous themes dealing with cats and cartoons. One group had to rationalize a meaning for why they were picking the poster, and the control group just picked a poster. When the participant had to rationalize a reason for picking the poster they tended to pick the more humorous style poster because the reasons for picking this type of poster were easier to verbalize. However, the initial “gut reaction” of participants who did not have to rationalize tended to prefer the artistic posters. A few weeks later, the researchers had

the participants report how satisfied they were with their poster choice. Those with reasoned judgments for picking the poster and had for the majority chosen the humorous poster, were less satisfied than those who had gone with their initial reaction. The impulsive impression of the aesthetic experience is something faced without rationality, in fact, rationality may only be a hindrance. In *Rembrandt: An Essay in the Philosophy of Art* Simmel rejects the analytical attitude toward an aesthetic analysis, and instead approaches it with a philosophical investigation from a sociological standpoint.

### **Social Meaning vs. Aesthetic Properties in Artwork**

Pieces of art rely, in varying degrees, on social meaning and aesthetics. On the one side is “Fountain” by Marcel Duchamp (*Figure 4*), who calls to question the validity of aesthetics in art by trying to remove it from the artistic process as much as possible and relying almost entirely on social meaning. The only aesthetic quality of this work is the shape of the urinal with its subtle curves, and perhaps the choice of the font in which he scribed the “R. Mutt.” However, it is not the aesthetic properties that are exhibited; by labeling a urinal as artwork, Duchamp relies on the social meaning people give to it. The beauty or form of the urinal is irrelevant in this case. A housing supply store would attempt to exhibit the more aesthetic qualities of a urinal, but by placing the urinal in the context of art, it is the *social meaning* that is more obvious. However, the effort of eliminating aesthetics from Duchamp’s work is done very deliberately, and thus the issue of aesthetics is addressed in a calculating manner by its intentional attempt at removal.

On the other side of this argument is a piece of art which attempts to remove symbolic meaning and rely solely on the aesthetic, as that of Jackson Pollock. In his drip paintings (*Figure 5*) he endeavored to remove any symbols and rely solely on the



aesthetic appearance of the drips of paint on canvas. However, even though he was driven with a purely aesthetic appeal, he too, was unable to avoid societal ebbs and flows within the realm of art. The social significance of “art” and the many social players involved make it theoretically impossible.

Art is a field in which aesthetics is addressed, either overtly or inadvertently. In the first branch of thought in the sociology of art, the more traditional, mainstream approach, the term “aesthetics” is inconsequential; it may be thought of as one of the many terms and codes that those of higher class have constructed in order to speak of art. There really is no “aesthetic appeal”; it is all social construction, just the product of socio-historical discourse of art in attempts to elevate it. The second branch of sociology of art has mixed views of the term and its meaning. What the second branch agrees upon is that there is a separate factor besides just seeing art as a symbol of socio-historical phenomena, and within this class many believe that factor is the artwork’s aesthetic qualities.

### **A Call for a Sociology of the Aesthetic**

Nick Zangwill (2002) compares the sociological and aesthetic theory of art. He says that the mainstream sociological perspective maintains skepticism about the presence of aesthetics in either the production or the consumption of art, whereas in aesthetic theory of art production, “minimally, the artist must desire and intend to create something with specific aesthetic qualities” (207). There is at least some type of aesthetic influence, which is separate from social phenomena. He states,

It is true that there are important nonaesthetic influences on art production...For example, the prices of different pigments may determine

the colors that a patron demands. And the work may reinforce, prescribe, or reflect ideas connected with social power relations...But the question is to what extent such factors provide an explanation of the existence and character of works of art. The fundamental problem is that such considerations explain some aspects of works of art but not all of them. The nonaesthetic influences do not tell the whole story. They underdetermine what the work of art is like. The fact that *some* features of a work of art are determined by social factors does not mean that they *all* are (209).

He gives an example of one of the factors of a work of art that is not preset by social factors; he says, “Although the social conditions set certain parameters, within those parameters, the artist exercises free choice about what to create” (209). Even when an artist is commissioned to paint a specific subject, who may be influenced by various ideological and/or economic factors, among other social factors, the artist must choose how to represent that subject. Taken from social influence, the artist may choose a richly colored robe to exhibit the subject’s importance, however, how that robe falls—the undulation of the fabric and the shades used are aesthetic choices. A photographer takes a photograph of what exists in front of him or her; the shading, details, and forms are already provided. However, for a painter every single brushstroke is a deliberate choice; if there is a shadow, the artist chooses whether or not to include it, and if it is included, must choose its form, color, and style of brushstroke. Says Zangwill, “It is not remotely plausible that every choice the artist makes is extrinsically determined by social conditions. To some degree his choices are autonomous, even if the options among

which he chooses are not up to him” (209). The choices independent of social conditions that are left up to the artist are aesthetic.

The ideological and economic explanations do not exist in a realm above an aesthetic basis. Zangwill states, “The aesthetic is an essential part of what drives the evolution of art” (212), and he gives an example, “ Much Egyptian art served as propaganda for the Pharaohs. But there is no doubt that it did this effectively partly because of its aesthetic impact” (212). Art has been used as a medium for propaganda and other ideological reasons because people respond to the aesthetic. Also, in an economic sense, Zangwill states, “While the production of art is usually profit driven, that is only because there is a demand for those works, due, in part, to the aesthetic satisfaction they afford. No aesthetic appreciation, no art production. The economic explanation does not supplant the aesthetic explanation—it depends on it!” (213). Ideology and economic aspects of art are apparent, as noted by the traditional sociological view, but they “sit piggy-back” to the aesthetic explanations.

Zangwill explains further,

Those who control the publicly owned or publicly subsidized art institutions commission and purchase works for reasons. No doubt there are ideological forces at work influencing their decisions. But aesthetic considerations are sometimes among the reasons for commissions and purchases. One can be cynical to an extent, but one must allow at some point that aesthetic considerations play a role in determining choices and hence in determining what gets produced (213).

For example if a museum was looking for an Avant Garde painting for the

museum's personal collection, and for political reasons their pick must be selected from the abstract expressionist genre, they still have various latitudes to select from within 'abstract expressionist.' If they select one artist from that genre, perhaps Jackson Pollock, they would have to select one painting from his collection. Even if they select 'Avant Garde,' 'abstract expressionist,' and 'Jackson Pollock' because of ideological reasons and reduce the selection to one of three possible paintings because of economic explanations, the choice between these paintings is an aesthetic one.

In mainstream sociological theory, aesthetics is thought of as mastery of a complex coding system within a higher social status. It is viewed as a fabrication. Zangwill states, "If there is to be a sociology of art, what we need is a sociology of the aesthetic, not the sociology of the illusion of the aesthetic" (214). The study of Simmel's monograph, *Rembrandt: An Essay on the Philosophy of Art* examines the presence of aesthetics in art.

Along with Zangwill, I am proposing the need for a "Sociology of Aesthetics" much in the same way that Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman (1967) wrote a treatise for the "Sociology of Knowledge" in their book *The Social Construction of Reality*. They were worried that most social theories were concerned with explaining the impersonal laws of social order rather than how social order is an outcome of social action. Knowledge of social realities is itself a social process and thus a study of social realities begs a different method other than "impersonal laws" that people had been using, thus they proposed the need for a "Sociology of Knowledge" in order to interpret social realities. Similarly, because of the nature of aesthetics as spoken of by Gadamer,

Simmel, and Kant, the traditional more scientific, analytical methods are ineffective in the study.

### **An Analysis of the Un-Analyzable**

As stated before, art affords an experience that analytical means cannot replicate. However, a *study* of art, which acknowledges the presence of such an experience, will bring *understanding* to said experience. This analysis will not reproduce a formalistic aesthetic experience. Instead, by approaching the subject from a philosophical angle to lay the framework for a more analytical discussion, the study hopes to bring understanding and insight into this subject.

In Betty Edwards (1986) *Drawing from the Artist Within* she provides exercises that are meant to promote left-brain reasoning. One such exercise requires the participant to think of a problem that they are having in their personal life as they draw a blind contour drawing of an inanimate object. After their object is drawn, they think of qualities of the object in their drawing which may help them in their problem. For example, a woman draws a pencil as she is thinking how to improve her marriage. As she is looking at the pencil she has drawn she points to the eraser and writes, “Forgive and forgive past mistakes” and points to the gold ring and writes, “Remember promises” (150). This verbalization process at the end of the experiment is *not* an exercise of the left-side of the brain; which is the side that the exercise is supposed to be tapping into. The verbal/language side of the brain is the right side. However, the left side of the brain is nonverbal; it is more spatial/formalistic. How does one access the left side of the brain and then *communicate* about it if it is non-verbal? In Edward’s exercise she *begins* with the left side. Instead of beginning the thinking process in the right-hemisphere with

rational, more scientific method, she begins the exercise by thinking of the problem with the formalistic/creative side. After she has laid the framework with the left-side, then the right-side is called upon to assist in the analysis. Similarly, I begin my analysis with Simmel's philosophical groundwork rather than an analytical one. From there, I add analyses, but starting with philosophy, which does not replicate the aesthetic experience, but brings understanding to it.

### **Georg Simmel**

Georg Simmel was an early German Sociologist, a contemporary with Max Weber and other academics such as Heinrich Rickert, Edmund Husserl and Adolf von Harnack, and considered by some to be one of the masters of sociological thought (Coser 2003:196). His contributions aided in the formulation of sociological theory, yet, "it is now almost universally agreed that Simmel is the most neglected 'founding father' of sociology" (Turner 1991:243). The insights that he supplied to the discipline are significant, but oftentimes overlooked, which makes the study of his theory advantageous in the realm of sociology.

Many of the sociology fathers address the issue of art in their philosophy, but very few dwell on the subject with quite as fixed interest as Georg Simmel, which is why Simmel is of particular interest in the realm of art in sociology. "The interest in aesthetics was a continuous aspect of Simmel's work" (Turner 1991:243). He addresses aesthetics throughout the development of his sociological theory and then writes a monograph, *Rembrandt*, that focuses principally on this issue at the end of his intellectual career and life.

## **Rembrandt: An Essay in the Philosophy of Art**

*Rembrandt: An Essay in the Philosophy of Art* was published in 1916, two years before Simmel's death. The theories of many philosophers often undergo changes as their theories are explored at a deeper level and the philosophers are exposed to new ideas and uncover irregularities. "*Rembrandt* is as a result an aspect of Simmel's final intellectual development" (Turner 1991:243). This monograph was written after all of Simmel's sociological theories had been fully developed and were at a period of maturity. "There are many themes in the analysis of Rembrandt, which reflect the principal components of his work as a whole" (Turner 1991:243). This book offers philosophical insight in art from a major sociological thinker after his theory had reached its fullest stage of development.

Though as a sociologist he writes this book about art, it also brings up topics of philosophy and art history. "Simmel blurs the boundaries between sociology and philosophy" (Leontsini 2006:493). One book reviewer, Mary Leontsini (2006), urges, "pluridisciplinary initiatives proved themselves extremely relevant to this field of investigation" (494). It is appropriate to gain cross-disciplinary insight in this case.

A book reviewer gave a review of *Rembrandt* before it was translated and stated, "It has been neglected in Anglo-American commentaries on Simmel" (Turner 1991:243-244). Though this book "had the highest circulation of any of Simmel's work during his lifetime" (Simmel 2005:xi) it was only recently translated into English in 2005. Because of this, it remains a relatively untapped resource for non-German-speaking scholars.

## Contents of Text

In this book, Simmel philosophically explores the work of Rembrandt and contrasts it with classical and Renaissance art. The editor of *Rembrandt: An Essay in the Philosophy of Art* explains in the introduction, “This is not a book about Rembrandt...Simmel is not concerned with the historical context, nor indeed is he much interested in the person of Rembrandt...It is a series of reflections for which Rembrandt’s work, but not his life or the conditions in which that work came into being” (Simmel 2005:xii). Another scholar states about this book, “Sociological contents, specific conditions of art production, and reception are not of importance within Simmel’s scheme” (Leontsini 2006:493). Another states, “By developing the philosophical essence of Rembrandt’s work, Simmel is specifically arguing against mechanistic, rationalistic, instrumental, and essentialist conceptions and interpretations of life and art” (Yengoyan 2007:486). There are two types of analyses of art that Simmel mentions, the analytic approach, and the philosophical approach. “The philosophy of art reconstructs the totality of art by intellectual means through which we can penetrate the work of art per se, and also its actual inner meanings” (Yengoyan 2007:486). Simmel focuses on the latter, but with a sociological perspective. “This book is of particular interest to sociologists, since it invites sociological theories to take seriously aesthetic experience in its singularity” (Leontsini 2006:494). Being a scholar of both sociology and art, this book is of particular interest to me.

The book is broken into three major sections. The first is “The Expression of Inner Life.” It examines subjectivity, totality, individuality and unity in Rembrandt’s portraits, self-portraits, series of portraits, group paintings and drawings. The second



section is “Individualization and the General,” and it discusses principles of art in Rembrandt’s work including individuality, death, character, and beauty among others. The last section addresses objectivity and subjectivity in religion and religious art, and he puts emphasis on artistic creativity and inner life. Throughout each of these sections he contrasts the art of Rembrandt with Western art, usually classical and Renaissance. He also speaks about “The Capacity to Create and to Fashion” and an “Antithesis in Art” within his conclusion. (Turner 1991:244; Leontisini 493)

### **Purpose Statement**

I received a BFA in Studio Art and a second major in Sociology, thus, I am acutely interested in the connections between art and sociology. In this thesis I identify a “Sociology of Aesthetics,” or art as a type of sociological knowledge, a method which is different from traditional analytical approaches and acknowledges the nature of aesthetics. I identify a method whereby to study aesthetics in the realm of sociology by investigating the method Georg Simmel used in his book *Rembrandt: An Essay in the Philosophy of Art*. Georg Simmel is a founder of sociology whose view on the arts and aesthetics shaped his formalistic sociology. This monograph is an intellectual discussion of his view of art, more particularly, the art of Rembrandt. Because he is a sociologist who not only discusses art but also acknowledges the aesthetic experience, an examination of the method that he used in his exploration sheds significant light on a method whereby to study aesthetics in the field of sociology.

## Methods

I examine Simmel's *Rembrandt: An Essay in the Philosophy of Art*, explore the concepts found therein, identify a better method whereby to study art in sociology, and develop this concept further using both *Rembrandt* and other material.

I dissect the book in an analytical fashion as instructed in Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren's book *How to Read a Book* (1940). This included pre-reading the book, reading the book again at a slower pace while marking and making notes, and finally a third time piecing together concepts and passages which were relevant to the subject at hand. The reasoning behind this method is to assure comprehension and to be able to organize and unearth a method.

I discuss my findings of Simmel's *Rembrandt* and react to it according to how *his* method may be used to form a *general* method to study the 'Sociology of Aesthetics' which may be discussed under the jurisdiction of Sociology.

The aesthetic experience is experienced at the completion of a piece of artwork, and is not included in an analytical analysis of the artwork. Thus, a "Sociology of Aesthetics" is needed which acknowledges and pays specific attention to this experience. The reason Rembrandt becomes a topic of interest is because, in Simmel's (2005) own words, "Rembrandt's art appears particularly suitable as an object of such investigation because, grounded deep in its objective character, that irrational experience...is accomplished in its purest form" (2). In Simmel's opinion the art of Rembrandt represents one of the most salient examples of which the aesthetic experience is felt with a high degree of prominence.

The understanding of the end of the Rembrandt artistic process, the ‘aesthetic experience,’ suggests the presence of means whereby to arrive at this end. Such means are discussed through the chapters of Simmel’s book, and as such, these steps of the process are topics of interest, which demand study. Simmel uses the reasoning that because the aesthetic experience is itself separate from rationality, instead of an analytical analysis, he uses a philosophical one. Thus the discussion of the art of Rembrandt begins with philosophy, which is why the framework for this study begins with Simmel’s sociological/philosophical basis. Any analytical studies are used to supplement the original sociological/philosophical context.

**Simmel’s *Rembrandt*:**

The following five chapters are an analysis of Simmel’s *Rembrandt*, which deals with how Simmel views Rembrandt’s unique understanding of the concept of life and how this is realized and affects his work. He compares Rembrandt’s work with other artists and artistic movements, most fixedly on Renaissance and classical art. He discusses Rembrandt’s work and what we see in a piece of art in general. He brings up issues such as individuality and unity, among others, and offers a discussion on religious art.

## CHAPTER 2:

### LIFE

#### Life as a Flowing Totality

Simmel's philosophy of art begins with his philosophy of life. Life is usually considered "the *sum* of all sequentially occurring moments" (5). However, Simmel rejects this view in favor of a different model. The first "separate[s] the whole and the parts" but Simmel's interpretation expresses a "continuous flow of real life" (6). Life, according to Simmel and his interpretation of Rembrandt, demonstrates itself as an ever-present totality. Human beings do not often experience life in this holistic manner because they separate their cognitive processes. They continually receive impressions from life and consequently produce phenomena from their interpretations of what they have received. Though life exists as a unity, people experience it through its "individual contents, fates, culminations" (6), and because of this, the unity, which is life, is sometimes overlooked.

However, life is not merely a sum of such instances, instead, "Each present moment is determined by the entire prior course of life, is the culmination of all preceding moments; and already for this reason, every moment of life is the form in which the whole life of the subject is real" (6). Each experienced segment of life depends on the entire course, and viewing a specific occurrence in life, separate from the rest, is not an accurate portrayal of life. The exact position or expressive movement of an individual at any given time is, in fact, the result of a lifetime of other movements. One moment represents the culmination. Life, then, is *in* each moment.

## **As Represented by Rembrandt**

The Renaissance portrait exhibits a cross-section of life. It follows the traditional view and displays just one of many moments. Rembrandt's paintings typify the second interpretation of life, "[Life's] totality is...continuously form-changing flowing" (7). His paintings show a moment in life, which represents the entirety of life. Says Simmel, "With Rembrandt the depicted moment appears to contain the whole living impulse directed toward it; it tells the story of this life course" (6). To understand this idea, one may view life as a stream; the Renaissance painters scoop a cupful of the stream out and hold it up and away from its source. Rembrandt's paintings examine a point within the stream itself, which is dependent upon the whole body of moving water, before and after. In his paintings "a represented moment of movement really is the whole movement or, better, is *movement* itself, and not some petrified something or other" (7). Even if a painted figure appears sitting stationary, what he represents is a movement, because life itself is flowing.

## **Expressing Movement in Painting**

There is a view that movement expressed in painting involves the viewer imagining the movement before and after the depicted movement. Simmel rejects this; referring to himself in the third person, he discusses how, "The viewer Simmel cannot reconstruct how a figure by Michelangelo might look in any posture other than that which it displays. In this case, it would be a Simmel figure, but no longer a Michelangelo one, and would therefore not be a moment of movement of the figure in question" (38). The entire movement is found within the depicted figure. Human beings, as they experience life, "do not "see" things the way they are captured in the photographic moment, but

rather movement as continuity made possible, as suggested, by the fact that our subjective life is itself a lived continuity and not a composition made up of individual moments that were neither a process nor an activity” (39). Movement in painting is a point in the stream, which suggests the presence of the whole stream. “We experience the moment of movement as the achievement of the past and the potentiality of the future: a force concentrated in a single inner point, as it were, transforms itself into movement” (40). The moment of a painting gives the impression of prior and future moments.

Simmel explains how the skill of an artist can depict the third dimension onto a two-dimensional surface. Even though paint on canvas can give the illusion of a bowl of fruit, it is still just paint on canvas. The artist’s talent does not only bring about this tangibility to the dimensions of space, but also to time. Given enough proficiency, the artist can portray movement onto a stationary surface. The entirety of a movement – an extension of time – can be seen in a temporal canvas. A moment that Rembrandt depicts really *is* the whole movement. “When the movement is really captured from within and artistically executed in its full power, direction, and unscathed unity, the smallest part of its appearance is already the totality, because each point contains that which has already occurred, because it had determined this, and that which is still to occur, because this determines it” (41). The whole life, rather than a segment, is made manifest in his paintings; the entire life and movement are present in the existing image because of Rembrandt’s ability to depict them.

## The Inner Life

The surface of a Rembrandtian portrait – its physical appearance – is as a result of what is inside the person of the painting, or what Simmel terms “the inner life.” The inner life guides the physical person to make the choices that he or she has throughout their lives and is also in turn, affected by these same choices. The inner life represents the whole life. “In the total development of the inner life we sense each present as only possible through this specific past” (9). That which is present because of the preceding sediment layers, the physical form of the figure in the painting, “ becomes the essential form of each present state of the totality of the inner life” (9). The present figure in the painting is a result of the accumulation of the figure’s life experiences—the choices that were made through the inner life. Simmel states, “In the physiognomies of Rembrandt’s portraits we feel very clearly that the course of a life, heaping fate on fate, creates this present image” (9). A Rembrandt portrait “depicts and brings to mind in the single movement of an expression the unity of its history” (9). Thus, the totality is manifest in the existing image, and the existing image brings awareness of the totality.

Rembrandt fashions his paintings from the inner life, the classical Greek paintings and the Italian Renaissance paintings depict an ideal and self-contained portrait which does not show the inner life, but the result of the inner life, which is a-historical and timeless. “The form is closed off in itself putting only the *results* of the movement of the inner life at our disposal as data” (10). For Renaissance and classical Greece,

The meaning and value of things lies in their *being*, in their clearly circumscribed essence as expressed in their timeless concept...The Renaissance portrait aims to capture the self-contained being, the timeless

qualitative essence of an individual. The traits of the person are spread out, side by side, in a steadfast form; and although, self-evidently, fates and inner development have led to the represented appearance, these factors of *becoming* are excluded. Like the steps of a calculation where only the result is of interest, they are of no concern (8-9).

For Rembrandt, these 'steps' are of great importance because they bring about the result.

In classical portraiture the image is portrayed in a timeless sense of *being*. The Renaissance portrait "captures us in the moment of its present, not a point in a series of comings and goings, but designates a timeless idea beyond such a series: the trans-historical form of the spiritual-physical existence" (9). The *being* is not what Rembrandt is concerned about. The painting is not portrayed as a self-contained sense of being because the present state does not exist without all of the other moments. The portraits of Rembrandt concern themselves not with the present stage of *being*, but portray this being as a moment occurring within a stream of life, relying on the other sediment chronological layers of life. The Renaissance portrait "seeks the being [*das Sein*], but Rembrandt seeks the coming into being, of the person" (41). *Becoming* rather than being is then brought to light, and this "becoming" is manifested as the subject's inner life.

### **The Inner as One with the Outer Life**

The physical appearance of a painting, then, does not merely *represent* the inner life; these two elements of a person are united. Simmel states that the outer and inner life of a person is only separate in retrospect, that in reality they are a unity that cannot be separated. Their functions, likewise, are not divided but one and the same. The inner being and the person's past are both viewed in the present image of the person. In art, the



inner life is not seen in a physical sense and then reconstructed through empirical means; instead the entire process is connected. The past is not constructed frame upon frame, the entire life is felt or impressed upon to the viewer – it is as a stream. We understand this process through the “unity of understanding”—both our inner and outer functions united as one instead of using the analytical process of only one of our functions.

### ***The Circle in the Depiction of a Person***

This principle Simmel terms as “the circle” apparent in the depiction of a person and how in art, and more specifically, in Rembrandt’s art, it disappears. As stated previously, with Rembrandt, the life of a person is seen through their portrait; their entire coming into being is portrayed through the present image. The subject’s inner life is seen through a physical representation, and the viewer’s bodily perceptions observes this physical representation and interprets it via their own inner self. This is the circle that Simmel speaks of. (*Figure 5*)

Traditionally, there is a dualistic understanding of the human being containing both an inner and an outer, physical self. A viewer witnesses the physical portrayal of the model in a painting, but this image represents a culmination of the model’s lived experiences. Even though the viewer exists at the present state of the portrait, they are able to distinguish the stages of its becoming rather than its being. The inner life of the portrait is manifested through its physical representation. This outer, bodily, portrayal is viewed through the observer’s physical self, and taken in and meditated upon by their inner self.

Simmel says that the traditional view of the inner and outer self is only “so-called.” The only time one is able to separate the physical and mental elements in a

person or portrait are retrospectively. It is not dualistic, but exists in a unity. Rembrandt, “simply wanted to paint a human being the way they appeared – more precisely, his vision of this appearance – but for him, in his artistry, “appearance” had not yet divided into body and soul” (19). The inner life cannot be separated from the physical. Instead the subject exists as both. It is especially apparent in art. “Only art, whose objectifications preserve the closest relationships to the subjective immediacy of experience, seems to succeed in relatively unrefracted reflections of that unity; not a reunification – a synthesis in which the seams never disappear – but rather the reflection of an original inseparability that is presynthetic because it is preanalytic” (18). Thus, the ‘circle’ actually does not exist. The entire person of the observer of art perceives the entire subject of the portrait in its indivisibility.

Just as the inner and outer life are one unity, the past and present in his work are not divided, but one. Simmel states, “As a real experience of intuition, the phenomenon of a human being is a totality that somehow transcends the moment – something standing beyond the contrast between present and past, and perhaps even future” (33). We do not see a ‘moment of life that we can deduce earlier moments,’ but the whole of life is found within this moment.

### ***Older Subjects***

The subject’s history is in their painted appearance. Simmel states, “All this [life] forms our “appearance” in the widest sense in which each line is a result of our actual self and of the things and events around us” (96). He believes that because the paintings of Rembrandt portray the present as a result of an entire life lived some of his most moving and profound paintings are of older subjects. The resulting image of an older subject

brings out more of the person's history than it would of a younger person with less life experience, and this affects the way the image appears. Simmel states, "[Youth] is either a passionate reaction against the world, or a carefree expression or realization of itself, as if the world were not there. [Old age], however, is something that becomes free and steps back from the world, after one has absorbed it within oneself as experience and fate" (96). Simmel acknowledges that some of Rembrandt's paintings of younger people do reach profundity because in them he portrays possible future moments and their effect on the present. Depth in a person's life will create depth in their physical portrait; life forms the appearance of its subjects.

### **The Ability to Relate to the Painting**

The "becoming" that Rembrandt focuses on, the inner-life and outer-life unity is also mirrored in the method whereby he paints. In Rembrandt's paintings the viewer is able to see the process of the painting's becoming as well as the person of the painting's becoming in life. This is not true of classical paintings.

Because of this particular difference between them, there is reserve in the classical portrait figure, and openness in that of Rembrandt. When a subject or personality is disconnected from the steps that it took to develop that personality, it becomes an enigma, because we are unable to understand how it came into being. In classical and Renaissance art the character of the person who sits to get painted, and the character of the person within the painting are kept separate. "The human being is grasped here in a layer of his appearance, keeping us away from a certain intuition of his life, gives the impression of the inaccessibility of this *human being* as a subject beyond art" (13)! The image seen in the painting is seen as one that does not exist outside the

realm of art because of the method employed to paint. Classical art follows rules to govern how the being is being painted...“The elements carry each other, as it were” (14). This process “excludes in a certain sense and to a certain degree the understanding of this model’s temporally developed life” (13). Here, the inner life is not important, rather, the physical aspects of the *painting* are valued.

Rembrandt's portraits are less finished. We can see within them the process of their coming into being. “For there is something dark and clouded in our inner-exterior being that can be understood...only through the life process of its becoming” (13). These portraits are more relatable precisely because they seem to explain the process of their own existence. Simmel states, “It is because Rembrandt’s intricate conception of the human being, which is richer in elements and apparently less clarified, makes the sequence of developments and fates of the inner life that shaped the present appearance emotionally more accessible within, and empathic with, this appearance, and thus more intelligible from within” (14). There is no enigma or aloofness.

This principle is amplified with Rembrandt’s drawings. His drawings differ from his paintings and etchings because even though the latter bring to mind a process of becoming, that is, the whole of life in one single moment, they also represent a completed work of art. Although there is always an unfinished edge to his pieces, his paintings and etchings have an air of being whole in their artistry.

The drawings of other masters usually either are finished pieces of art or artistic studies—fragments of a “technical or preparatory nature” existing not to stand on their own, but to be used for something else. Rembrandt’s drawings do not have the “finished” quality that his paintings have, but neither do they exist as merely as an

experiment, practice of a technical skill, or sketch for some future completed piece of work. Mirroring life, they actually appear as a breath, with the impression of inhalations and exhalations preceding and following the expressive movement.

### **Reflections to Kant and Zeno**

The view of Kant and Simmel are different in some ways, but Simmel discusses how they have a similar view on the interpretation of life. Paraphrasing Kant, Simmel says that God, for which temporality does not exist, does not wait for a moment in life for which perfection is affixed, but views the life of the mortal as an entirety. It is neither the present nor the past, but exists in a unity, and thus is interpreted neither physically with the senses nor solely intellectually or of the inner life, but rather with a “total unitary function” encompassing both.

Rembrandt’s paintings go against ‘Zeno’s proof of the impossibility of the flying arrow.’ It says that the arrow passes through every given moment at a particular point. The arrow is thus at rest, however brief, at each point. The snapshot photographer and lesser artist portray movement in this way, as a moment in a movement is resting at a particular point. Rembrandt’s movements do not portray separate positions but a steady movement.

Each person that Rembrandt depicts represents a unique life because each life depends on the previous sequential choices and actions of that person. This principle is true even in Rembrandt’s series of paintings in which one person has been depicted in multiple stages throughout his or her life. Each moment in his paintings depicts life in its entirety, and each moment is unique and separate from the other moments. Although a depiction of people throughout their life shows the same life at different stages, the

moments are different. Thus each of these moments demonstrates a complete impression, or a whole life up to that point.

Rembrandt, according to Simmel, has a unique view of life. Each moment of life is not separate; the whole of each life is in each moment. The viewer is exposed to this view through the way that he depicts his portraits, figure based paintings and etchings, and drawings. One cannot look at his works of art with a purely artistic logic, Rembrandt did not intend them that way. In the 'abstract artistic view' the critic does not count anything beyond that which is only artistic, such as the inner life. Part of the merit in Rembrandt lies within the non-artistic elements of his paintings although they are brought about through the use of artistic means. Rembrandt's holistic view of life becomes a significant element of his work; through visual means he was able to "discuss" and consider his philosophy of life.

## CHAPTER 3:

### ART

#### Life and Form

Within the realm of art there are elements and principles that the masters rely on to create an aesthetic piece. Elements such as line, color, value, and others are used to further principles such as rhythm and harmony. These elements traditionally follow form. As stated before, one of the factors in which Rembrandt differs from his artistic compatriots is his particular paradigm of life. What makes his art unique is that he uses this life view to design his pieces. Rather than patterning his paintings after an artistic element like form, it is the relatively non-artistic principle of life—and his unique view of what this entails—which directs the artistic organization within his paintings.

There are two elements that appear as diametrically opposed; they are mutually exclusive – the emphasis of one leads to the de-emphasis of the other and vice versa. This is life and form. Life is changing; form is stable. If we look at the forms that exist from one point in existence to another, the form is not what changes. It is life that finds itself in between the forms that changes.

Imagine a video recording; it is made up of many film slides, one going after another. Each one film slide represents form; it is the physical – what we see. In Simmel's interpretation, life is not the entire video recording – the summation of all the film slides. It is the invisible pervading force, which determines each film slide. If there are two sequential slides sitting side by side, one slightly different than the other, they each have form – a different form – and their present form does not change. The form is

fixed. What causes the first to be different from the second is life. Life continuously constructs and deconstructs form.

Classical and Rembrandt art differ in the way that they treat form. With classical art, they organize the piece of art according to the form. The product is a result of logical rules in which one form is placed in relation to the other forms. With Rembrandt, the painting's resulting form is a product of the life. The life governs where the forms should rest. Life for great classical painters finds itself as a result of the forms that they have used. Life for Rembrandt is what controls the form. "Classical art seeks life via form. Rembrandt seeks form via life" (54). All great painters attempt to find a union for life and form.

### **Art as Art, not Reality**

The painting is a physical reality; it is, simply put, paint on canvas. A portrait is not the actual person, so how is it that we can see not only the physical aspect of a depicted person, but their entire self – the unity of the inner and outer persona, and its becoming into being. The "animation of the portrait" is the ability of the viewer to observe the inner life of a portrait even though they are confronted with an image of the person's physical self.

Photography is different; the more that it looks like the actual physical appearance of the object is how its merit is measured. Simmel suggests that art should be more than just a representation of the physical. Art is separate from physical reality, or just its representation. For something to be art the "content, stimulus, and meaning" should come from the work of art, not the model (22). The inspiration for a painting is from the outer world, but it is created by the inner world of the artist. They express the view of the



artist. Photography is a mechanical device that replicates exactly what it sees. The artist is a living, breathing person, interpreting the inner life of a model through his or her own inner life. Each line, each color and brushstroke is a conscious choice of the artist. The result is separate from reality. It takes inspiration from reality, but then it transforms into art. This art, then, can never be the exact corporeal reality.

### **Art as its Own Reality**

The typical view of art is that it mimics reality. This view can be stated, “An appearance is the appearance of something; indeed of that which represents something that awakens the *illusion* of its reality, just as reality is the *true* image of precisely this something” (142). This is not the case; the painting becomes *more* than just the representation of something. Simmel examines the fur collar in Rembrandt’s portrait of his mother (*Figure 6*) in which the collar is represented with a few etched lines. Says Simmel,

Had one never seen a real fur collar, one would never grasp (just as one would never be able to create) this complex of lines. However, this kind of technical indispensability, as it were, of this mediation does not establish any kind of necessary connection between it and the kind of category that is attained via it. However necessary it might be for accomplishing the jump, the springboard is naturally not the jump’s aim (147).

Reality and nature act as inspiration for Rembrandt’s art, however, it is not what he is trying to achieve. He makes art, not the appearance of reality; art then becomes its own reality. He continues,

The fur collar in Rembrandt's etching is not, as a photograph would be, a surface picture of that which his mother really wore. Rather it is exactly as autonomous as the real collar – a structure no less growing from its own roots, so to speak. It is not an “appearance” of a reality. On the contrary, it belongs to the artistic world and to its powers and laws, and therefore is thoroughly released from the alternate reality or appearance (148).

Art is its own reality. “The real fur collar and the etched fur collar are one and the same essence, expressed in terms of two fundamentally different and independent types...the idea of the fur collar is pronounced by reality and by art as by two languages” (149). Art goes beyond what is immediately given to the viewer, but it requires that we complete the image at hand with our own visual experiences.

The models have been transformed into art in Rembrandt's portraits. His paintings are not mere representations of the model and that particular model's inner life. The figures in his paintings are created from his mind, supplemented with the inspiration taken from the model that sits for him. Simmel states, “The creative mind objectifies itself in the constructs of autonomous characters with their own shaping and logic that are in boundless measure independent of the character, shaping, and logic of the personality who created them” (24). An entire life may be fabricated in the complete reality of a painting through the mental exercises of the artist.

### **Objectification of the Subject**

There are two temptations for artists dealing with realism. “To use the model merely as material or as apparel for the immediate mood and impulsiveness of his own strong subjective reality, or alternatively, to bring the fully grasped life of the model into

immediate reality, allowing the impression of reality to speak in place of the artist's vision" (26-27). The first is called "object-for-itself." This is where the painter gleans all inspiration directly from the model. The goal of this natural realism is to represent the physical actuality of the model as close as possible. The closer the depiction looks to reality, the better. The extreme example is photography.

The second temptation brings forth the artist's subjectivity and is called "subject-for-itself." Here the model only serves as an armature to express the artist's own inner life. The subjectivity of the artist is seen in the portrayal of the model. The artist as a subject becomes real in the painting. Simmel uses Velazquez as an example for this type.

In the first type of painting the inner life of the model is not depicted within the portrait; it is just a representation of the physical reality. In the second type, it is not the model's inner life that one can observe within the painting, but the artist's. Simmel gives the analogy of an actor,

In the actor's art, which offered the most appropriate analogy, two concomitant extremes drive the pure artistic form into reality. On one side stands the imitator whose performance fakes a real course of outside the sphere of art, a course of action that should lie within the category of the real for the audience and in which the stage merely enables him to move.

The contrast to this is the subjectivist actor who "plays himself" in all roles (25).

An actor who is inexperienced will simply regurgitate the lines that were given him directly back to the audience, delivered without any sort of life. There is nothing added to the lines delivered vocally that were not in the script. In art, this is when the lesser

artist simply replicates what is given. The more experienced actor may be able to put him or herself within the character they are playing. Thus, they act like themselves, but in the circumstances that their characters are put into. However, this type of actor is only able to play one sort of character; the one that is most like the actor. This occurs in art as well.

What Rembrandt does, and what Simmel believes all artists should strive for is a third option. This is where the actor creates a whole new person within the framework of the character he or she is given. The inspiration for the character can be taken from real life experiences, but they are actually a different person. This type of actor can convincingly play a variety of roles (e.g. immature, evil, dedicated, flighty, calculating, impulsive, benevolent, etc.) by endowing each role with *its own* life. “The inner life really can fabricate such a body that emerges from it as its real production but that nevertheless in its quality and its expression is that of another inner life” (23).

Rembrandt’s works are not always a realistic portrayal of his models, but he is not trying to replicate the appearance of his models. He takes inspiration from his models and creates a new person with its own inner life.

Besides the analogy of an actor, Simmel also gives the example of an historian who makes “inner connections” in the recorded history from his own life, but who has nonetheless, never experienced that which he is writing about. He gives a final example of a dramatist who creates characters that arise from his own impulses, but are separate from himself.

Thus, the solution that guards against the temptations of object-for-itself and subject-for-itself is the objectification of the subject. In self-portraits the model is the

artist himself, and so one treats it as objectively as possible, the inner life is already known about the model and the temptation to endeavor to portray the artist's inner life is removed. The two temptations are not applicable. Because the internal and external are simultaneously experienced, Rembrandt used self-portraiture in order to train himself to paint this unity. As he develops the formula for painting the unity that he is able to achieve, he uses what he has learned in the execution of his other portraits. Rembrandt's portraits go beyond both of the two first types of realism. He creates the entire unity of the person he is depicting. He fabricates this entire person from his own mental capacities and subjectivity, which subjectivity is not then projected on the resulting portraiture.

To be art, it must be more than just the representation of the corporeal reality. An artist must recreate the inner life of the person, and he does this through the impulses from his own inner self. Simmel states,

It really derives from the fact that it was an inner life that created the picture. And the fact that this is a different inner life from the one that is invested in, and speaks objectively out of, the painting cannot very well be a contradiction that negates this interpretation, because the same type of thing is realized in countless examples experienced daily (24).

As proved by historical and dramatic genres, it is possible to recreate another's inner life. Rembrandt uses this principle in his work.

## CHAPTER 4:

### HOW REMBRANDT CREATES HIS ART

#### The Spiritual Germ

Rembrandt's interpretation of life also serves as an analogy for his mode of painting. As a single moment represents the entirety of a life, one brushstroke represents the tone of the movement that is being depicted. Simmel gives an analogy of "a person [who] wants to express the deepest emotion pervading him completely. He does not have to utter the entire sentence that logically displays the content of that which moves him, since the tone of voice of the first words already reveals all" (8). The impression of the painting is there with the first stroke.

In art there is something separate from the actual piece which brings about its unity which is present from its beginning in order to determine the natural consecutive ordering of its parts. Simmel states,

Every work of art has some form of *extension* in space or time in which its parts range themselves with or alongside each other and form a unity. This unity must somehow be there from the beginning and determine the creation, otherwise it would be inconceivable on which basis the artist should be able to gather together the individual materials as something that fits together and forms a totality (27-28).

In the "classicist rationalist" tradition this extension was considered an "idea"; or a replication of the piece that had not yet been realized—almost like a miniature version of the piece itself. Simmel rejects this. He states, "The mind cannot produce the

multiplicity of individual parts instantaneously in one creative moment” (28). The definition of ‘idea’ in classical rational thought “is hardly anything other than a redundant duplication of the work of art through which it – actually unchanged – is transposed, if not theoretically then perhaps intuitively, onto the conceptual level” (28). Simmel rejects the idea that the complexity of the final piece can be entirely contained within a single idea.

Simmel believes that the formation of each work finds its origins within a “spiritual germ.” He states, “The visible elements (besides their immediate relation *to each other*) are shaped as though from a point lying behind them... We witness the dynamics of life and fate that forged the elements” (14). It is not an exact representation of the resulting piece in a smaller form, instead it is a seed of all the potentialities which grows organically. For Rembrandt,

The impulse of the movement – as it emerges from its kernel laden with or guided by its inner meaning – seems to form the basis. And out of this germ – this concentrated potentiality of the whole and of its meaning –the drawing develops part by part, just as the movement unfolds in reality. For him, the starting point of the foundation of the depiction is not the image of a moment as viewed from the outside as it were, in which the motion has reached its portrayable zenith – a self-contained cross-section of its temporal course. Rather, it contains from the outset the dynamic of the whole act concentrated into a unity. The entire expressive meaning of the movement, therefore, lies already in the very first stroke (7).

The creation of a melody follows a similar path. As a composer writes a song, the unity is somehow present before the song is written and assists in determining the onset of notes and tones. However, it does not exist in its entirety, because that would negate the need for composition. If the song pre-existed as a self-contained “idea”, it would only require writing it down to bring it into reality. This is not the case; the melody unfolds as it is composed. It develops to its maturity through an organic growth.

Rembrandt’s portraits embody this idea. The existence of the model is a stimulant for an even deeper intuitive impression felt by Rembrandt from which an organic progression takes place on the canvas. Because some of Rembrandt’s customers complained about the “poor likeness” of his portraits, he loses the details of specific models “in favor of their broad essentially decisive features” (30). It is because his loyalty lies with the art of the painting, not with recreating a person’s outer appearance. The intuitive nature of his portraits grasps more at the unity of a person than their outer physiology.

Great artists acutely study the natural world. Not so that they can replicate it, but so that their studies will act as fertilizer for the spiritual germ. The studies of the artists become intuitive to them and rather than being limited to the exact representations of something as they are creating art, they are able to feed the spiritual germ with all that they have gleaned.

The individuality of the person is depicted with a unity of both the spiritual and the corporeal being, and is able to be realized through the process of organic growth originating from a spiritual germ.



## Rembrandt's Composition

Composition is, “the structure of the painting as a whole” (42); it is how the visual elements are organized within a frame. In Renaissance art there is usually some sort of abstract form in which the figures are placed; the form exists and the artist situates the figures within this prearranged design. It is something that is not organic, and so it does not have an organic unity. Simmel says “The unity of the well-composed Renaissance painting is external to the content of the picture itself” (42), and he continues, “It should be thought of as abstract form: pyramid, group symmetry, contraposition within and between the individual figures; as forms whose independent meaning actually could also be filled with a different content” (42). Most paintings done by masters have some sort of unity in their composition, but this unity is separate from the figures. There is a schema or set of ratios into which the figures fit; the ‘golden ratio’ and other orthogons are an example of such a schema. It is only the lesser artists that arrange impulsively, that do not place their subjects in some kind of order.

Rembrandt's compositions are different in that they are arranged in an organic unity. The lives of the individual figures determine the organization of the group. He talks about a specific Rembrandt painting, *The Night Watch*, “The unity of the painting is, as it were, nothing in itself, not to be abstracted from the painting, not based on a form beyond the fulfillment of its purpose, but rather that its essence and its power are nothing other than the immediate interweaving of the vital forces that break out of each individual” (43-44). One cannot interchange these figures because they and the composition depend upon the relationships between them. Each figure contains its own unity, but they also affect one another.

The actual space of Rembrandt's paintings is filled with the same vivacity as his figures. Because it is filled with life, it actually becomes life through the unity of the forms within it. It is different from space in Renaissance paintings, which is a self-contained stage in which the figures are placed, and also Gothic space, which is a separate entity, which builds upon itself. The space in Rembrandt's paintings is dependent upon its figures. The relationship is organic.

## **Rembrandt's Visual Elements**

### *Degrees of Clarity*

With Renaissance paintings and other more geometric configurations, everything in the painting has the same degree of clarity. Form dominates this type of painting; there is evenness among all the parts of the picture. However, the act of causing every visual aspect in a painting to have the same emphasis is opposite the real visual experience. Simmel states,

Where the image of objects is taken from *life*, and in its reproduction is saturated by life, there is also unevenness in the execution; [in the] foreground and background, not merely in a spatial but also a qualitative sense. Life is the ranking of priorities: emphasized important matters and neglected inessential matters, the determination of midpoints and the graduation toward the periphery (48).

In life not only are there spatial inequalities, but qualitative ones. Because of the apparent inequalities, some components will have more emphasis.

Viewed externally, a Rembrandt painting appears uneven, however, this mimics the actuality of life. Simmel continues in his discussion by saying,

Here the structure of this image, viewed externally, is uneven, but from inside is unified. So is life itself. Viewed with regard to its phenomenon, results, projections, which the individual deposits externally as his own contents of existence, it is uneven and accidental, discontinuous and unjust. Viewed from the inside, however, all this, at least according to its idea, is the consistent, necessary, appropriate development of a unified germ (48).

There is an internal, organic unity, of which comes from the original spiritual germ. The diversity and gradation of clarity has to do with the emphasis of certain things within the painting, and the de-emphasis of others, which mirrors life. Viewed from the outside it appears uneven, but from an inner perspective it is unified.

In Renaissance paintings there is a preexisting form within which the parts of the picture are rationally installed. With Rembrandt the forms that exist in his paintings can only be that specific form. In this way each one represents an individuality that has been created because each can only exist as this form and no other; the form cannot be repeated to fit some other artistic purpose or composition. This is not only true for Rembrandt's portraits, but also his group paintings. Because of the gradation of the degrees of clarity within his paintings, Rembrandt's forms lead to individuality more than that of Renaissance art.

### *Details*

There is a view held that the details of a painting are what make the portrait individualized; that if the painting is lacking these details then it looks more commonplace. Simmel offers a different view. He says it is precisely the details that more people

have in common, and dwelling on these details will portray *less* of an individual. He gives an example of Arthur Schopenhauer,

Schopenhauer's incomparable individuality does not lie in his "personal" circumstances – that he was born in Danzig [Gdansk], that he was a bachelor unworthy of love, that he fell out with his family, and that he died in Frankfurt – because each of these traits is merely typical. Rather, his individuality, that which was personal and unique about Schopenhauer, is *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, his intellectual being and activity, which appears all the more individual the more one turns away not only from the particular circumstances of his existence, but also from the details of his achievement on an intellectual level (50).

The individuality comes with the unity of parts. The inner life guides the attitudes and actions of the person; a person's separate features such as residence, physical appearance, personal interactions or others are not the factors that shape their inner life. It is the collection and chronological ordering of all these constituents. The parts by themselves are typical and not unique; all these things in a unity arrange the individual. Instead of focusing on the external aspects of peoples' lives, one should focus on their inner life in order to view individuality. This unity transcends specific details and contains degrees of clarity.

## CHAPTER 5:

### THE MOTIVE THAT GUIDES THE APPEARANCE

#### Death

As previously discussed, a person's past can be made evident in a Rembrandt portrait. Another dimension of his work is that it also illuminates at least one future moment – that of death. Peoples' conceptions of death take various forms. One involves thinking about death as an end to life. To explain this idea Simmel gives an analogy of a string as life and death as the cutting of the string, confronting death at one moment in our life. Simmel says this is not so in Rembrandt's conception of death; death is always present during life. Not as an odious force looming over us ready to snatch us at any moment, but as an influence; our lives are so because death will come. Simmel states,

Death *inhabits* life from the onset...Life would be different from birth on, and in each of its moments and cross-sections, were we not to die. Death is related to life not like a possibility that at some point becomes reality, but rather our life only becomes life as we know it, and is only formed as it is, in that we...are always and already *such being that will die* (71).

Life would be different if there were no death, and so the fact that there is death influences the way we live our lives.

There are many conceptual dichotomies like the one that occurs between life and death, for example “good and evil, masculine and feminine, progress and stagnation” (72). More of one means less of the other; they are mutually exclusive. But if one observes only one side of the scale, for example, only the good of something, within this

category there is relative good and evil. Within the track of progress one can find both progress and stagnation, relatively. Within the category of life there are relative categories of life and death.

Classical art seeks laws and rules, which govern its form and composition, instead of the inner lives of the subjects themselves. These laws separate themselves from time and from individuality because the laws, which are general, govern them. They seek for an ideal or a general representation of an idea rather than the individual. The individual is not as important as something that can be generalized to humanity. Thus, classical art exhibits life in a restricted sense. Death is a foreign particle, and if painted characters experience it, it is sudden and unexpected. Rembrandt's figures embody the "whole life" precisely because they deal with death as a part of the flowing progression of life.

There is a tension apparent in all types of portraiture paintings. The nature of art is that it lasts long after its subject has past. The painting itself contains "timelessness" because through not only its existence but also the artistic principles that exist within its elements, it is separate from life. Simmel says that this tension is used by Rembrandt to make the concept of "death" perceptible. Because any painting is separate from the "sphere of life" (76) death is made more visible; it can be recognized more in the painting than in the actual life of the person of whom the depicted image finds its origins. The subject outside of the painting is someone who has a mortal timeframe and will someday die; he is running his course within the stream of life. A painting is timeless, and only a representation of a living breathing being – not the being themselves.

In classical art they try to eliminate the tension between the mortality of the subject within the painting and a-temporality of the nature of the portrait by reducing the

individual. Simmel states, “Only the individual dies, the type does not” (76). Classical artists paint the type; they portray the ideal in a general style, and not the individual. This makes the subject within the painting appear timeless, matching the nature of painting. Thus death is not made apparent.

This principle goes both ways; the more individual a person is and the less typified, the more death is felt. “The individual nature dies most profoundly because it lives most profoundly” (78). This is manifest in Rembrandt’s portraits. Because Rembrandt seeks to portray the whole individual life in one moment, the whole life must be made available, including death.

### **Traditional Artistic Aims**

Just as the presence of death affects how people live their lives, the artist’s motive, driving philosophy, and life view dictate how the resulting painting will appear. Traditionally the principles of character, beauty, and perfection have been guiding motivations for each artistic brushstroke. As the artist keeps these principles in mind, each mark on the canvas is colored toward expressing the artist’s philosophy toward one of these aims. Rembrandt deals with these principles in a different manner.

### ***Character***

Simmel says that an individual is made up of an essential person or character with which external events and environment has been interacting with since their birth. Other painters of a more classical persuasion seek to find that character and paint it, while Rembrandt’s figures do not display much, if any, of it. Says Simmel, “Titian draws more the characterological foundation of the whole life; Rembrandt more its culmination” (79).

The events of a person's life result in an individual who would be altered if the specific events occurred in another manner. Rembrandt is not interested in the character of a person, but what that character has become.

The "character" is made up of generalizable characteristics, of which can be included with any person, and so Rembrandt's method is actually more individualistic. Simmel states as he is discussing the nature of God,

Meister Eckart teaches that one must not love God because He is graceful, just, mighty, and so on, because these are individual, determined qualities which take from Him His absolute unity – His "nonbeing." Expressed differently, in that He possesses these general qualities, He becomes something special, He becomes individualized (80).

The events and experiences of a person's entire life course shape the uniqueness of that specific person. Rembrandt focuses on the individual rather than the essential character, which individuality is found through the culminating life course.

### ***Beauty***

Beauty, physical beauty, involves the appearance of things, and likewise, the perception of this appearance. People attach the value of beauty not only to living objects, but unlike moral values, also to nonliving objects. Simmel states, "Beauty can adhere to the stone, to the cascade and its rainbow, to the drift and the coloring of clouds, to the nonorganic as to the organic" (81). If the aim of an artwork is toward beauty, Simmel says the piece is either "shallow, or, where it has depth, it is symbolic – that is, it departs from that immediacy in order to supply us with values and meanings in the form of intuition or allegory of idea or mood" (82). Rembrandt does not use symbols in his



work; he does not strive toward beauty as an end product, as do classical and Renaissance paintings. He does not wholly oppose beauty, it is simply irrelevant. The reason for his unconcern with beauty in his paintings or even in the subjects that he paints is that he is driven by a different force.

There are various responses to a work of art through the lens of the audience. The non-artistic perception of whether the piece represents beauty deals with the beauty of the person or thing being painted. Simmel explains, “The beauty or ugliness of the represented figure is simply the same as the beauty or ugliness of the real living human being that imagination regards as the former’s archetype” (82). A non-artistic person will deem a painting of a woman beautiful if the woman in the portrait is beautiful.

The artistic perception differs from this perception. It does not matter the beauty of the person being portrayed; what matters is the beauty of the painting. Simmel illustrates how, “the human being within its frame means to artistry precisely only that which is visible on the canvas, and its beauty or ugliness is the totally immediate one of the lines and colors, no matter whether these represent a human being or an ornament” (82). Whatever is being portrayed, the formalistic analysis, or the compilation of lines, forms, and colors, must lead to a pleasing result.

Simmel believes the actual experience is based on a third type of perception. “We see...neither the human being beyond the paint marks that signify them, nor the paint marks beyond the human being whom they signify, but rather a new object” (82-83). He continues, “With this the miracle is complete, namely, that a number of paint marks composed side by side receive a complete and coherent life that is something other than that represented by the category of reality” (83). This coherent life, for Rembrandt, holds

great significance. He sought to portray inner-life, becoming, individuality, and other principles. With these elements in mind, beauty remained an unimportant motive.

It must be acknowledged, Rembrandt does have an appreciation for the beautiful. He has a “passion for the beauty of beautiful things” (83). In his paintings he uses color and “arms and jewelry, for old fabrics with their dull and glowing colors” (83). As with most human beings materially beautiful things hold interest for Rembrandt, and this “demands from the picture surface, as a symphony of colors, a beauty that is indifferent toward all “meaning,” toward all meaning of the objects expressed by it” (83). However, “He never demanded from beauty the decisive inner values, as did Michelangelo.” Simmel continues, “However mightily visible beauty, at least at times, enchanted him, it remained as such always something exterior that the soul did not touch...in its life belonging to itself and in its expression, and precisely thereby accompanied it more peacefully” (84). He enjoyed the appearance of physically beautiful things, but his paintings focused elsewhere.

### ***Perfection***

A discussion of beauty in art is oftentimes coupled with a discussion of perfection. In this case, perfection means without flaw. Through this definition, perfection does not touch our souls; it is unreachable and thus unrelatable. Since we cannot relate we are not moved. Simmel illustrates, “There exists a perfection in works of art with which it does not achieve the deepest impression of empathetic experience and appropriation” (84). Perfect art objects have “erased each sign...each possibility of earthly imperfection...[and thus] we miss a certain inner tangibility of the work” (85).

Though Rembrandt's works were sometimes confusing in regards to technical aspects of his work, his viewers still relate to them.

Paintings that portray beings without opportunities for flaw have been removed from the life process. Simmel explains, "The perfect works, in the above sense, lack a moment that, however unconscious it may be, seems to be necessary for the deepest human shock created by a human work, namely the possibility of failure" (85). This is why "religions supply a "story of temptation" even to their saviors" (85). In the Bible, Jesus Christ's perfection existed before He was tempted, but it was made apparent and noticeable after His temptation with the devil in the wilderness. Rembrandt's works have been "subjected to life's fate with its possibility of failure, even where this possibility has not in the smallest degree become reality" (85). Rembrandt's intentions do not position themselves toward that perfection left untouched by the life process.

### **The Aims of Rembrandt: Individuality and Life**

Instead of seeking for beauty, perfection, or character as his ultimate intention "the point of individuality is decisive for the human phenomenon, and he develops this out of the flowing liveliness of the whole personality" (87). Rembrandt seeks the individuality of his figures through the totality of their life experiences. The Renaissance and classical era create an "impression of typicality" in art and Rembrandt the "impression of individuality" (87). Rembrandt's portrait figure "does not converge into a formulated, or merely felt, or really effective general concept, but exhausts itself completely in each individual figure" (88). Renaissance and classical portraits have a harmony among their figures, which unites them in their nature. They are alike in nature and their individuality comes from certain traits, which are typical to that person. For

Rembrandt each of his portraits contains their own self-sufficient individuality. They are completely absorbed in their own individuality. Rembrandt does not concern himself with trying to unite them. He does not follow formula when he shapes their features. The elements of a particular portrait assist in creating only that portrait, and the individuality emerges from the specific life lived.

Though he emphasizes the individual, individualization is not accentuated, as it was in the Renaissance. Simmel points out that at the beginning of the period of the Renaissance, “there was no general fashion in men’s clothes because everyone wished to dress in a unique fashion” (89), however, one could compare one article of clothing with another because they share a general type. For Rembrandt, “His individualization only means that the presented appearance in question is determined by, and, so to speak, visually understood with respect to, the total stream of life leading toward it that simply is, and can only be, the life of this one person” (89). Renaissance individuals strive to be unique—just like all of the individuals of that time. Rembrandt’s individuals just happen to be unique because their life course is different from anyone else’s.

### **Life Philosophies of Michelangelo and Rodin**

The method whereby Michelangelo, Rodin, and Rembrandt paint are as a result of their concepts of life. Because of the nature of Rembrandt’s paintings, we can see “a certain limitation of his conception of the human being that...contrasts sharply with...that of Michelangelo, and that of Rodin” (101). The works of art of these other artists are influenced by a different paradigm than Rembrandt.

Both Michelangelo and Rembrandt deal with the issue of human fate within their concept of life. For Michelangelo what is defined as life “has humankind as its subject

and as its content; all that one could call...fate” (102). Rembrandt may agree with this concept of fate being a culmination of life experiences, however, fate in Michelangelo’s figures separates itself from the person. Simmel explains, “If fate means that a world-immanent process, independent of the subject, nevertheless stands in teleological meaningful relationship...to the innermost direction of the life of this subject...this relationship takes the form of that which confronts them” (102). Michelangelo’s antagonistic fate can be thought of as a separate confrontational force.

Like Michelangelo, Rembrandt agrees, “the whole life immediately is their fate” (102). However, fate “does not soar above them as human fate in general only descending upon the individual; rather it bursts out of them” (102). In Rembrandt’s work the fate is within the person rather than a separate entity acting upon the person. Simmel states, “The intimacy that characterizes all Rembrandt’s representations exists here also between the person and his fate, however dull and ordinary, however wearisome or fragile it may be” (103). For Rembrandt, fate is life; it helps determine who the person is and how they appear in their portraits.

Michelangelo’s figures are limited or ‘constrained’ to portray something heroic or mighty—to transcend the individual. Simmel states,

Michelangelo’s figures, deposit all of their mightiness and perfection give the impression of constraint. Fate and life...belonging to humankind in general, overpower them. The figures seek to defend themselves against them and shake them off, but cannot do so because they are *nevertheless* their own nature... [Rembrandt] has shown how in the ideal image of each human being there dwells a freedom and self-esteem as soon as the

moment, grasped in the picture, really grows out of the continuity of his life (104).

For Rembrandt it is enough to be an individual. There does not have to be a battle between a person and his fate. Fate may not be a grand thing, but it is a part of the individual. Because the fate is within each figure, his work has a sense of freedom.

Differing from both Rembrandt and Michelangelo, Rodin's figures are expressed with a Heracliteanistic view of life. Heracliteanism involves, "all the seeming unity of its contour is nothing other than the vibration and surging movement of the exchange of forces" (105). For Rodin, "The intention of the feeling no longer lies in the fate of humankind [as it does in Michelangelo and Rembrandt]...but, rather in the rhythm of movement of the cosmic process in general" (105). The individual is not important nor his fate, rather it is the cosmos and the forces involved in such, against which the individual is powerless.

Form is dissolved in Rodin's work, as it is in Rembrandt, "however, in Rodin coming into being and into process does not simultaneously accomplish consolidation into totally new meaning, nor the form of a single sequence of individuality" (105). Rembrandt does not "confront the totality of the world with the eternity of its laws and fates...[Life] is the task which Rembrandt's...representation brings to a conclusion" (108). The work of Rembrandt "elects the greatness and depth, the miracle of individuality and the beauty of life remaining within itself" (108). In each of these master's works a life philosophy is present; in Michelangelo's it is the struggle between a man and his fate, in Rodin's it is Heracliteanism, and in Rembrandt's it is the totality of life.

## **Rembrandt Portrays the Individual**

### ***Typification and Individualization***

Classical and Renaissance art represents the ideal, or something external. Rembrandt art pulls from within his own experience. In classical and Renaissance traditions the individual always views himself as viewed by others, in German culture, where Rembrandt resided, they exist for themselves. Simmel states, “[The] German not only sings “for himself,” but also as though out of an inner mood...the Italian sings at such moments as if for an audience, and as if standing on a podium” (62). This is translated into painting.

If everything is viewed from the outside, things are more ideal and more general. Things are separated into “types.” Says Simmel,

The Greeks find a small stock of forms that present themselves as the generalized representation of very diverse contents and shades of emotions...In the classical period, the elements are formed as if to evoke the most favorable impression in a typical viewer with respect to characterization, beauty, and clarity (61).

Rather than finding the unique individuality of each object, the Greeks found rules and forms to represent the ideal type. The ideal was the object sought after, canons of human figures were established, and individuality in painting was lost. In this tradition, people did not seek to be individual, nor did they seek simply to fit in the crowd. Their desires were set on an ideal—physically, intellectually and in their conduct. Paintings likewise followed after what was thought of as ideal, which does not represent an individual person, but an ideal person

Rembrandt rejects seeking after types, even if the type is 'ideal,' in favor of individuality. Simmel states, "The portrait figures of the Renaissance always appear to be somehow typical, while Rembrandt's give the impression of individual uniqueness" (61). The paintings are still organized, but they are patterned after the inner life of the individual which does not borrow any type of form or follow general laws. Each painting is separate and follow their own principles which are based upon that particular person in the particular painting.

### ***Identifying Personality***

There are at least two conceptions of life, or two ways in which we claim to know the nature of other people. The first traditional method involves general ascribed categories of that person's demeanor – "clever or stupid, generous or petty" and so on. Simmel says in regards to deciphering the nature of people this way, "I do not, thereby, know this human being from within, but rather my knowledge flows from concepts that I have already brought with me" (66). It is information that one receives secondary.

The second conception of life is the very first impression of the person when they walk into a room. It does not mean that with the first glance the viewer places the subject into one of these categories (e.g. that person looks clever/stupid, benevolent/kind, etc.). It is the impression of the particular self of the person, which is unique. When a viewer observes another person the knowledge of that person continuously increases, but that knowledge only supplements the first initial impression. Rembrandt's portraits manifest the second conception of life through tangible means.

Classical art follows more the first conception of life, or at least is similar in its philosophy. As stated before, classical art follows general forms, just as the categories of



“clever” and “stupid” are general. However, Simmel states, “This existence may share its form...with countless others...it still remains only this one [existence] in its temporality extending from one noninterchangeable point of being to another noninterchangeable one. As previously stated, its form and its contents may be comparable, but its process is beyond the alternative of comparability and incomparability” (68). Life brings individuality, and following principles of form brings generality. The second conception of life shows the individuality of each life. Forms may appear identical, but the two existences will always remain separate from each other.

## **The Unity of Rembrandt’s Paintings**

### ***Generality***

The traditional view of generality believes that a group of individual elements have something in common. In this view the individual maintains distinct boundaries and separates itself from the general. Any element of the group may be either individual or general. However, for Rembrandt, “the membranes have been torn up, washed away by the surge of life in which each singularity of life is enclosed and appears as isolated against the other, so the existing generality does not go beyond the individuality that is the bearer of precisely that life” (93). The ‘generality’ of Rembrandt paintings is not that each individual feature contains individuality, that is that each part contains its own emphasis, or that there is an ‘evenness of form’ where each piece or feature contains the same amount of emphasis. Instead it means that each piece works together for the unity of the whole. The inner life – Rembrandt’s focus, or that which is sought for during the painting’s creation –causes each of the separate elements of the piece to work together. Simmel gives an example of a face. It is both unified and individual; each feature is its

own but also belonging and finding meaning in the unity of all the features. The generality of Rembrandt does not involve some general trait of the individual features, instead each entity is engaged toward the same objective.

### *Atmosphere*

The mood/atmosphere of the painting transcends individuality. Simmel states, “Mood is something interior, personal, perhaps something individual for each, which has nevertheless extinguished all particularity of contents” (100). The painting creates this atmosphere as it ties individuals together. In one piece, “the figures are like the tones of the chord that are clearly not external to the individual tones but they are merged in the chord into a construct that cannot be displayed pro rata in each separate tone” (100). Each movement of each figure is as a result of their inner life, which is very much individual, but then in some paintings more than one figure or other separate elements of the piece can be pulled together to express an interaction of individuals, which interaction transcend the individuals themselves. In another painting Simmel says how “life contained in each of the two figures nevertheless continuously extends into a shared atmosphere wafting around them” (100). He continues to say, “A higher unity has absorbed the being-for-themselves of the individuals whose singularity falls away in the face of this unity, which yet nourishes it with the ultimate generality of their life” (100-101). The conglomeration creates a mood of the painting of which each individual life takes part.

## CHAPTER 6:

### RELIGIOUS ART

Much of Rembrandt's most profound and celebrated pieces of art are religious in nature. Because of this, Simmel discusses issues involved with his religious art.

#### Two Types of Religion

According to Simmel there are basically two forms of religion in human history, the objective and the subjective. The objective has to do with "the *objectivity* of religious or ecclesiastical facts: a world enclosed within itself and constructed in conformity with its own laws...absolutely indifferent to the individual who can only accept and respect it" (111). This type represents religion as an object, something separate from the self and something that is acted upon. The subjective is "religion transposed entirely into the *inner life* of the subject; or perhaps better: consisting in the inner life of the subject...All religious significance now lies completely in the qualities and movements of individual souls" (111). There is a religion of doing, which is objective, and there is a religion of being, which affects what one does. Simmel explains, "The structures through which religion becomes something historical and visible (dogma, cult, church) are at best of secondary importance to those for whom religion consists in an experience" (112). Simmel states that there is an "immediate relationship between the soul and God," or what can be thought of as God. He continues, "[This relationship] can only be played out within the soul itself ... Were subjective religiosity truly to be realized...then it would consist in the life process itself – in the way the religious person lives each hour – not, however, in any specific contents, nor in the belief in any specific realities" (112).

Subjective religion is found within and objective without, and the former influences the daily actions of the individual whereas the latter does not.

## **Rembrandt's Religion**

### ***Piety***

In his paintings, Rembrandt focuses on subjective religion—the religious *person* or, as Simmel later terms it, piety. Simmel states of Rembrandt,

He does not make the object of belief visible, and in his representations of Jesus, Jesus never has the character of a transcendent reality but rather that of an empirical human one... The religious element that he calls into artistic appearance is *piety* as produced in its many variations by the individual soul. This soul may be stimulated by otherworldly powers, embraced and determined by divine being. But it is not this that Rembrandt displays, but rather the condition that this soul, presupposing all this and with its specific powers, brings forth; a condition that can only exist within human souls and express itself through human, earthly bodies (114).

Rembrandt shows the human side of Christ, rather than His divine power. He does not treat religion as something transcendent or otherworldly, instead it is the way the life of the person he is portraying is lived. Simmel continues, “Religiosity, as the basic form of personal life...makes every scene of this life the place in which a religious tone or value can exist—indeed must exist” (115). Religiosity or spirituality affixes to a person and becomes a part of their being. Simmel quotes Luther when he says, “servant and maidservant, when they do as their master and mistress bid, serve God, and, insofar as

they believe in Christ, God is more pleased by them sweeping the parlor or cleaning shoes than by all the monks praying, fasting, holding mass, and whatever else they boast they do in God's praise"(117). For these of whom Luther speaks, "piety really is the "aim," the final value point, of their inner being" (118). When a person's religiosity is a part of his/her "inner-life" it is manifest in painting without being objectively religious.

### ***Dogmatic Contents***

Simmel states that in Rembrandt, "the decisive rejection of all dogmatic content has been accomplished" (151). Because Rembrandt approaches religion in his painting in a subjective rather an objective way, there are certain limitations certain "lacunae" or gaps in his "sphere of psychological experiences." Some things can only be reached or "only appear with the transposition of life's religious emphasis onto objective religious content" (154). The idea of "hope" is one of these things. It is a source outside of the painting, and because Rembrandt's paintings do not glean material from outside suppliers, "hope" is not evident in his paintings. Also Rembrandt's figures "stand totally beyond the alternative of temptation and salvation" (154). These issues would spring from resources external to the work and so Rembrandt is not able to portray them.

### ***Religion as Concrete Existence***

Religion, at least subjective religion, is manifest within the folds of actual life. In Rembrandt's religious paintings, religiosity shapes concrete life just as the inner life shapes the physical nature of his portraits. This is because in his religious paintings religiosity is the person's inner life. Simmel states, "There are some [paintings]... that display rapt attention to the represented existence...Rembrandt's religious paintings,

however, reveal things from the other direction, in which the singular visible existence attaches itself to the religious...not the fruit, but the root” (120). He continues by saying, “Religious here is a way in which life is lived” (121), and this is brought out in his paintings.

## **Central Concepts Considered in Religious Work**

### ***Unity in Religious Paintings***

Life is more than the sum of its parts, as is society. Society is more than individuals who coincidentally reside in proximity to each other. It becomes something else entirely as these individuals interact. This happens within a painting. Simmel explains, “Where a number of persons are gathered within a frame...we generally experience a unity that is something higher and more indivisible than the sum of its parts...In each case from a unity that somehow lies beyond the participants’ individual qualities” (122). As stated before, the unity in a Renaissance painting has to do with form and law whereas with Rembrandt the unity lies with the lives of the people being portrayed. In Rembrandt’s religious paintings, piety is the inner-life of the individuals, and so it is subjective religion, which creates the overarching harmony within the composition. Simmel states, “The fact that in Rembrandt’s paintings piety is the way in which the individual lives stands precisely in mutual determination to the unity of the way they are brought together” (123). However, Simmel continues, “The whole remains bound [and dependent] to the personal elements in their individuality” (122-123). Religiosity, and religion (subjective not objective) *is* the inner life of the person in the painting, or the unity of the people in the painting, which binds them together but at the

same time preserves their individuality. Their individuality and each inner life has the same focus; that of piety.

### ***Individuality in Religious Paintings***

Although the figures all share various degrees of piety, their individuality is preserved. Simmel explains, “The religiosity of his figures lack generalized character not only because the latter is an abstraction, not only because the religious *life* (in contrast with religious *contents*) can only adhere to individual bearers, but also because it is something commanding, something vis-à-vis the individual” (124). In Rembrandt’s work the religiosity of the figures “is not the emanation of any content...but rather a life process, a function that can only take place within the individual” (124). Religion is unique for each person and unlike objective religion in Rembrandt’s paintings religion does not act upon the individual like a general law. Rembrandt’s depictions of Christ do not have “any suggestion that the Redeemer is shown to belong to another order in an objective-metaphysical sense. He only has the stronger, the strongest, *religiosity*” (125). Christ is relatable precisely because He is shown as an individual; His Holiness is made apparent because of His individual piety. In Rembrandt’s profound religious paintings, “Jesus is merely the most heightened of Rembrandt’s religious figures whose dissimilarity to the nonreligious is determined exclusively by their respective individual inwardness. This may be borne by a grace, by some power flowing out of the sphere of the superhuman, but Rembrandt does not enquire after this” (125-126). The objective in religion does not interest Rembrandt. The figures of Rembrandt would “live in this state of piety even when no God existed or was believed in” (127). Each individual soul determines his or her interpretation of religious value. Many of his figures shares this

subjective form of religiosity, however, they maintain individuality because each figure feels piety within their own inner life, which inner-life is unique to that individual.

Although Rembrandt focuses on subjective religion, this piety is felt as a concrete value—something objective—not that the religion itself is objective religion, but that it can be seen objectively in painting. Simmel states,

Precisely this *certainty of life's fundament*, as it lies in the religiosity expressed by Rembrandt, relieves the subjectivity of religiosity from its mere accidental nature as though it were an ebbing and flowing “atmosphere” with which the subject had to come to terms without it having an objective meaning...here religious conduct residing exclusively in the individual is made felt as an eternal value (126).

Simmel continues, “The religious quality of the subject is itself something objective, is an existence that in and of itself has metaphysical meaning” (126). In Rembrandt’s paintings subjective religion is manifested in a tangible, more objective, manner.

### ***Inner Life in Religious Paintings***

Rembrandt portrays the religious in “the way in which these people live” (130). The religious person “is itself something *metaphysical* (a value outside time that is borne exclusively by the inwardness of these temporal individuals)” (130). Simmel states, “There are religious works of art whose object does not at all need to be religions, just as...there are completely nonreligious art works whose object is religious” (132). He continues, “This primary subjectivism turns out to be an absolutely objective value in that, on the one hand, represents in the figures something metaphysical in itself – the absolute significance of the religious soul – and, on the other hand, the art itself has



become an *a priori* that possesses the full objectivity of the form of art immanent within the conditions of objective creation” (135). The subjectivity of the individuals in Rembrandt’s paintings – their religious fervor and piety which is individual to them and originates from within each person, rather than an objective force that acts upon them – is something that actually becomes somewhat objective. Even though it originates from within, it outwardly binds them together so that the piece of art becomes something metaphysical that rests outside the soul.

### **Metaphysical Shown through Physical**

There are three points that Simmel makes in showing that something beyond what is immediately given can actually be seen in the present image.

#### ***The Painter of the Soul***

The first point shows that the religiosity of a person can be made to feel, in itself, metaphysical, because what people normally view as metaphysical, and of which is normally portrayed in religious paintings, Rembrandt excludes from his religious paintings. Rembrandt is the “painter of the soul” (130). He does not attempt to fit the being, the soul, into the greater cosmos. The soul remains a sufficient subject for Rembrandt to paint without having to tie it to something overtly ethereal. Because it is not tied to anything thought to be more significant, it is itself the significant entity for Rembrandt. Simmel explains, “Precisely because Rembrandt is the “painter of the soul” his figures...lack that difficult to define cachet of the *cosmic* as it exists” (131). He continues by saying, “The Rembrandian focusing all interest on the soul does not allow itself to arrive at such a relationship in either the object, or in the way in which it is

represented” (131). He gives an example in *The Resurrection of Christ*, in Munich. There is “an existence and a worth that is sovereign and to a degree untouchable with respect to all others; a valuable realm of subjectivity in itself that clearly lacks the inclusion of and by the worldly, and perhaps also the otherworldly, cosmos” (132). Because of his exclusion of typical metaphysical representations, Rembrandt’s figures themselves become something metaphysical.

### ***The Religious Artist***

Another way in which Rembrandt is able to bring about the objectivity of a subjective religion in his paintings is that “He as *painter*...is religious” (134). Simmel states, “The subject is formed and animated in the process of becoming art in such a way that it becomes completely absorbed into the character of the artistic process whereas precisely this character of the artistic function is fed by the most general meaning of the subject, far transcending its individual details” (133-134). A religious man fertilizes the germ cell spoken of previously—that which influences the outcome of the paintings with his inner religious influences. Simmel states, “With Rembrandt...the painting itself draws its sustenance from the general basic motif of the represented event; its religious being, and it is through the medium of the artistic process determined in this way that the event is in turn drawn into religious being” (133). Rembrandt paints like a religious and pious person, and it influences the way that his work is created.

### ***Rembrandt’s Light***

A third point that deals with Simmel’s interpretation of the portrayal of a subjective religion as objective, is the example of Rembrandtian light. Rembrandt’s light

is an element he receives much, if not the most, accolades for. In his paintings, light is subjective and metaphysical, but also physically manifested in painting. Rembrandt light varies from other masters because it does not originate from an outside source. Simmel says, “His specific light may well emanate neither from the sun nor from an artificial source, but rather out of the artistic imagination” (135). In Rembrandt’s paintings religion does not act upon the figures but is born inside of them, and likewise Rembrandtian light is not a force that acts upon them, instead it originates within each figure. Simmel continues, “This light behaves like the religious expression of being...this light is, so to speak, religious as a natural reality just as those figures are religious as inner reality” (135). However, this light becomes an objective formalistic feature that the viewer is able to identify. Simmel states, “Rembrandtian light is something clearly sensually earthly that points to nothing beyond itself but is as such something beyond the empirical. It is the metaphysical transfiguration of visible being that does not raise the latter into a higher order; rather it makes tangible the fact that it is itself and immediately a higher order” (135). The transcendent nature of Rembrandt’s light mirrors the painting’s religious nature.

The figures of Rembrandt themselves aren’t complex or ideal figures as more Renaissance style figures. Simmel describes Rembrandt’s characters as “simple characters lacking any subjective imagination, earthy, gruff – and in themselves already participating in that immanent religiosity they are once more embraced by light in order to bear a totality that manifests the same character of a pure inner transfiguration – an earthiness that is transcendent without reaching beyond itself” (136). The figures show forth their piety in their simplicity, which emanates from within but at the same time is

manifested outside of themselves. The light encircles them and bears them up to a higher more transcendent plain, but at the same time the light does not come from an outside source; it comes from their inner life – from their life of simplicity.

Light is not a symbol of celestial power, instead it creates an atmosphere which can be seen as religious. “Light is an immediate religious atmosphere, a religious coloring of the world. While in other paintings a shaft of light pouring from an open heaven or emanating from the Christ Child, for example, are symbols, here it does not symbolize anything” (137). Light is another expression of life.

His light is not mechanical, but organic and dependent upon the life form. “Rembrandt contains the light within the painting and uses its infinity only for the painting’s interiority” (139). The light does not come from an outside source. Instead the entire life of the painting *is in the painting*. Simmel states:

Thus, Rembrandt’s light is restricted to the space and action of each respective painting, but this means...the elevation of the picture over each particularity into *its own* highest generality; into the highest possible expression of its pure and sublime nature...It displays, as I have already said, not the unity of the painting with something that is external to it, but the final and simplest unit of the painting itself (139).

It does not borrow from an outside source. It may have inspiration from an outside source, but the individual in the painting is the individual *for the painting*. It’s entire life is within the painting. Its world is within the four canvassed corners.

Simmel talks about how Rembrandt views light and dark. “Rembrandt, who renounces the emphasis on the part to the advantage of the individuality of the whole, never allows it to come to this kind of separation” (140). He continues by saying, “They [the principles of light and dark] are for him like siblings whose essential natures and spheres of activity merge gently into each other and who never forget the commonality of their origin, that is, the unity of the picture itself that pervades all singular elements” (141). The unity is what remains vital.

The world inside the painting, which does not receive anything from outside sources, it is self-containing. Simmel says it seeks, “to obtain its effect from within itself” (141). The light found therein “originates entirely from within the painting...His light is only the light of this painting. Thus the painting is released from reality more than in any other case. It grows self-sufficiently out of different roots from that of earthly reality” (141-142). This non-symbolic, organic light manifests itself as an objective form of the subjective, and is created and contained within each painting.

## Summary

Simmel’s interpretation of Rembrandt’s life philosophy expresses life as a totality. He states, “Each of the parties contain the whole...life – it may be necessary to separate them, but not to choose between them” (162). This totality is found within each expression of life. The inner life can be separated from the outer life only in retrospect and is expressed in the physical manifestation of Rembrandt’s artwork. Rembrandt creates his artwork by beginning with a spiritual germ that guides the entire creation. His aim is toward expressing the totality of life of the individual. His concern toward these intentions is apparent in the method of his artistic procreation; he organizes his

composition around life, he forgoes details in favor of the individual, and the process of creating his paintings is left for the viewer to see. The world of the painting is self-sufficient; it becomes its own reality because it is separate from reality outside of the piece. The religious paintings of Rembrandt reflect the subjective religion that Rembrandt himself experiences. Simmal says that art does not have antitheses; it transcends antitheses. In the world of the painting there is no opposition; what is said as truth, *is* truth – in the painting. He says, “[Art] gushes out of the deepest – yes, the most singular unique – aspect of the personality as its expression, and yet allows this peculiarity to be experienced as a vessel of that which is general and all-unifying” (160). An examination of Rembrandt’s work expresses insight into his interpretations of piety, unity, and individuality.

## CHAPTER 7:

### APPROACHING A SOCIOLOGY OF THE AESTHETIC

*When I heard the learn'd astronomer,  
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,  
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,  
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in the  
lecture-room,  
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,  
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,  
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,  
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.*

Walt Whitman (1855)

#### **Reactionary**

The editors forewarn that the text is, “reactionary” (xvii). It has nothing to do with “the contextualization of the artist’s work, on the material conditions of the production of that art, on the facilitating and constraining role of patronage, on the significance of reception, and so on” (xii). According to the editors, the book is not empirical—it is not a traditional sociological approach to art, and this means that the book is simply reactionary, which strikes dangerous resemblance to presenting itself as a collection of Simmel’s opinions.

In the introduction of the thesis I quoted David Myers (2008) who noted that our thinking is partly controlled and partly automatic. The ‘controlled’ part of thinking, in

the sociology tradition, is reserved for method. People usually place reaction under the 'automatic' and reflective side of their thinking processes. Myers states that the power of reaction is defined as "immediately knowing something without reasoning or analysis" (84). John Bargh and Tanya Chartrand (1999) also examine automatic thinking processes, "Most of a person's everyday life is determined not by their conscious intentions and deliberate choices but by mental processes that are put into motion by features of the environment and that operate outside of conscious awareness and guidance" (480). According to Bargh and Chartrand, environmental factors and social structures lead the individual to think and, correspondingly, perform according to these external factors.

This sort of automatic thinking may be dangerous. Prejudice, stereotypes, and biases can be set in place without being a conscious choice of the individual (Banaji 2004; Barge and Chartrand 1999; Devine 2005; Greenwald et al 2000). In tests performed by Michael Gazzaniga (1992, 1998) patients whose brain hemispheres have been surgically separated fabricate reasons for the behavior that their automatic thinking processes have demanded of them. For example, when a researcher flashed the word "walk" to the right, nonverbal hemisphere, a patient will get up to walk. When the patient is questioned as to why he or she is walking, they will make up an excuse such as "I was thirsty and I wanted to get a drink of water." The reason that the patient began walking is because their right hemisphere picked up the message; however, their left hemisphere is unaware of why they are walking, so it verbalizes a reason, and the patient believes it. Is Simmel's book a part of this type of process?



### ***Beauty as Reaction***

Upon reading Simmel's text and considering whether or not it was reactionary, we may reflect upon beauty—not beauty as an aesthetic principle as Simmel considers, but as affixed to human appearance. People determine human beauty based on reactionary processes rather than analytical method; it is more of an intuitive measure than a deliberate choice. For example, research shows that culture affects body type preference. It has been shown that cultures with scarce resources generally prefer heavier women, and in cultures with abundant resources a thinner female body type is preferred (Anderson, Crawford, Nadeau, & Lindberg, 1992; Furnham & Baguma, 1994; Symons, 1979). Jeffery Sobal and Albert Stunkard (1989) take this argument even further; they show that in cultures with limited resources female body weight and socioeconomic status are directly related, and in cultures with abundant resources, these two characteristics are inversely related. To account for this tendency, Leif Nelson and Evan Morrison (2005) declare, “When resources are scarce, people risk malnutrition, but when resources are abundant, people risk, if anything, overconsumption” (167). Whether or not a body type is considered beautiful depends on the resources of a culture and how this culture interprets status according to the consumption of said resources.

Nelson and Morrison (2005) took this trend to an individual level when they completed four studies. The first study determined if the literal possession of cash affected how participants perceived ideal body weight. Males without money in their pockets preferred slightly heavier women than those with money. The second study asked participants the combined amount in their checking and savings account. Some were asked with an 11-point scale in increments of 50, from 1 (\$0-\$50) to 11 (over \$500),

and others were asked with the same scale in increments of 500, from (\$0-\$500) to 11 (over \$400,000). The first scale was used to cause participants to feel relative affluence; they usually answered in with the highest response option. The second scale caused relative poverty; the participants usually used the bottom of the scale. Even if male students had the same amount of money in the bank, those who felt relative poverty preferred heavier women than those of relative affluence. The location of the last two studies was at the dining hall, where students were either entering or exiting. Hungry male students preferred heavier women than those who were satiated. The article states that “temporary affective states can produce individual variation in mate preferences that mirrors an otherwise unexplained pattern of cultural norms” and the reason for this is that “subjective experience of resource deprivation provides implicit cues about collective resources” (172, see Neumann et al., 2003; Schwartz, 1990). Regardless of the reason, men’s preferences for beauty of the female body type rested upon something extrinsic. These judgments were made intuitively, but they depended on environmental and social stimuli.

However, the whole point of the new approach whereby to study aesthetics is to acknowledge that the import of art lies beyond merely existing as a product of culture. Likewise, I cannot acknowledge that Simmel’s ‘reaction’ or his ‘automatic thinking process’ was completely determined by environmental and social stimuli. Judith Langlois and her fellow researchers (2000) examine maxims of beauty in a meta-analysis. The age-old axiom, “beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” has been stated quite boldly. As seen in the studies of female body type, this quip may appear as a truism. To a male, whether or not a female’s size appears beautiful depends on that male, his procured

resources, and the meaning this brings as interpreted through culture. However, when examining *facial* attractiveness instead of body attractiveness Langlois examines the research available to study this question both within and across-cultures. As with the body-type studies, in the facial attractiveness studies, people within cultures agreed on who was and who was not attractive. The results go even further; they did not vary according to gender or even age. If these were the only results, it may be concluded that cultural cues prompt a society's response of what is seen as beautiful. However, the results were the same across cultures and ethnicities. Says Langlois, "Cross-cultural and cross-ethnic analyses showed that even diverse groups of raters readily agreed about who is and is not attractive...These analyses seriously question the common assumption that attractiveness ratings are culturally unique and merely represent media-induced standards" (400). With other researching groups Langlois has shown that even infants, before they have been socialized, prefer the same attractive faces that adults do (Langlois, Ritter, Roggman, & Vaughn, 1991; Langlois et al., 1987; Langlois, Roggman, & Rieser-Danner, 1990). Beauty, as an automatic reaction, is not always dependent on an extrinsic source. In these studies, the researchers found that beauty may be universally felt.

Research showing that reaction does not always depend on culture and media or other extrinsic sources may seem to blandly rectify the qualms accompanying the assumption that Simmel's responses are reactionary. However, the conclusion reached is poorly felt. This supposition—that Simmel's book is reactionary, but simply relying on reactions that are not deterministically controlled by culture—points to the conjecture that every insight produced by Simmel in this book was gained mechanically and

automatically while simultaneously viewing the art of Rembrandt. It is not enough. The idea of ‘reactionary’ must be dismissed altogether.

### **More than Reactionary**

The simple fact that Simmel’s book is not analytical or empirical does not mean it is reactionary or opinionated, or on the other side of the argument, just because something is analytical and empirical does not mean it escapes reaction and opinion. Simmel’s text is philosophical which does not make it insignificant. It is more than simply reaction.

Remembering what Gadamer (1975) states in the introduction of the thesis, “through a work of art a truth is experienced that we cannot attain in any other way” (xxii-xxiii), we are reminded that there is something achieved in art that cannot be achieved analytically, methodologically, or the means proper to science. Traditional sociology uses analytics and method to study art, which ignore the aesthetic experience. They argue that any value of art lies with the social meaning that is fabricated and ascribed to it by society.

Acknowledging the aesthetic experience in sociology may appear reactionary to some, especially to empiricists. However, it appears that the more one delves into the details of any discipline, the less pragmatic the method, truths, and laws become—even in a field as seemingly ‘empirical’ as physical science. Through theory development and scientific experiments, matter was broken up into its smallest component, the atom, and this component responded to the predictable laws that govern the universe. Then the atom was broken. It was composed of electrons, protons, neutrons, and even smaller components like neutrinos, photons, and more.

The electron was put through some of the same experiments as the atom, and the laws were no longer predictable. To determine whether an electron was a particle of matter or a wave of potentials, a sample of them was passed through a double slit and observed landing on a screen. When performing this experiment, matter produces two bands on the screen, and waves produce interference patterns. Observing the resulting motion of the electrons once they were passed through the slits produced an interference pattern, which baffled scientists because electrons were traditionally thought of as small particles of matter passing through either one or the other of the slits. The fact that they were behaving like waves meant that they were somehow not a particle when they were passing through the slits. To try to comprehend this phenomenon, the scientists put a small recording device at one of the slits. With the presence of the recording device, the electrons went back to behaving as particles of matter. The result on the screen showed two bands of electrons, rather than the interference pattern of waves. The simple act of *observing* the electrons' positions collapsed the wave function. The electrons acted differently depending on the mere presence of an observer. Thus, quantum physics was born. The more they are examined, the details under examination become less black-and-white than was once thought; even electrons appear to have some sort of 'agency.'

(Darling, 2007)

This occurs for Simmel as well. In his book he terms the non-predictability of the details as 'life.' We have as his sociological theory a "formal sociology" based on the forms that govern how society is organized. Even though in his sociology he places social actors in these preexisting 'forms'—much like the painters of the Renaissance place their subjects into a composition of form—his ideas follow more of Rembrandt. It

is not the form that governs life, but life that governs form. The agency and even discrepancies of his actors are what govern how each actor exists within society. They may follow general laws, but they are guidelines that may influence, but do not control, how each life is lived. It is not as though Simmel is impractical and wholly against empirics and method, in fact, he may be so practical he has the boldness to acknowledge the impracticality of reality.

The exertion that Simmel's text is, as this thesis proclaims, *more* than reactionary begs the question, then what is it? What is Simmel's response to art?

### **Being Moved**

Many afford the value of art to the pleasure of the viewer's response to it. Art philosopher Gordon Graham (2005) begs the question, "If the value of art did lie in the pleasure we get from it, how are we to discriminate between artworks that differ in quality?" (8). In John Stuart Mill's essay *Utilitarianism* (1985) he examines different kinds of pleasure in order to better understand that which is afforded by art.

Mill says that higher pleasure emerges either by greater quantity or greater quality – one or the other. If higher pleasure is found by quantity, pleasure exhibits a single latitude; in order to experience a higher degree of pleasure we simply experience more of it. Graham (2005) discusses Mill's thoughts when he says,

If what Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* has over *Friends* or *Neighbors* is *quantity* of pleasure, we can make up the difference simply by watching more episodes of *Friends*. In fact, we don't even have to confine ourselves to similar sorts of things. Food is often a pleasure, so we could make up for any lack of artistic pleasures, by eating more of the food we especially like (10).

Both Graham and Mill dismiss the idea that people without any exposure to high pleasure, “are in no way impoverished provided only that they have sufficient quantity of more mundane pleasures” (10). In this way of thinking, “Pizza is as good as poetry” (10); when put in these terms, the implication that higher pleasure derives from a greater quantity of pleasure appears nonsensical. The other option to this argument suggests there are various latitudes of pleasure; higher pleasure is at a higher latitude and quality. Mill believes that the worth of this higher quality outweighs even contentment. He states, “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the pig, or the fool, is of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question” (14). How then is something deemed as higher quality?

Mill believes that to know that something is of a higher quality the ability of experts must be used. He states, “The judgment of those who are qualified by knowledge of both, or, if they differ, that of the majority among them, must be admitted as final” (14). This is where Graham differs. He says that tastes differ, and the experience of being exposed to both the grand opera and a soap opera does not make the viewer an expert simply because the viewer has been an audience to both. Even if the majority of those who have observed both are in favor of the soap opera, this only shows that more people prefer, or have a taste for, the soap opera. All that can be concluded is that people may get more pleasure for one or the other. In Graham’s words, “What we cannot infer is that the normal estimation that puts grand opera on a higher scale than soap opera, artistically speaking, is mistaken,” he continues by saying, “We cannot show that beer is

*better* than wine simply by showing that more people prefer it” (11). He suggests that we cannot rely on the majority opinion to reveal the higher pleasure.

Graham proposes a different suggestion. He states, “higher pleasures involve the higher faculties; this is what makes them of a higher quality” (11). He goes further as he explains, “Applied to the subject of art, what this implies is that serious art engages aspects of the mind that lighter art does not address, or even attempt to” (12). This is supported by a study by Gregory Berns and Sara Moore (2011). They show that the songs that rank the highest on the charts are the ones that cause the most brain stimulation, which stimulation is not purely focused within the pleasure centers of the brain. The aesthetic experience may not simply afford what is thought of as “pleasure” to the viewer. At this stage it seems appropriate to move away from the word “pleasure” and conceivably suggest another term.

When describing the physical strain of training and competing in a sport such as wrestling, the wrestler does not describe the experience as “pleasurable.” It is work, sweat, and oftentimes, blood. Reading a novel such as *Moby Dick* or *Portrait of a Lady* for the first time or learning about differential equations does not afford a pleasurable experience, it may even be taxing and tedious. Pleasure is not the feeling that someone viewing the etching *Woman Holding Dead Child* (Figure 7) is having; it is more likely they are in pain. However, these are all experiences that people seek after. Working and stretching one’s emotional, intellectual, and/or physical capacity is not, oftentimes, pleasant or pleasurable. This kind of strain does, however, change its actor in some way. It increases his or her capacities, which does not all the time bring pleasure, but afterwards usually manifests some sort of satisfaction because they are moved. To be



moved requires one to utilize his or her faculties. The more the person's faculties are utilized, the more the person will be moved.

Art that brings about an aesthetic experience demonstrates a satisfaction within a viewer. Simmel is exposed to the work of Rembrandt, and he is *moved*. Merely automatic reactionary processes do not move us because they do not require work. They are not satisfying because there is no effort on our part. To be moved is to travel from one place to an entirely different one, and it requires action on the subject's part. The subject must exert themselves, they struggle, and they change. Good art does just that—it moves people. If the viewer allows him or herself to become a part of the experience, the fact that they will have to exert themselves in some way changes them.

Thus Simmel's response to Rembrandt is that he was moved. Being moved is not simply an automatic reactionary process; it requires using our faculties, may they be physical, emotional, spiritual, mental, or something else. For Simmel, Rembrandt's art "*engage[d]* aspects of [his] mind" as Graham stated (2005: 11, emphasis added). Rembrandt's art represents an intellectual achievement which had the capacity to change Simmel. What constitutes an "intellectual achievement" besides having the ability to move people?

### **Humans as Historical Beings: The Ability to Create and to Fashion**

Simmel explains that we are historical beings. He states, "Humans, precisely because they do not merely repeat but create something new, cannot start anew each time. Rather, they need a given material, a given antecedence on which, or on the basis of which, they accomplish their achievements as a reshaping [of the material]" (155). This principle—that we as humans build upon the concepts that have already been given us—

is the origin of the expression there is no need to “reinvent the wheel.” Calling something historical means that there is history behind it; that the developments rely on previously existing discoveries.

Because humans are historical beings they continually relearn what has already been learned—they take what has been given—and then add to it with original thought and development. The process of relearning what the generation before has performed is dubbed by Simmel as “fashioning.” Anything original that adds to this store of knowledge is “creating.” Simmel states, “We call historical a being that creates something new and its own, but on the basis and as the further development and shaping of something that is already handed and passed down: the organic synthesis of creativity and fashioning that we live” (156). Simmel says, “There is no human work, beyond pure imitation, that is not simultaneously fashioning and creating” (155). Any intellectual achievement falls within the framework of one of these two concepts.

Animals are not historical beings; they simply fashion. They do what their forbearers have done, and their offspring will follow the same path of performance. The young bird whose predecessors form nests of sticks and mud will likewise form nests of sticks and mud, and from these nests will hatch future stick and mud nest-builders. They simply do the same thing over and over adapting to changes in the environment, but not really taking part in any type of creative act. On the other side, if people did not “fashion” or glean from the store of historical knowledge and only took part in creating new they would be “transhistorical.” They would also probably waste a lot of time reinventing basic innovations such as the wheel.

The Greeks emphasized fashioning. In this time, there was a set method to create art; the artists achieved mastery the closer they came to performing this method and finding the ideal. Through the Greek paradigm it was vital to make clear the developments that had come before. Michelangelo demonstrates a struggle between fashioning—using the method of classical Greece—and creating. Rembrandt and Shakespeare leaned toward the creation side of this dualistic model. Because these artists were all historical beings they each had elements of both creating and fashioning, they just tended toward different degrees of either.

In the art of fashioning, individuals have come up with better and more effective methods whereby to further the original ideas of others. For example, wheels have been engineered for bicycles, cars, wagons, the inner-parts of various machines, and so on. These wheels have been adjusted and modified to be more aerodynamic, powerful, lightweight, and, overall, regulated to fit a large variety of needs and pleasures. However, as stated before, in a broad sense no one had to reinvent this device. Simply stated, method has improved. The true novel ideas may get inspiration from a range of sources, but they are the innovations on which others are able to build upon. Creative thought precedes improving our method, but any development begins as original thought.

Albert Einstein revolutionized the scientific world with his General and Special Theory of Relativity and with his other groundbreaking contributions. In a discipline where logic reigns supreme, Walter Isaacson (2007) says of Einstein, “His success came not from the brute strength of his mental processing power but from his imagination and creativity” (7), and he continues, “He made imaginative leaps and discerned great principles through thought experiments rather than by methodical inductions based on

experimental data” (5). Einstein went so far as to say, “Imagination is more important than knowledge” (Viereck 1930: 377). This may be worth consideration.

### **What is Art?**

This concept is mirrored in the artistic skill in Rembrandt himself. Simmel talks about how Rembrandt is able to capture an “aspatial” gaze in his portraits. Simmel states,

If one observes exactly the difference between the gaze of deep and significant persons and that of shallow and insignificant ones, then the former appear to look not only at the object (which they may fix sharply and attentively), but yet further beyond it, not further in the linear sense but somehow into the trans-local, to some place that cannot be limited that, however, does not have a spatial meaning (98).

For figures that do not have the aspatial gaze, they look directly at the object in front of them. It is a “doorless wall,” and “the gaze is simply reflected back” (98). An aspatial gaze does not fix itself to a specific space; it is a deep and penetrating gaze. This type of gaze is a result of a thoughtful inner life.

The fact that simple paint on canvas not only gives the illusion of person, but that the painted eyes of a figure can be either spatial or, as Rembrandt illustrates, aspatial, is a concept worth addressing. How does Rembrandt bring about this depth and insight of a unique and individual life on a 2-dimensional surface with nothing but bits of pigment mixed with oil? It may have to do with his use of more raw and unworked strokes, his placement of white dabs of paint to highlight in certain areas, or perhaps his technique of

layering paint glazes to create depth that communicates to the viewer that what is in front of them is an aspatial gaze rather than a spatial one.

Would someone, in retrospect, be able to reproduce Rembrandt's aspatial gazes? To go even further, would someone have the ability to reproduce that "Rembrandt light" which is recognized as one of his renowned and prominent accomplishments? The answer, which may seem surprising, is "yes," and it has been done. A skillful artist can replicate, brushstroke for brushstroke, an entire Rembrandt painting. The difference between this duplicate and the original is that the artist Rembrandt did not have a Rembrandt to work from. His way of painting is completely his own; it is part of his own socio-biological-historical being. His philosophy and motive guides his painting from the very start. This process is similar to driving a car. The driver does not concentrate on each small asphalt pebble that he or she drives over. Instead the focus is much farther away—to the goal that the driver is steering toward. The resulting motion of the car is as a result of that focus.

Simmel believes that Rembrandt's portraits portray an inner life. Each expressive portion of his painting is geared toward this. It is not a snapshot of what is at that moment, rather, what is at that moment is a result of an entire life lived. This life is the life of the person in the painting, not the life of the model that sits for the painting. This motive, and the person Rembrandt, affects each brushstroke. It is the original thought of Rembrandt that brings about his paintings and the effects of his paintings, including aspatial gazes and Rembrandtian light. An imitator would use method whereby to copy these things that Rembrandt has brought about. However, the innovation has come from Rembrandt and his *creativity* rather than the imitator and his or her *method*.

For the sake of this thesis, the concept of art will be expanded from what is traditionally thought of as “art.” Scott McCloud (1993) gives a broad definition of art. He states, “Art, as I see it, is any human activity which doesn’t grow out of either of our species’ two basic instincts: survival and reproduction!” (164). The creative forces bringing about innovations that Simmel speaks of in the section “The Ability to Create and to Fashion” can be thought of as “art.” Why must we limit ourselves to a concept of art that consists of that which can hang on the wall or stand in a corner?

Art can be found in scientific discoveries, brilliant prose, and technological advances. Art does not lie in the urge to eat when hungry, but art can be found in the culinary master pieces of a chef or even in the poor working father’s efforts to create something edible from the few ingredients that lay in his pantry. Art may not be with the two beggars huddling together for warmth, but when one reaches out his hand to hold the hand of the other in comfort, that is art. Miscarriage may be a biological process for a would-be mother, but the deep sorrow that she feels is not; it is art.

What makes some ‘art’ more art than others? As stated before it is the degree to which we may be moved. If it causes us to think, feel, or work, we are thus changed and moved from one position to another. The really good art occupies our faculties and moves us.

On the side of fashioning is method, analytics and “form.” The art of anything rests with the side of creating, life, and innovation. New ideas, Simmel agrees, do not originate on the side of the brain governed by logic. They are creative. Logics, analytics, and method can further the inspiration originating at the brain’s creative non-temporal centers. If we are to look at the artist, Rembrandt, his paintings illustrate the creation

aspects of the dichotomy, as we have discussed. His light, the inner-lives of his subjects, and his ‘aspatial gazes’ are innovations of Rembrandt, and even though these elements are brought about by the method of his painting—how he puts the paint on the canvas—the art is not the paint. It is not the method. Art, here, is what is being painted. Method is the avenue for Rembrandt to express his creative thoughts—his art.

### **The Method**

The focus, that which guides the person to act the way that they do, that which guided Rembrandt to paint as he does, is as a result of the person’s life totality—as Simmel has stated in his text. It is a culmination of their life experiences lived up to that point. If one could see how each experience leads to the next, that which has brought about change in the person’s life are those times in which he or she was moved.

Rembrandt was moved by the ‘life of the individual,’ and he produced his paintings. Simmel was moved by the paintings of Rembrandt, and he produced the text that has just been analyzed. This text is as a result of his thoughtful deliberation concerning the philosophy of art. Even though this book was written at the end of his life, he was moved by Rembrandt’s work earlier on. Though he did originally write on the specific subject, much of Simmel’s sociological insights, especially his “formal sociology,” originate from these experiences with art. The introduction of *Rembrandt* states, “It was wrestling with issues in the theory of art that paved Simmel’s way to this new [sociological] theoretical movement” (xi). It continues by saying that from his “reflections on the essence of art...he gained several of his general theoretical insights, which he then incorporated into his so-called formal sociology, into his general theory of culture, and into a number of other fields” (xi), and so, indirectly, the paintings not only

moved him to write his book on the philosophy of art, but also to develop his sociological theory.

Simmel believed society itself is arranged around formalistic qualities. By using his reaction toward art and testing it with method and rationale, he developed his theory of society. Presuming these basic assumptions are correct, this sort of method, which begins with the creative forces of people's thinking processes, may be applied to a variety of fields including, but not limited to, sociological ones. In order to study space, as in Yi-Fu Tuan's (1977) *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, the prerequisite for Tuan was to experience space and react toward it. Afterwards he analyzed his reaction to clarify and bring about greater understanding. Tuan says, "Mathematicians...claim that the design of their theorems is guided by aesthetic criteria – notions of elegance and simplicity that answer a human need" (8). The birth of sociology itself began as creative ideas about society, which then developed. The main figures of sociology became such because they offered innovation to the sociological discussion. Rather than stemming from replication or fashioning, the innovation of sociology or any discipline originates with creative forces.

Method, analytics, and rational calculations are valuable and essential. They safeguard against bias, prejudice, and stereotypes by allowing the actor to put him or herself in check. They demonstrate, substantiate, and confirm detached and vague concepts and incomplete research, as well as disprove, negate, and challenge others. However, to begin we must be moved. Imagination and intuition instigate creativity, which is improved with method, but not replaced.



The purpose of this thesis is to approach a sociology of aesthetics—a method to study aesthetics which acknowledges its existence and experience. Simmel’s response and philosophical approach to Rembrandt’s pieces can be generalized to a larger approach to art and aesthetics at large. Simmel was exposed to Rembrandt’s creative thoughts, his art, through the medium and methods of paint, and he was correspondingly moved.

Art, in the broadest sense of the word, moves the subject experiencing it, but this requires some effort on the part of the viewer. A painting, or any other type of art for that matter—any creative outlet, can have an enormous potential to move those exposed to it. If the person in front of the painting is closing his or her eyes, the fault does not lie with the art. We, as sociologists—or for that matter, as any type of historical being with the capabilities of furthering intellectual achievement, must be moved and act. To try and understand aesthetics, we must first be *moved* by *art*.

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**APPENDAGE A: CONTENTS OF REMBRANDT: AN ESSAY OF THE  
PHILOSOPHY OF ART**

CHAPTER 1: The Expression of Inner Life

Continuity of Life and the Movement of Expression

Being and Becoming in a Portrait

The Series of Portraits and Drawings

Reserve and Openness of the Portrait Figure

The Circle in the Depiction of a Person

The Animation of the Portrait

Subjective Realism and the Self-Portrait, Artistic Procreation

Life's Past in the Pointing

The Representation of Movement

The Unity of the Composition

Clarity and Detailing

Life and Form

CHAPTER 2: Individualization and the General

Type and Representation

Two Conceptions of Life

Notes on the Individuality of Form and on Pantheism

Death

Character

Beauty and Perfection

The Individuality of the Renaissance and of Rembrandt

Types of Generality

The Art of Old Age

The Aspatial Gaze

Mood

Human Fate and the Heraclitean Cosmos

### CHAPTER 3: Religious Art

Objective and Subjective Religion in Art

Piety

Concrete Existence and Religious Life

The Type of Unity in the Religious Paintings

Individual Religiousity, Mystique, and Calvinism

Inner Quality

Religious-Artistic Creation

Light: Its Individuality and Immanence

Excursus: What Do We *See* in a Work of Art?

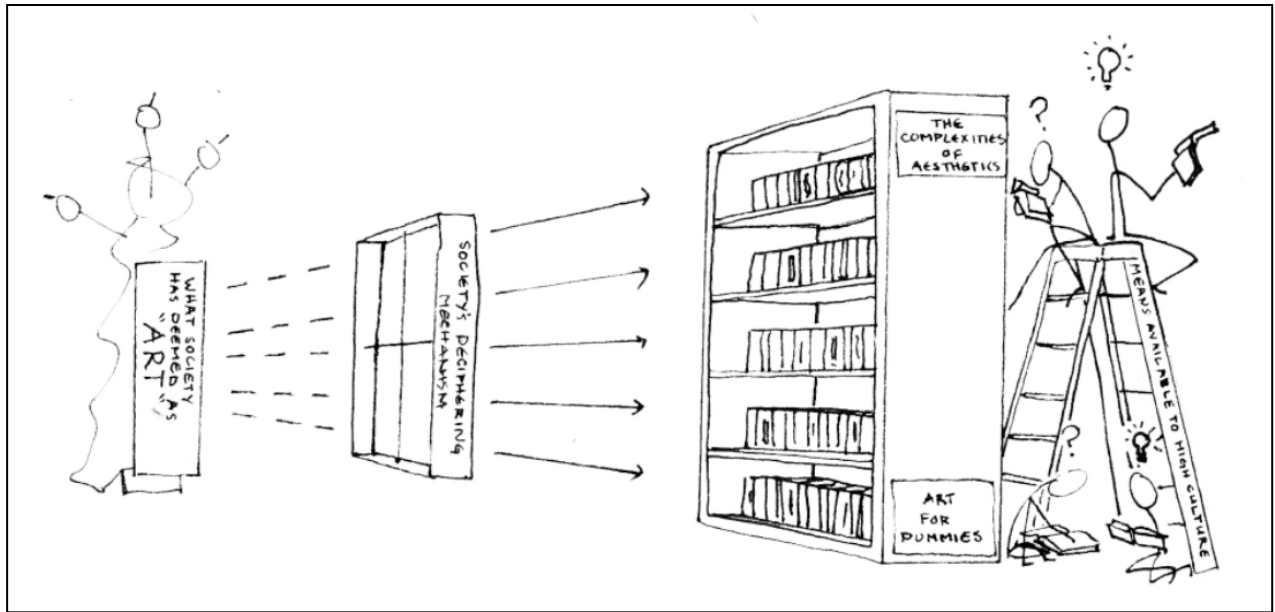
Dogmatic Contents

### IN CONCLUSION

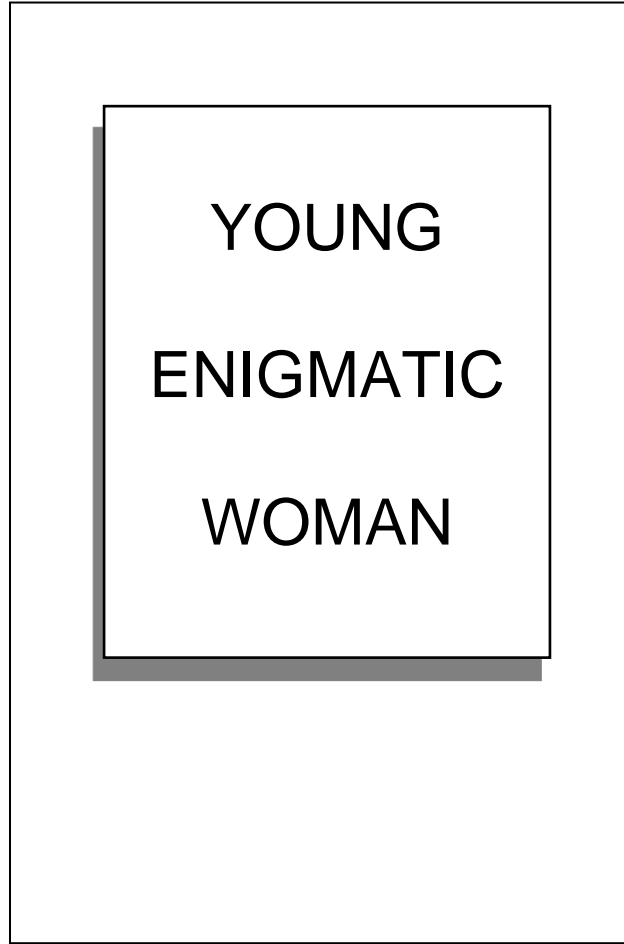
The Capacity to Create and to Fashion

Antithesis in Art

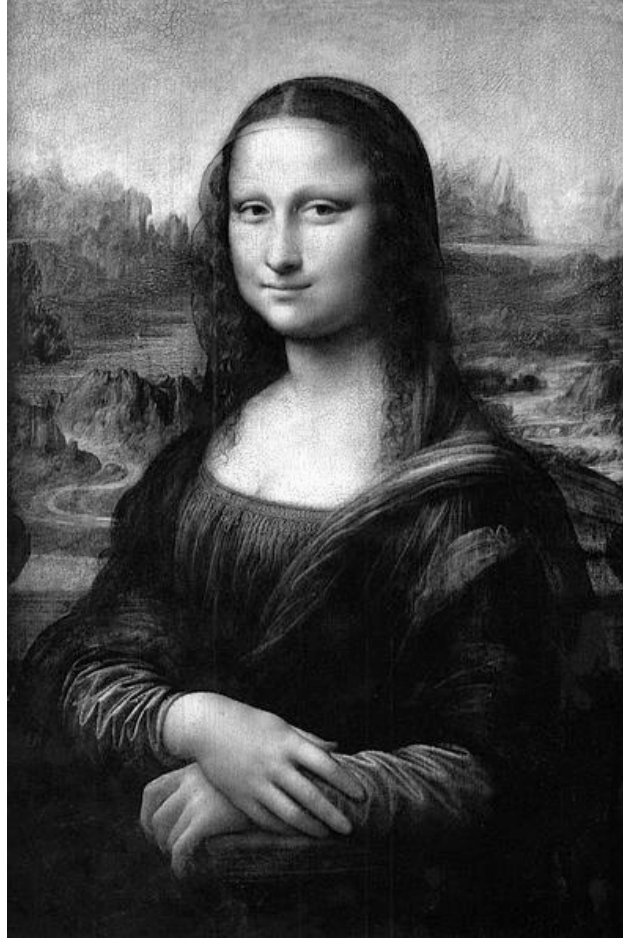
**FIGURE 1: BOURDIEU'S MODEL OF ART PERCEPTION**



**FIGURE 2: SYMBOLIC MONA LISA**



**FIGURE 3: MONA LISA**



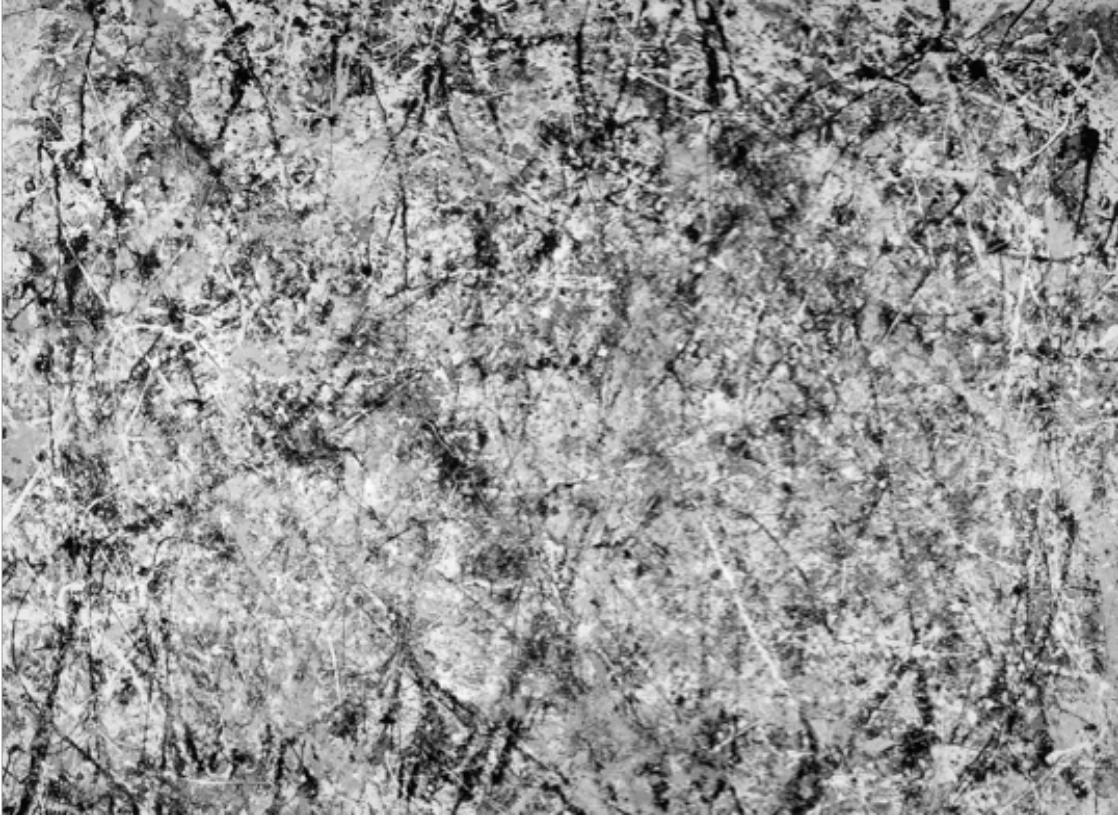
Da Vinci, Leonardo (Artist). 1503-1505. *Mona Lisa* [Painting]. Louvre, Paris.

**FIGURE 4: DUCHAMP'S FOUNTAIN**



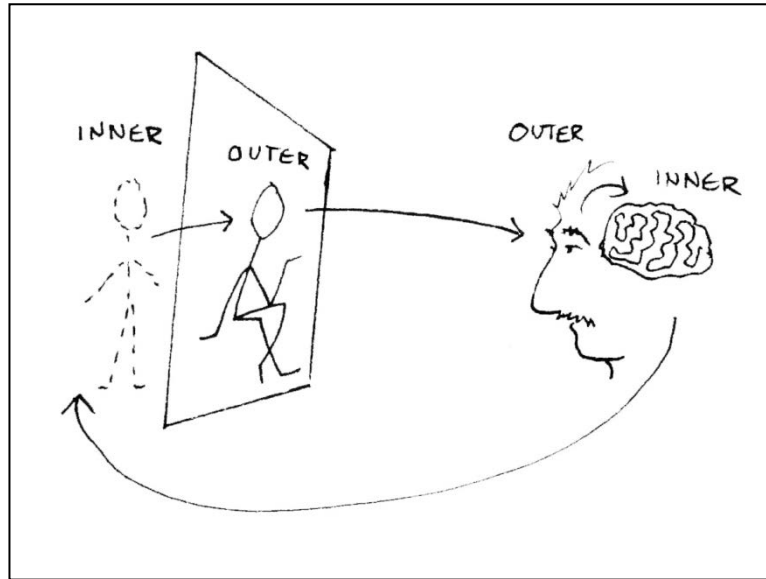
Duchamp, Marcel (Artist). 1950. *Fountain* (second version) [Sculpture]. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia.

**FIGURE 5: POLLOCK'S DRIP PAINTING**



Pollock, Jackson (Artist). 1950. *Number 1, 1950* [Painting]. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

**FIGURE 6: CIRCLE IN THE DEPICTION OF A PERSON**





**FIGURE 7: REMBRANDT'S MOTHER**



Harmenszoon van Rijn, Rembrandt (Artist). 1628. *The Artist's Mother, Head and Bust: Three Quarters Right* [Etching]. The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

**FIGURE 8: WOMAN HOLDING DEAD CHILD**



Kollwitz, Käthe (Artist). 1903. *Woman with Dead Child* [Lithographed Etching]. British Museum, London.