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Volume 15, 2023

Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan



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## *Simmel and the Aesthetics of Luxury*

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ABSTRACT. Luxury is a rarely discussed topic within aesthetics. Even less attention is paid to George Simmel's perspective on the aesthetics of luxury, which can be found in *Philosophie des Geldes* and in *Das Geheimnis. Eine sozialpsychologische Skizze*. My paper has two aims. The first one is to analyse the texts in order to clarify his position. The second one is to interpret his contribution from a social aesthetic perspective. If *Philosophie des Geldes* is interpreted from this point of view, then the description of an ambivalent aesthetic phenomenon is provided: luxury, is, on the one hand, a private experience, but, on the other hand, it requires inter-subjective interaction. In luxury, I argue, there is a double experience: of distance, as for art in the basic Kantian assumption, and of narrowness, through possession, as in Benjamin's *Ich packe meine Bibliothek aus*. The reason for this is that luxury, like fashion and sociability, is a specific social form.

### **1. Introduction**

George Simmel, the author of *Philosophie des Geldes* (1900), is today widely appreciated as a founding figure of sociology and, in particular, of the theory of sociological aesthetics at the turn of the XX and the XXI centuries, even though he lingered for a long time in disciplinary margins (Fitzi, 2021, p. 33). His essays are now widely considered relevant for the development of relational sociology, network analysis and for studies about money, space and individuality. What remains, however, a rarely discussed topic in relation to his thought is the social phenomenon of luxury. Even though it can be seen as relevant for both a sociological and aesthetics analysis, due to its relationship with the sensible perception and with the social organization of status group, such phenomenon or experience has never been object of a proper

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investigation in such perspective. In this paper I therefore propose to consider luxury as an object of socio-aesthetic analysis and I claim that Simmel offers interesting suggestions to consider it a social form. That is, the aim of this article is to analyse the concept of luxury taking inspiration from Simmel, whose texts, nonetheless, are not taken here as an object of philological analysis.

Barbara Carnevali and Andrea Pinotti famously described social aesthetics as the study of the aesthetic dimension of society (Fitzi, 2021, p. 170). They claim it to occupy both the field of studies that focuses on the realm of sensation and perception (*aisthesis*) and that pertaining to the theory of art as well as of those techniques used to shape and transform the sensible world (Carnevali, 2020). George Simmel is regarded as the founder of such field of research since the appearance of his famous essay *Sociological aesthetics* (1896).

According to him, society is regarded as a unity where people not only communicate through the senses, but also create and analyze new social formations from an aesthetic perspective and according to aesthetic principles, as the one of symmetry.

As I will further explain, social forms, as sociability and fashion (and luxury!), which are central in the last part of *Philosophie des Geldes*, constitute social unities. Accordingly, luxury is a social phenomenon that transforms a specific relationship between some people and some objects into a unity. The senses, among which the sight has a prominent place, are the means of this new formation: without their playing no social formation can have light. In particular, in relation to luxury, it is the sight that makes the subject and the observer identify an object as luxury. That is, an object is identified as luxury only if it is set at distance and it is able to attract the eye of the person. Moreover, such a distance is a social distance. The sight is, in fact, the faculty that immediately ('at first sight') catches the difference in personal appearance. Accordingly, social distinction is firstly acknowledged by the sight<sup>75</sup>. In conclusion, the social form of luxury indicates the relationship between a person and goods perceived, estimated as a positive deviation from a standard and possessed only by a minority of people.

In consumption societies, the discriminant factor to judge some goods as luxury is

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<sup>75</sup> This aspect is particularly stressed by some sociologists. For example, Packard in his analysis of the new affluence class, wrote: "we tend to place people on the basis of what is visible: such as type of home, automobile, clothing, home furnishings. These are all visible" (Packard, 1960, p. 57). This is why every aristocrats in *Ancien Régime* had a policy for the appearances. See, for example Norbert Elias (*On the Process of Civilisation*) or Peter Burke's (*The Fabrication of Louis XIV*) studies on the French court.

represented by money, the mean per excellence of modernity in the German scholar's perspective, in reference to which moral and political claims are made. Hence the ever-debated link between luxury and economic inequality.

Because of her deviating nature, the social form of luxury is a constant object of social evaluation. Since the sight is the source of most of aesthetic principles, as the one of symmetry, a social form that derives necessarily from it will be judged in a positive or negative way in accordance to the overall aesthetic principle more influential in a given society. As Christopher Berry notably showed, in a socialist or platonic state luxury as transgression is condemned because it is a symptom of disorder, while a liberal and modern society, as Smith and Hume's writings clearly showed, has to accept it because idiosyncrasies in the world are effects of a spontaneous order. The former are the ones governed by a quest for symmetry, while in the latter this principle is refused (Berry, 1994) (Armitage, 2016).

Accordingly, the first aim of this article is to clarify the usage of the term luxury in Simmel's *Philosophie des Geldes*. This is the occasion to reveal the basic dualistic structure the author found in human nature as the role of distance in the creation and stratification of society. The second aim of this article is, instead, to investigate luxury in accordance with the social aesthetic perspective in order to arrive at a definition of the concept. In this second case only Simmel's methodology is to be used. My thesis is that luxury is the social phenomena of differentiation through the possession of goods reserved to the few and it is a specific social aesthetic form, as much as, but different from fashion and sociability. Luxury, as the hypostatization of vertical differences in society, is an aesthetic social form whose power of attraction is strictly bound with an aesthetic consideration of distance and whose experience lies in the possession of good through the market.

## **2. Of luxury in Philosophies des Geldes: Simmel's Philosophical Anthropology**

*Philosophie des Geldes* is Simmel's work where the word luxury recurs the most frequently. Nonetheless, luxury is for sure not a topic of systematic investigation and this is the reason why Simmel's work is never quoted in such field of studies (Assouly, 2017) (Berry, 1994). Luxury is, for the first time, quoted in the second part of the third chapter, *Money in the Sequence of purposes (Das Geld in den Zweckreihen)*. Simmel spoke of "Luxusgenüssen" as



the ones which ‘has proven to be unenjoyable’.<sup>76</sup> They are associated to goods that cannot provide the expected enjoyment. For this reason, they are not appreciated by the thrifty people who think that whatever is paid should also be consumed to satisfy the person. That is, if a normal object should give to its possessor comfort, being oriented to satisfy a need, the luxury object is the one which does not provide a complete gratification of the senses. This is why the thrifty person does not appreciate it.

The reason for the attraction of this object does not lie in its usefulness. In the case of a luxury object, the direct relationship (= of use) that a person should have with the object is not relevant. Another element, the economic one, has gained a primacy in the consideration in a subjective estimation. Simmel suggests that the monetary value is here the sufficient condition to identify something that provides an enjoyment that is, paradoxically, no true enjoyment. He wrote: ‘the object which has lost whatever might have been the meaning and purpose of his consumption, is consumed under condition of discomfort and harmfulness merely because the money spent has bestowed an absolute value upon it’ (Simmel, 2005, p. 247).

Luxury then reveals a very paradoxical trait: it refers to objects by which people are attracted even though it is not possible to have a relation of true enjoyment with them, because of some of their characteristics. The most important concerns the monetary value. The price is a source of attraction, independent of the utility value of the good. In summary, the German philosopher judges luxury goods to be expensive (and therefore distinctive) and functionless (and therefore superfluous). They are the opposite of necessary goods, as Simmel’s use of the word “Luxusgütern” shows.

To distinguish between the two types of goods, he proposes a distinction based on the intensity of desire. Necessary goods are highly desirable, but lose their appeal as soon as the basic need is satisfied. This condition easily occurs with primary needs, such as clothing and food. This means that Simmel, like many thinkers like Helvétius before him (Helvétius, 2021, p. 64), saw in the actual capacity of the stomach an insurmountable limit to the satisfaction of any increase in desire. Once the stomach is full, desire ceases.

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76 Frisby translated: ‘Many thrifty people think it proper that everything that is paid for is also consumed, and even then not only if another necessary expenditure were to be saved, but also in relation to luxury goods which, in the meantime, have proved to be unenjoyable (Simmel, 2005, p. 247). The original text writes: ‘Und zwar keineswegs nur dann, wenn damit eine anderenfalls erforderliche Ausgabe erspart würde, sondern Luxus-genüssen gegenüber, von denen man sich inzwischen überzeugt hat, dass sie keine Genüsse sind’ (Simmel, 1930, p. 271).

The demand for luxury goods, on the other hand, is unlimited and will never exceed the supply. Spiritual desires, such as those of esteem and self-realisation, can be created endlessly without any limit, unlike hunger.

In more anthropological terms, man is indeed described as a creature who is easily able to satisfy his own basic needs, which are already determined in quantity, but whose appetite for luxury goods (“Luxusgüter”), which here stand for superfluosity (“Überflüssigkeit”), is unlimited. For example, to protect the body from the weather, it is enough to produce a cloth, but man is always on the lookout for a more refined coat, then an umbrella, etc.

The increase of desire is due to the fact that man is represented not only as an instrumental animal who wants to satisfy his hunger, but also as a purposive animal who wants to enjoy the taste of the dishes in order to increase his sense of himself as a human being. That is to say, he not only needs means to satisfy his hunger, but he constantly increases and/or refines his desires, making them unlimited. The reason for this is that he is not only dependent on his instincts as a simple animal. Moreover, unlike God, he does not have the immediate power to satisfy all mental desires immediately (Simmel, 2005, p. 209). This is the reason why, in order to satisfy them, he generally needs means, also acquired through consumption, that are deemed necessary to satisfy human purposes, that lies well beyond instincts.

In summary, luxury goods refer to a macro-category indicating all products for which there is a fervency of desire that cannot be braked and that defines itself in strict opposition to what is judged necessary. Nonetheless, the luxury so described share some features of need, not physical, but psychological, due to human nature. This idea of “Luxusbedürfnis” is clearly revealed when Simmel made the argument that money, this modern medium of social life, is what carries in itself the structure of the need for luxury, because it rejects any limitation upon desire for it, but at the same time it has no necessity to set a distance from direct needs, because everyone use it on a daily basis, as a necessity. The modern society, built upon money, has thus in itself the germs for the spread of luxury.<sup>77</sup>

Luxury goods, in fact, have to do with what is outside the ordinary and it is such a distance that exercises a powerful attraction upon people due to mechanisms of social

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<sup>77</sup> Luxury has a tendency to become more and more widespread, progressively raising the limits of its acceptability and consequently failing in its identification as luxury. This thesis has been expounded philosophically by Peter Sloterdijk (Sloterdijk, 2015) and economically by Fred Hirsh (Hirsh, 1976).

psychology. The desire for esteem or self-actualization pass through a recognition of the superiority of something distant and a desire to reach it. Because of the distance, because luxury goods resist the desire to possess them, they are esteemed valuable<sup>78</sup>. The fervency in desire is a result of the limitlessness of human aspiration that can only be directed to what a person not yet possess. Nonetheless, an increasing distance is not always directly proportional to an increase in desire. Some distances may exercise a negative effect on it.

This is extremely clear in the last place where luxury is mentioned as “Luxusartikel”. At the end of Chapter Five, *The Money Equivalent of Personal Value (Das Geldäquivalent personaler Werte)*, luxury goods are described as the ones in which a considerable amount of mental labour is invested, and they are extremely rare in an economy where primary goods (for him foodstuffs) are easily reached. Luxury goods, if too expensive, push the goods completely out of the view of ordinary people, preventing people to make claim for them. Nonetheless, such goods may become more widespread in society if they stop being out of reach. What guarantees the desirability of luxury is exactly their visibility, the fact that they can fuel social passions as envy and, in opposite direction, a feeling of self-actualisation, self-esteem, vanity. Moreover, only the luxury that appears can fuel emulation, this peculiar form of imitative desire directed only to the superior in status, and that is a psychological mechanism to cope with a quest for self-esteem (Brennan and Pettit, 2005).

In summary, considering only the use of the word by Simmel two remarkable features of luxury have been highlighted. Firstly, luxury is an attribute of a good insofar as the good is judged distant by an ordinary person. Secondly, through luxury goods a psychological desire seeks to be fulfilled. Moreover, it must be noted that such goods in a modern society, where the social form of money dominates (Simmel, 2005, p.225), are desired mainly in virtue of their price. Money and luxury goods, in fact, have a common feature: they are ordinary and exclusive at the same time.

Beyond the textual consideration of “Luxusartikel”, “Luxusgüter” and “Luxusgenüssen”, it should be noted that luxury cannot be described as a property of an object, as well as fashion.

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78 ‘Value does not originate from the unbroken unity of the moment of enjoyment, but from the separation between the subject and the content of enjoyment as an object that stands opposed to the subject as something desired and only to be attained by the conquest of distance[...]. Objects are not difficult to acquire because they are valuable, but we call those objects valuable that resist our desire to possess them. Since the desire encounters resistance and frustration, the objects gain a significance that would never have been attributed to them by an unchecked will’ (Simmel, 2005, p. 64).

It is, on the contrary, a phenomenon involving a subject valuing a specified object and it relates to distance on at least three levels: from basic material needs, in “price architecture” and in fervency of desire. Only once the basic needs are satisfied a person can turn to luxury which is marked by a high expenditure, being it a prerogative of the higher strata of society, which can invest in products that required a considerable amount of mental labour, otherwise known as refinement. For example, before desiring a more refined dress the need for covering himself has to be satisfied. This has been and somewhere still is a privilege of the higher social strata. For the recognition of some objects as luxury, therefore, such goods, must be seen as a category to identify a peculiar social phenomenon. Visibility at distance is a necessary condition for luxury to subsist. In order to fully analyse the concept of luxury other parts of Simmel’s work require an analysis.

### **3. The luxury social form – the apotheosis of distance**

The thesis I proposed in the introduction is that luxury is the social phenomena of differentiation through the possession of goods reserved to the few and it is a specific social aesthetic form, as fashion and sociability. It is clear that there is no direct reference to the general concepts of luxuries that are somehow explicitly used by Simmel. The question, beyond the simple review of the usage of the word in Simmel’s work, is: how is it possible to define luxury using Simmel’s intuitions?

So far, two main points have been emphasized: a philosophical anthropology centered on the conception of man as a desiring agent who uses means such as money to satisfy ends, and the role of remote vision (sight plus distance) in stimulating such desires. Moreover, luxury goods were described as refined goods, since they involve mental labour, and the pleasure they provide is not related to comfort, it is not a real pleasure, but has to do with the path to possess them. It follows that, firstly, luxury is related to the experience of attainment as well as to the objects attained, and, secondly, that luxury is the value that a person attaches to a good on the basis of some characteristics that make it valuable. Accordingly, my hypothesis is that luxury is a social form that involves a particular relationship of distance between a person and an object.

### 3.1. Distance: the first a-priori of society

Distance is the central point for an understanding of luxury and it is strictly connected to sight. This point is of the greatest importance in a social aesthetics perspective. The eye is the organ which makes society possible in Simmel's *Sociology* (Simmel, 2009) and the possibility to conceive the study of sociology as an independent discipline relies on the fact that an inter-subjective distance is the first a-priori of society. If the other person were not distant, which means not fully knowledgeable, social formation would not take place. The distance, physical and in the possibility to fully know the other person, is at the basis of the possibility to have, on the one hand, social formations and, on the other hand, the abstract forms of reduction of fragments in knowledgeable unities that are the true objects of Simmel's sociology<sup>79</sup>. There is a triple movement at work here: the representation of the other person is indeed possible thanks to an individual distance, which in turn is necessary for the person to arrive at an objective assessment of the other and thus, on the basis of that assessment, to lay the foundations of the relationship. Distance is, after all, what makes society possible and it is, ultimately, a defect in a complete knowledge of the other person because she is constantly reduced to abstract forms, while her interiority is never and cannot be caught. Distance, in itself, is nothing more than a powerful, refined and necessary aesthetic medium<sup>80</sup>.

My hypothesis is that luxury is based on the same logic that gives rise to society. In order to have luxury, it is necessary to create a distance between the subject and the object. This distance allows to present the object as a luxury, in a generally positive light, emphasising the formal aspects of the object and exerting an attraction on the subject. Moreover, since every social form takes into account all other people, it should be noted that luxury as a social form involves a precise social relationship between the owners of the object and those who can only

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79 Simmel claims that people and artifacts are given in the real world as fragments to the perception of every person. Since society is a form that is not only an abstract, but also every person has an awareness of it, what should be analysed is the way in which society become a single object of consideration. In relation to a single person fragmentation can, for example, indicate the place in the social order (i.e. the poor). Simmel famously wrote: 'Because one can never know another absolutely — which would mean the knowledge of every individual thought and every attitude — because one forms for oneself in fact a personal unity of the other from the fragments in which the other is solely available to us, then the latter depends on that part of the other that our standpoint vis-à-vis the other allows us to see' (Simmel, 2009). Equally, fragments have also to do with the world of objects, as Simmel's analysis of the ornaments, of the ruins, etc. testifies.

80 Dirk Solies shows how distance works as the central paradigm in Simmel's philosophy and social theory and how distance is first of all an esthetic element: 'Der ästhetische Bereich ist die eigentliche Domäne des Distanzbegriffes' (Solies, 1998, p. 66).

continue to be limited in their possible enjoyment by the distance.

### 3.2. Distance in time

The basic levels of distance are clearly represented by time and space. The former, a relative distance, emerges between the subjective valuation of the object and the subjective momentary feeling of enjoyment of the object. It is the distance in the possible pleasure, which is the standard object of the aesthetic experience, that defines luxury. In one of the most famous sentences of his work Simmel states: ‘We desire objects only if they are not immediately given to us for our use and enjoyment; that is, to the extent that they resist our desire. The content of our desire becomes an object as soon as it is opposed to us not only in the sense of being impervious to us, but also in terms of its distance, as something not-yet-enjoyed, the subjective aspect of this condition being desire’ (Simmel, 2005, p. 63).

The temporal distance is the condition of an absence of enjoyment that fuel subjective desire toward an object that is judged as a source of gratification.<sup>81</sup> The distance of the ‘not - yet gratifiable’ can only be experienced, when imagination, the aesthetic faculty, is considered. In the end, the object has value because of this distance that should be overcome by the desire. Once this has been accomplished, the situation is deceiving, because the luxury good proves to be unenjoyable, as seen in the first quotation of this article. According to Simmel, such objects are functionless, they do not provide true comfort. Nonetheless, the reason why a person, once become a possessor, finds them deceiving has to do with a lack of intrinsic value of the content of desire. Luxury has value, but such value is only stated as a contrast. This movement is still nowadays seen in some common sentences: ‘If you have it, it is not anymore a luxury’ or by the famous Rifkin analysis about luxury goods, which are claimed not to provide true happiness (Rifkin, 2009). Luxury is the name given to objects reputed valuable because of the distance interposed between them and the agent. The more the distance established, the more the desire is fervent. Moreover, such a distance should be objectively evaluated. That is, luxury should be intersubjectively recognised.

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<sup>81</sup> Simmel uses Kant’s dicotomy between gefallen and genisessen. In order to describe the difference between the beautiful and the agreeable the father of Aufklärung famously stated: ‘das Annehm kultiviert nicht, gehört zum bloßen Genusse’! Because luxury supposes an interest in the object it should be linked to Kant’s agreeable. Nonetheless, contrary to this type of judgment that is only subjective, the one of luxury, as the one of the beautiful, requires others to agree upon, as I will show in this article.

In fact, if the luxury form would be completely dependent on subjective formulation of value the luxury would not constitute a social aesthetic form. It is necessary to have an objective medium that reify the distance. Money is the one allowing such objectification.

Simmel suggests that in a modern economy objective distance is hypothesized in the price, the most important medium or social form. Because money is conceived as an objective mean, that works only if adopted by all, also the judgment of something as luxury is considered somehow objective, as a quality of the object. As in the case of Kant's beautiful, in relation to luxury all are supposed to agree of what actually constitute it: 'Just as we represent certain statements as true while recognizing that their truth is independent of our representation, so we sense that objects, people and events are not only appreciated as valuable by us, but would still be valuable if no one appreciated them. [...] This extends all the way down to the economic value that we assign to any object of exchange, even though nobody is willing to pay the price, and even though the object is not in demand at all and remains unsaleable' (Simmel, 2005, p.65). The price objectifies the value, acts in a substitution with the subjective evaluation, becoming the greatest source of attraction. This can be seen in Simmel's example of the shops in large cities which, with ostentatious self-indulgence, emphasises that they have the highest prices and thus appeal to the finest circles of society who do not ask for them. It is because of the distance of contemplation, as well as their prohibitive cost, that the objects in the glass cases in the shop windows arouse the desire to possess them. Their attraction is even greater when price is hidden, as the case in new marketing strategies for luxury brands testifies (Kapferer, 2012). The money in that case reveals at best its power of objectification. What is highly valued in monetary terms does not even deserve its price to be evident: imagination can play at will.

The result of this process of objectification is that distance is no longer linked only to the desire to be satisfied for the individual. Luxury becomes a social form of hierarchisation in which distance is crystallised: only some people can afford to satisfy such a desire through possession. The basic gap in desire was transformed into a distance in price architecture that clearly shows how distance from ordinary needs can only be a prerogative of the few in relation to the many. As a social form of distance, luxury clearly marks a social distance between classes, ranks or, more generally, groups of people.

### 3.3. Distance in space

Strictly connected to the ‘temporal’ level of desire, distance reveals indeed also material estimation, in the worldly space: scarcity of an object, the difficulties of acquisition due to the scarce availability of its distribution, etc. These conditions predate the money circulation and it can be argued that they constitute an intersubjective recognition of the luxuriousness of a good. For example, a precious stone was a prerogative of a chief in the clan even in an economy based on gift. The temporal level of desire is here connected and/or substituted with the spatial distance of the not-yet – which means not-easy to be possessed. The rarity of the truffle as well as the luxuriousness of the product coming in Roman banquets from the Middle East is a clear example.

The distance in space is first of all a geographical and physical limit to the satisfaction of a desire. In a way, it is a more concrete distance than the one in time, created by subjective desire and an immaterial human creation, the money. It is even more evident in modernity where it also sometimes serves to increase the temporal distance, always arousing new desires. In fact, another element come into play in modernity: the value of money as universal medium. The spatial distance has now to do with the geographical space of the cities, the place at the center of the global tendency to urbanization. There exclusive spaces gain prominence. The spatial distance is the one of the exclusivity. It is again a human creation that creates or simply increases the spatial distance for the recognition of an object as luxury. Accordingly, the brand which aims to be recognized as a luxury in a generalized way, by the greatest number and not just by a person or by communities of lifestyles, should be at the center of the places that confer exclusivity.<sup>82</sup>

Accordingly, products being luxurious can only be associated to particular recognizable spaces in city center (especially in Europe), huge shopping malls (especially South Asia) or iconic places (usually everywhere). Be there means to be, for an object or, more commonly, for a brand, recognized as luxury. The recent celebration of the Chinese New Year of Bottega Veneta on the Chinese Great Wall as well as Valentino’s colouring of the Séoul Wave Center

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<sup>82</sup> This is true for real spaces in physical cities as well as in virtual spaces in the metaverse as the most recent trend for some generally reputed luxury brand shows. For a quick and general overview see: <https://agedigroup.com/en/2023/01/10/the-luxury-real-estate-market-in-the-metaverse/>. A complete analysis on this topic has not yet been conducted.



are outstanding recent examples in the world of merchandises.<sup>83</sup> The magnificence of installation is what attracts the eye because of its distance and, at the same time, confer a sense of exclusivity to the brands.<sup>84</sup>

The rarity in the space distance is then not necessarily a natural one, but also artificial, created only by the hierarchization that money generates: ‘The fact that more and more things are available for money and, bound up with this, the fact that money becomes the central and absolute value, results in objects being valued only to the extent to which they cost money and the quality of value with which we perceive them appearing only as a function of their money price’ (Simmel, 2005, p. 280).

Since money is what allows a brand to be in the center of cities as well as to provide extreme experiences for private clients during fashion shows on Mediterranean islands, these experiences are intrinsically valued as luxury. They confer to a larger amount of people, the so-called aspirational consumers, a halo of splendour that fuels imitative desire. Again, it is the money form that not only objectify the distance in the satisfaction of desire standardising a value, but also it co-creates a distance in city space that make more evident the social hierarchies associated to the luxury social form.

In summary, luxury is related to what appear as luxury in relation to the price and to some spaces, that are already invested of significance in the eye of a relevant part of the public. From here the association with exclusive places having an aura of heritage or with an iconic status. The fact of being exposed to the public is a necessary condition for a general recognition of them as luxury. The possibility of small amount of people to be in such a given places reaffirms the sense of exclusivity and spatial distance. Luxury is then a social form of hierarchization through possession. It is aesthetic because it has to do with the senses, with a feeling of pleasure aroused by possession and also by techniques that continue to highlight such distance even when a society is democratized and luxuries (as goods not deemed strictly necessary) are at disposal of the majority of people, at least in Western countries.

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83 See, for example: <https://journalduluxe.fr/fr/business/supersize-luxe-ooh-marketing>.

84 Exclusivity may also be due to the link between aesthetic appreciation of the aesthetic of art installation, but this plan that should be linked to cultural capital, is not deemed necessary for a definition of luxury based on a modern person recognizing only the objective nature of money. This is why I do not consider this point in this article.

#### 4. The aesthetic experience

The social form of luxury turns out to be recognised by the possessor of luxury as well as by observer. Nonetheless between the two there is a great difference. While the latter can simply recognise the distance without the possibility to fill such gap, the former bridges it thanks to possession. My suggestion is that the social form of luxury stresses also a specific form of aesthetic experience that only the highest strata in society can have. This means that not only the social form of luxury individuates the masters in every society, but also make it clear that some possibilities of aesthetic experience, contrary to the one of the contemplations of Kantian's beauty, are reserved only to the few.

In particular, I suggest that the experience of luxury is an ambivalent aesthetic phenomenon. It is, on the one hand, a private experience, but, on the other hand, an inter-subjective interaction is required. The masters have luxury insofar they possess something, but the source of the pleasure derives from intersubjective relations. Without possessing an item intersubjectively recognised as luxury it is not possible to have such an experience. On the one hand, there is no doubt that the masters indulge in a precise aesthetic experience<sup>85</sup>: the objects, as Simmel remarks, do not provide true comfort because they are not judged in an operationally oriented way; the subjects are conscious of their experience, since they are the conscious desiring agents who willingly indulge in possession; they, at least at first, have some pleasure of a very peculiar kind, because completely social.

On the other hand, contrary to a normal aesthetic experience the one of luxury is not concerned with the contemplation of the object, but there is an interest in its possession. Nonetheless, such possession, contrary to the one of objects that gratify the senses (the place of the agreeable, following Kant's *Critique of Judgment*), gives no enjoyment. It is the distance, as for the beautiful, that provides a feeling of pleasure (the standard object of aesthetic experience). Such pleasure is completely a social one. That is the fact of having something that can be possessed only by the few and whose value is judged as universally recognized offers a socio-psychological pleasure. The charm of luxury is the one of social exclusion: a person increases the sense of one own value because of the exclusion of others in the ownership of such goods. In Simmel's essay, *Das Geheimnis. Eine sozialpsychologische Skizze*, the German

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<sup>85</sup> The two main criteria of an aesthetic experience are operationally orientation and self-referentiality as defined by Wiesing (Wiesing, 2019). I also consider the pleasure dimension, as done by Kant (Kant, 2000).

philosopher noted how an increase feeling of ownership (“Eigentumsgefühl”) is experienced due to the exclusion of other people from a possession. From here the rule: the pleasure of possession (“Besitz”) has not to do with the feeling of actually owning something, but in knowing that others should renounce to it. Through possession a vital feeling, inspired by a reciprocal regard with others, arises in people. The consequence is relevant also in the establishment of the value of the good and in the continue objectification of it: since a good is precluded to the many it should be precious.

Here the circular logic of luxury become evident: price standardizes the desire for what is distant, arising also a certitude in the intrinsic value of the object because of the feeling of possession that is nothing more than an affirmation of one own value in comparison with the others whose desire have not (at least yet) been satisfied. My conclusion is then that in modern society luxury is linked to an experience of possession whose value lies in the exclusion of others from it: possessing and having coincide, arising a sense of vanity, fueled by a claim for generalization of the judgment of luxury made by the actual owner of the good in question. At the basis of it there is not only the temporal distance, but recognizability has also to do with the spatial one to be overcome. Spatial distance is then not the necessary condition as the temporal one, but the sufficient one to fuel such desire of self-realization through exclusion, as previously mentioned. Again, sight and distance are the central medium.

To summarize, in luxury, so my thesis, there is double experience: of distance, as for art in the basic Kantian assumption, and of narrowness, through possession, as in Benjamin’s *Ich packe meine Bibliothek aus* (Wiesing, 2019).

## 5. Conclusion

I have suggested that luxury should be seen as a social form. In particular, luxury should be seen as a form of distance, whereas fashion, which is usually associated with luxury in the usual marketing brand, is a form of imitation. As in any social phenomenon, content and form constitute a unity: the form of distance is related to the object, its content, in order to make the social phenomenon of luxury visible and analyzable. That is why I have spoken of luxury in terms of both an experience and an object. Luxury is then a social form of stratification that has a correlate in personal experience.

On a subjective level, it is nothing more than an aesthetic experience of possession

through the medium of distance, in desire. Nevertheless, the plan of mere experience is only subjective, and it should be converted into a more social perspective based on aesthetics. To put it more clearly, the simple form of distance, without material content, is definitely not an object of social aesthetics. The peculiarity of this approach is that not only form and content are brought together in the social world, but the person is never considered as a microcosm, but always in relation to others. The consequence of this is that the social form of luxury can be used to give cause to social passions such as envy and vanity, because of the medium of sight, but it can also explain a social phenomenon such as the attraction that one person sometimes feels for another person who, for example, wears a brilliant earring. The subjective experience of luxury then leads to a consideration of the actual social form of luxury, which could never have been understood without a preliminary aesthetic analysis. On this basis, a more refined analysis of the role of the aesthetic experience of luxury in modern society, or of the relationship between social passions and such experience, should be undertaken.

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