The notion of “more-than-life” belongs to Georg Simmel and refers to a broadly understood art. However, in Stéphane Symons's book, it is Walter Benjamin's conception that literally elevates art above mere life and thus exceeds the metaphorical quality of Simmel's formulation. Art's “more-than-life,” for Simmel, is life's “self-transcendence,” which, nevertheless, lacks permanence and is instrumental with respect to life itself: by transcending life, forms and constructs of culture are meaningful and purposeful only when they execute a circular motion and reconnect with life on a different, higher level. Life here succumbs to art temporarily and only in order to be opened—through art—to its own meaning. The likeness of art to death, which, for Simmel, is also life's self-transcendence that provides it with meaning, projects this type of aesthetics onto the metaphysical realm, thus opening it to the ontological dimension of aesthetics, which so much resembles Martin Heidegger’s concepts that it almost cries for a comparative study. As the virtual lack of parallels with Heidegger and other thinkers, outside the Simmel-Benjamin twosome and Henri Bergson's philosophy of life as the most indispensable reference, is what seems to be the only visible shortcoming of Symons's monograph, its asset is the discussion of the ontological dimension of aesthetics that in order to be effective does not need to touch on the most representative and therefore commonplace theories of the two heroes of the book—Simmel's philosophy of money and Benjamin's concept of aura. While in Simmel death as a revealing factor turns backs to life to provide it with meaning, for Benjamin what truly matters cannot be brought back to the mere life's continuity: the value of discontinuity and disruption, prioritized over an overarching dominance of life, makes “more-than-life” truly Benjamin's formula regardless of its authorship. Similarly, the discussion of Simmel in Symons's book, however inspiring and self-sufficient, makes full sense only in its projection onto Benjamin's ontology of art, which becomes a marker of quality or truthfulness and, by implication, renders Benjamin's aesthetics as though a more important subject of Symons's study.

Although the almost nonexistent personal relationships between the two thinkers can be boiled down to Benjamin being a one-time student to Simmel, it is not the formal reason that brings Symons to this comparative study. Before Symons begins his analysis of Simmel's and Benjamin's aesthetic theories (respectively laying them out in two main parts of his book), he takes full account of Benjamin's response to Simmel's fundamental philosophical statements, in which Simmel's “pagan context of nature” is juxtaposed
with “the Jewish [one] of history” in Benjamin (p. 16), and which, nevertheless, do not preclude Benjamin from sharing a similar conception of artistic reproduction that is different from mimesis in its capacity to produce the world anew. However, more specific understanding of this capacity, embodied in particular studies and interpretations of works of art, shows the same bifurcation running along the lines of Simmel's philosophy of life and Benjamin's messianism: the artistic renewal is inscribed within the processes of life itself in Simmel, but in Benjamin yields meaning only when it appears discontinuous and disruptive with respect to life and is not, as it were, returnable or reducible to it. When Symons comes to a close reading—sophisticated and insightful in its own right—of Simmel's and Benjamin's interpretations of particular artworks, this discrepancy loses its emphatic character; therefore, for the reader who wants to maintain the overall ontological basis of this comparison, it is necessary to keep coming back to the introductory chapters of both main parts of the book. For example, it is rather hard, without proper guidance, to discern a fundamental difference between Benjamin's insistence on the productive quality of depersonalization and self-alienation and Simmel's description of the “super-individual” essences that impart universal validity to Michelangelo's sculptures, if only those concepts as mere terms are taken into consideration. One always needs to keep in mind that, for Simmel, Michelangelo's figures lack individuality because they seek to represent universal ideals and thus close themselves off from the eternal movement of life as constant becoming. It is only against the backdrop of Benjamin's repudiation of tragedy that the difference between the two “depersonalizations” becomes tangible: as much as for Michelangelo, in Simmel's view, the absolute ideas of his figures are forced on them as fate; in Benjamin's perspective that would make them tragic heroes who conceive of their fated deaths as a mere form of life and thereby deny themselves the capacity for any change or, as Benjamin would put it, moments of disruption, needed for truth to be laid bare and unfailingly offered by Benjamin's “self-alienation.” What would redeem those figures in Simmel's (and Bergson's) Lebensphilosophie (philosophy of life), that is, their desired-for potential to dispel fate and return to life's constant becoming, would grant no artistic value for Benjamin, for whom life is essentially fallen and is in constant need of redemption itself, unable to produce any self-alienating or disruptive movement, which is only possible as an external intervention (the one of art).

Such juxtapositions, although deducible from the overarching context of the monograph, are not necessarily offered when it comes to the two main parts—the analyses of Simmel's and Benjamin's interpretations of art. According to Symons's own logic, the Simmel part of the book starts with Michelangelo's universal, proceeds through the singular of Rembrandt, and closes with the general of Rodin. In contrast with Greek sculpture, Michelangelo's figures are “individuated” due to their ambition to universalize the individual (for example, the human body) but not individualized because, having rid themselves of everything that would relate them to the outside of their incarnate ideals and render them singular, they remain mere forms “that all human beings have in common” (p. 33). This gap between life's incessant becoming and the ossified universals of Michelangelo's sculptures is exactly what is exposed in Rembrandt. Since the genuine grasp of life's becoming is only possible in a truly individualized figure, whose “soul,” as “a relational” rather than “a substantial unity,” is a controversial multiplicity of its experiences yet also a desire to move beyond itself, Rembrandt's paintings manage to picture the lives of the sitters by capturing their “layered” history and at the same time openness into the freedom of the future (pp. 45, 46). Doing justice to the comparative intention of his study, Symons does not fail here to point out that so masterfully captured moment is informed with significance only in the context of “the over-
arching movement in which it partakes,” while for Benjamin the “now-time” and “momentary interruption” preserve their own intimate and individualizing value (p. 46). However, when Symons moves to Rembrandt’s self-portraits and their meta-artistic quality that is based on “show[ing] themselves off as objects of art” (p. 56), the comparative task subsides to a mere general implication and gains power only in relation to the context of Simmel’s other analyses. In this context, Rodin, Simmel’s favorite artist, appears as a synthesis to the thesis of Michelangelo and the antithesis of Rembrandt because Rodin’s work embodies the very dynamic of life’s becoming and thereby expresses “nothing less than the ontological structure of reality” (p. 66). To counter both Michelangelo’s individuated figures and Rembrandt’s individualized portraits, Symons borrows from Gilles Deleuze the concept of the “dividual” to describe how the human body is presented in Rodin—“a continuous stream of modulation” in which “human beings are caught up” (p. 68), but at the same time does not provide any further parallel with the most related philosophical perceptions of modernity in art—for instance, those of Marshall Berman and Zygmunt Bauman. By the same token, the discussion of the inseparability of aesthetic value from the objects of use in vases and vessels (based on Simmel’s essay “The Handle”[1]), while enriched by Theodor Adorno’s interpretation, does not seem to be full without the Heideggerian discourse on Van Gogh’s shoes.

The Benjamin part of More Than Life, in which close readings are preceded once again by a comparative introduction that actualizes a broader philosophical context of their more specific aesthetic ideas, focuses on Benjamin’s concept of Unscheinbarkeit (inconspicuousness) and his takes on the characters of Charlie Chaplin. In the spirit of denying life its Simmelian-metaphysical quality of self-rejuvenation, Benjamin professes the primacy of the “inconspicuous” (unscheinbar) experiences (both objects and events) that appear “meaningful in an unsuspected and improbable manner” and therefore originate not from the homogeneity of life but from the momentary disruptions that are brought about by means of art alone (p. 97). Among the various instances of objects and ideas that strike us as evocative of meaning without being a coherent totality in their own right (Benjamin reflects on the objects of photography, melancholy, recollection, etc.), the Proustian souvenir involontaire (involuntary memory) is the most impressive example of the paradox that such experiences always necessarily entail: the inconspicuous quality of recollections is haunted by the feeling that they are loaded with meaningfulness and significance. Both souvenir involontaire and melancholic contemplation (in the works of the German Trauerspiel [tragic drama] authors [Martin Opitz, Andreas Gryphius, etc.]) “allow for something that was not significant as an original totality to become significant as a fragment” (p. 110). The meaning of these experiences is always dislodged because it belongs neither to the inconspicuous object nor to its meaning and thus needs to be actively and constantly produced by the perceiving subject. When discussing, in this regard, Benjamin’s idea of the contingent nature of the relationship between the image and its reference in photography, Symons draws timely and apt parallels with Roland Barthes. Similarly to the bringing about of meaning in Proust’s work of recollection and in the interstitial space between the image and the object, Chaplin’s Tramp’s responsiveness to the world outside his persona does not come from his features as a “singular” individual but needs to be created over and over again. As a contingent “character” rather than a metaphysically construed coherent and self-identical individual, the Tramp demonstrates how “forgetfulness can be turned against itself” and thus reveals the true nature of inconspicuousness: “a genuine more-than-life that embodies the limits of life’s all-encompassing forgetfulness but which is located within the heart of forgetfulness itself” (p. 157).
Designed as a comparative study of Simmel's and Benjamin's conceptions of art, *More Than Life* faces the obvious challenge that lies in the difference of the artistic objects each thinker preferred for the development of his respective reflections. However, even relegated to the introductory chapters of the two parts of the monograph, these comparative observations provide the necessary background for the appreciation of the close-reading chapters, which are the most praiseworthy and revelatory parts of the book. Although the reader can almost always feel that in this comparison Symons positions Benjamin's aesthetics at a higher level than Simmel's, it is the Simmel chapters that are supplied with the most creative passages of the study, called “codas,” in which Symons, covering for the shortage of Simmel's close readings of works of art, offers his own such interpretations, basing them on Simmel's aesthetics. In this way, a few famous works of Michelangelo, Rembrandt, and Rodin receive a Simmel-like explication by the author who has an intimate knowledge of his philosophical subject and a deep understanding of art.

Note


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