

# Georg Simmel on “Amusement” in the Berlin Industrial Exhibition of 1896

## Abstract

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Georg Simmel was a social theorist, philosopher, cultural critic, and sociologist who often wrote for popular audiences. His primary area of interest was the effect of industrial and commercial capitalism upon individuals, particularly in the way that it changes peoples’ perceptions and values. One of his best-known works was *Philosophie des Geldes* (1900), translated in 1907 as *The Philosophy of Money*.

In 1896, Simmel published this review of the Berlin Industrial Exhibition in the Viennese journal *Die Zeit*, showing both his admiration and astute social critique. In the review, Simmel reflects on the role of the bewildering array of “amusements,” and the impact that paying for these amusements has upon visitors’ aesthetic sensibilities. This aestheticization, seen in commercial amusements and commercial poster-art (i.e. advertising) comes at a cost: namely, the erosion of genuine social interaction. Simmel thereby paved the way, intellectually, for the critical theories of Walter Benjamin some thirty years later.

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In the face of the richness and diversity of what is offered, the only unifying and colourful factor is that of amusement. The way in which the most heterogeneous industrial products are crowded together in close proximity paralyses the senses—a veritable hypnosis where only one message gets through to one’s consciousness: the idea that one is here to amuse oneself.

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The sense of amusement emerges as a common denominator due to a petty but psychologically subtle arrangement: every few steps a small entry fee is charged for each special display. One’s curiosity is thus constantly aroused by each new display, and the enjoyment derived from each particular display is made to seem greater and more significant. The majority of things which must be passed creates the impression that many surprises and amusements are in store. In short, the return to the main motif, amusement, is more effectively achieved by having to make a small sacrifice, which overcomes one’s inhibitions to indulge, than if a higher entry price, giving unrestricted access, was charged, thereby denying that continuous small stimulation.

Every fine and sensitive feeling, however, is violated and seems deranged by the mass effect of the merchandise offered, while on the other hand it cannot be denied that the richness and variety of fleeting impressions is well suited to the need for excitement for overstimulated and tired nerves. While increasing civilization leads to ever greater specialization and to a more frequent one-sidedness of function within an evermore limited field, in no way does this differentiation on the side of production extend to consumption. Rather the opposite: it appears as though modern man’s one-sided and monotonous role in the division of labour will be compensated for by consumption and enjoyment through the growing pressure of heterogeneous impressions, and the ever faster and more colourful change of excitements.

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The press of contradictions, the many stimuli and the diversity of consumption and enjoyment are the ways in which the human soul—that otherwise is in an impatient flux of forces and denied a complete development by the differentiations within modern work—seeks to come alive. No part of modern life reveals this need as sharply as the large exhibition. Nowhere else is such a richness of different impressions brought together so that overall there seems to be an outward unity, whereas underneath a vigorous interaction produces mutual contrasts, intensification and lack of relatedness.

[...]

It is a particular attraction of world fairs that they form a momentary centre of world civilization, assembling the products of the entire world in a confined space as if in a single picture. Put the other way round, a single city has broadened into the totality of cultural production. No important product is missing, and though much of the material and samples have been brought together from the whole world they have attained a conclusive form and become part of a single whole. Thus it becomes clear what is meant by a 'world city' and that Berlin, despite everything, has become one. That is, a single city to which the whole world sends its products and where all the important styles of the present cultural world are put on display. In this sense perhaps the Berlin exhibition is unique, perhaps it has never been so apparent before how much the form of modern culture has permitted a concentration in one place, not in the mere collection of exhibits as in a world fair, but how through its own production a city can represent itself as a copy and a sample of the manufacturing forces of world culture.

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I refer to what could be termed the shop-window quality of things, a characteristic which the exhibition accentuates. The production of goods under the regime of free competition and the normal predominance of supply over demand leads to goods having to show a tempting exterior as well as utility. Where competition no longer operates in matters of usefulness and intrinsic properties, the interest of the buyer has to be aroused by the external stimulus of the object, even the manner of its presentation. It is at the point where material interests have reached their highest level and the pressure of competition is at an extreme that the aesthetic ideal is employed. The striving to make the merely useful visually stimulating—something that was completely natural for the Orientals and Romans—for us comes from the struggle to render the graceless graceful for consumers. The exhibition with its emphasis on amusement attempts a new synthesis between the principles of external stimulus and the practical functions of objects, and thereby takes this aesthetic superadditum to its highest level. The banal attempt to put things in their best light, as in the cries of the street trader, is transformed in the interesting attempt to confer a new aesthetic significance from displaying objects together—something already happening in the relationship between advertising and poster art.

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Nevertheless this exhibition shows the attempt, often successful, to develop aesthetic opportunities which through display can contribute to their attractiveness. Certainly the qualities of taste are mostly lacking in the individual items of the exhibition. Aside from the practical motive of Berlin's exhibition, it is to be hoped at the least that the aesthetic impulse is encouraged beyond the exhibition itself and becomes part of the way products are presented.

Source: Georg Simmel, "The Berlin Trade Exhibition," translated by Sam Whimster, *Theory, Culture & Society* Vol. 8 (1991): 119-123.

Source of original German text: Georg Simmel, "Berliner Gewerbeausstellung," *Die Zeit. Wiener*

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*Wochenschrift*, July 25, 1896, pp. 59-60.

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