


# Signs of the Times

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## Abstract



This article is a consideration of what Michel Maffesoli means by the 'aesthetic' in his work, and in particular by the important phrase "the ethic of the aesthetic". Rather than a discrete area of rather refined study for art historians or the like, this term is central to Maffesoli's understanding of the imaginary in postmodern times. It considers the term and also the crucial ways Maffesoli operationalises it in his *Sociology of the Imaginary* through the interrelated notions of 'the re-enchantment of the world', 'the Baroque', and 'the orientalisation of the world', and considers issues arising from his treatment of these topics. A premise of the article is that this material is central to Maffesoli's understanding of the Imaginary in the Postmodern world.

## Keywords

Aesthetic | Re-enchantment | Baroque | Imaginary | Orientalisation

This piece considers Michel Maffesoli's appreciation of what he calls the aesthetic. Unless this is considered, we will really only have a two dimensional view of what Maffesoli's social theory is about. The aesthetic, in the sense that Maffesoli uses the word, and in the more general sense of the word, is central his appreciation of the Imaginary.

Let's start by looking at the specific way in which Maffesoli uses the concept of the aesthetic, and particularly his concept of an ethic of the aesthetic. In *The Contemplation of the World*, Maffesoli introduces the term: "To vibrate by means of common images, to enjoy, albeit in a relative manner, the world such as it is – here are the major characteristics of an ethic of the aesthetic" (1996a: 128). (This shows that the concept links tightly to another key Maffesolian idea; presentism.) The aesthetic is, for Maffesoli, central to the postmodern condition of which the tribes are a key feature: "aesthetic, certainly, which is no longer, as was the case in modernity, peculiar to 'separate' objects in museums or equally separated moments outside of current life, but now as a transversal ambiance contaminating the whole of everyday life" (2004b: 81).

Given the centrality of the aesthetic to postmodern life for Maffesoli, what then is this ethic of aesthetics? Maffesoli gives an explanation in his book *Au creux des apparences*, in the chapter "Homo estheticus". (The English version of the chapter, "The ethic of aesthetics" is used here). There Maffesoli notes that an obsessive idea which runs throughout all forms of civilisation is moral life, which could be posed as a question – what is the ground or condition of collective life? Sometimes this question is answered by a strict morality – a logic of duty, stressing puritanism, planning and productivity. At other times, on the contrary, "the idea embraces sensitivity, communication and collective emotion, and is then more relative, and dependent upon the groups (or tribes) that it structures: this then is an *ethic*, an *ethos*, which comes from below. Morality *versus* ethics" (1991: 7).

Picking up on the last point first, Maffesoli's ethic of the aesthetic is certainly *not* any form of moralism: it is not a '*devoir-être*'. But just because we have moved from universal morality into a phase of moral relativism, a point which Maffesoli argues can be empirically demonstrated, and we have seen the emergence of alternative modes of life, this does not mean that all ethical codes have gone. "One can rather advance the hypothesis that what was marginalized in a period of productivity is now diffracted into a multitude of central marginalities. I would express this in the abbreviated form of the *ethic of the aesthetic*" (*ibidem*). The polarity of the moral and ethical is developed in Maffesoli's 2007 book *Le réenchantement du monde*. Indeed, that book's subtitle is 'an ethic for our times'.



So, if we are looking for Maffesoli to hand us down a specific morality under the heading of the ethic of the aesthetic, to tell us how to live our lives, then we are going to be disappointed. What Maffesoli is talking about is, perhaps, rather like Machiavelli's concept of *virtu* which he has discussed in other works. [See, for instance, *La Transfiguration du politique* (2002: 96-97)]. This connection is useful as it highlights the historical aspect of what Maffesoli is saying here. This is because he argues that there have been eras which are comparable to our own postmodern times, in which a similar ethic of the aesthetic, has prevailed. "The connection is not new (and may even be seen as trans-historical) as the Greek ideal of *Kalokagathos* or certain intuitions of the renaissance (Pater [ie Walter Pater, MT] 1985: 158) show very well" (Maffesoli, 1991: 7).

Another way of thinking about these historical epochs, and one that connects especially well with the whole question of the aesthetic, is to think about life in terms of drama or tragedy. For Maffesoli:



[...] the *drama* of history – be it individual or social – consists in being a perpetual possibility. It is characterized by an ideological tension, and its essential trademark is the 'project', or *projectum*, tending towards the future. *Tragedy*, on the other hand, is of the present, and is nothing but a series of actualisations: passions, thoughts and creations that exhaust themselves in action, in acts of instantaneous expenditure, without reserve. (2004a: 202)

There is for Maffesoli a sort of pendulum in history. This swings, as it were, in time with the mechanism of saturation in social phenomena, so that

[...] what is frivolous in one era may become determinate in another time and place. Thus the marginalization of the aesthetic within the finished perspective of *history* may be replaced by the centralization of the aesthetic within the post-historical perspective of *destiny*. In the former, things are only valued to the extent that they conform to the workings of an evolutionary mechanism: drama in its etymological sense (*dramein*); in the latter, each thing is valued for itself, since it is a signifying element of an *organicity*, an organic whole, hence the tragic, which is the mode in which we are living today. (1991: 18)

So, if elements of the aesthetic were 'frivolous' in the dramatic times of modernity, then they certainly aren't in the tragic times of the postmodern epoch.

In *The Contemplation of the World* Maffesoli makes clear just how central the image is to his overall viewpoint. He notes that "it is around an image, as a function of a style, that this being-togetherness takes form, *stricto sensu*" (1996b: 56). This goes to the heart of what is changing in the present: "the slippage from a democratic, theoretical, conceptual and distant ideal toward a communitarian ideal, that of an image, a style, a form, lived in common in the framework of the quotidian" (*ivi*: 141).

The postmodern tribes can be seen as cohering around images: in the same work, discussing the tribes, giving as examples the microgroups, the sociability of neighbourhoods, the affective ambiance of friendships, the viscosity of religious,

sexual and cultural belonging – “all things that have need of images serving as their catalysts” (*ivi*: 84). Certain types of thinking are noted by Maffesoli as having a real distrust of the image (a theme regarding iconoclasm that connects to the work of Gilbert Durand, perhaps?).

We can take this further. As Maffesoli puts it *Le rythme de la vie*: “empirically we can well see that the individual and individualism have a tendency to lose themselves in the desire for a more and more confusional tribalism. Tribes are born, consolidate and express themselves around aggregative figures” (2004: 129). Maffesoli then points to Worringer’s art historical term *Einfühlung* – empathy. Maffesoli reiterates that “I have, several times, shown how *empathy* was the essential characteristic of our times” (*ibidem*). The swarming of the tribes around images, figures and the like is a profound – perhaps the most important – example of this empathic condition of the emerging postmodernity. Image and style may have been frivolities in the eyes of the theorists of the modern age, but in the postmodern epoch that is being born before our eyes, and which is characterised by empathy, these aesthetic factors are central to Maffesoli’s analysis.

What Maffesoli is doing with this concept of the ethic of aesthetics as much as anything else is providing a reading of the ‘Signs of the Times’. As we have seen moralising is not his intent. He is concerned with characterising postmodern times.

Mechanical societies, of which modernity is a good example, have a tendency toward homogeneity: to base themselves on one value alone or on a set of directly operational criteria. It is not the same for complex societies which are of a dispersed and fragmented construction, and which contain a swarming multiplicity of heterogenous values. The paradox is that such societies, while evidently polytheistic, are nevertheless characterized by a specific ambiance, a particular ‘spirit of the times’. In short, their lack of *unity* does not mean the absence of a certain *unicity*. (1991: 12)

The ‘Signs of the Times’ today are that nothing is now frivolous – not cooking, not how we look, not going for a walk, whatever. “In so far as such activities may provide a focus for collective emotions, they constitute real underground movements, demands for life which have to be analysed” (*ivi*: 8). To pull this discussion together, we can go one step further and consider a summary of the ethic of the aesthetic.

I would specify the ethical as a morality ‘with neither obligation nor sanction’, with no obligation other than coming together and being a member of the collective body, with no sanction other than being excluded should the interest (*inter-esse*) which brought me into the group come to an end. This is precisely the ethics of the aesthetic: experiencing something together is a factor of socialization (*ivi*: 16)

Because the interest that takes us into the postmodern tribe can be quite literally anything – from an interest in a type of music to a shared belief in a specific obscure religious teacher to a shared liking for a particular type of sausage – Maffesoli sounds more than a little like Joseph Beuys in saying that “the whole of everyday life can be considered as a work of art” (*ivi*: 8). This statement provides us with a useful pointer to the nature of the *unicity* of the postmodern epoch in Maffesoli’s eyes.



Maffesoli has given us further indications as to the nature of this *unicity*, or perhaps we could say that he has given us further readings of the 'Signs of the Times'. There are three characterisations of the postmodern that he mentions which we will explore further, and they all highlight aspects of his 'ethic of the aesthetic'. These signs of the times are orientalisation, re-enchantment and the Baroque nature of the postmodern. To no small extent these are linked concepts. Let's start with his argument about orientalisation.

Maffesoli poses this notion sharply at the end of his article on "Everyday Tragedy and Creation": "is everyday life becoming oriental? Perhaps not consciously, but certainly unconsciously, precisely to the extent that only the present lived moment exists, with others, in a given place" (2004a: 209). This indicates some of the aspects of Maffesoli's analysis that 'fit' with this notion of orientalisation – clearly presentism, tribalism, and the importance of the local have a lot to do with it.

Maffesoli takes us further into this concept in *Le Rythme de la Vie*. Writing about the return of the communitarian ideal, which he sees as part of the 'underside of history', he notes that we need to keep that return in mind when discussing individualism – the essential lynchpin of Christianity and its heir, socialism. It is good form among the intelligentsia to praise or decry this individualism. "But it is hardly pertinent to invoke it, when it is its exact contrary which, empirically, is tending to prevail" (2004b: 149). It is in this context that the phrase 'orientalisation of the world' can give us food for thought. He is clear (*ibidem*) that he is invoking what Gilbert Durand and Henry Corbin have called 'mythical orient'. This is about the resurgence of a congeries of values, ways of being and ways of thinking that cannot be recognised in the patterns of the modern west.

However, in this context Maffesoli also points to the successes in the western world of non-Western religious ideas; Zen, Tibetan Buddhism and Candomblé, shamanism and the like. These examples are far from individualism, rather, "to the contrary, in the perspective that I am trying to reach, they are close to a communitarian renewal" (*ivi*: 150). Citing Pierre le Quéau's book on the 'Buddhist temptation', Maffesoli makes it clear that in these examples we see a change from the modern autonomous individual to the postmodern (and premodern?) heteronomous person, who depends, essentially on the 'the other'.

Earlier in *Le rythme de la vie* Maffesoli had discussed such points in a rather different context that perhaps affords us another insight into what he means by his notion of orientalisation. Discussing the 'substantialism' of western thought (which puts the accent on the static and intangible of identity, and which plays out in a Divine substantialism of the one God, and then a statist substantialism – nation states and institutions, and an individualist substantialism based on the autonomous individual), he points to phenomena such as the increasing bureaucratisation of social life. But side by side with all this there is a holistic renaissance, founded on the fission of the individual atom – this is in a chapter called "From fission to fusion". "A heteronomic process, à la Pessoa, [Fernando Pessoa, MT] inducing a magical participation in the tribe and in nature. Fission promoting fusion. integration into a



larger 'self,' whose empirical expressions are legion. Oriental ontogenesis as against western ontology" (*ivi*: 101–2).

It is clear from these points that for Maffesoli oriental ways of thinking, even if we are talking about 'mythical orientals', embody a conceptual framework different to that of the modern west. But we need to be clear on one point. Whilst Maffesoli is, no doubt, at least in part pointing to the phenomenal growth in interest in eastern philosophy (or, perhaps better, philosophies) and other practices (far eastern martial arts, postural yoga, Chinese medicine, for instance) this is not the whole story. As he notes in his book *L'Instant Éternel*:

We are increasingly confronted with a sort of social ecstasy. We must, in this case, understand this *strictissimo sensu*: which is, a leaving of the self, and, paradoxically, a uniting with the other. There are numerous analyses, and I think in particular of those of Pierre le Quéau, which establish a connection between this ecstasy and oriental philosophies, for instance Buddhism. For my part, I think that this 'dissolution of the subject' is a good expression of an undeniable orientalisation of the contemporary world. (2003: 203)

In other words, not only is this a question of practices, but Maffesoli is arguing that eastern philosophies express aspects of the new (perhaps 'different' would be better here) forms of thinking and being that are supplanting 'western modernity' in societies like France, the USA and Britain. Crudely, our ways of thinking are starting to become more like the patterns delineated by eastern philosophies, for instance, than they are like those delineated by modernist rationalism. That this is unconscious to some large measure can hardly be surprising; it is highly doubtful whether the 'Man without Qualities' was aware that he thought and acted through the categories of modernist rationalism in the first place.

The second of Maffesoli's aesthetic 'Signs of the Times' is the 're-enchantment of the world'. This characteristic of the postmodern epoch has been stressed by Maffesoli over a long period of time now. We can find it discussed in book, *Le rythme de la vie*, equally we can find it in *The Time of the Tribes*, first published in France in 1988, some sixteen years prior to the appearance of *Le rythme de la vie* (and it was the title of Maffesoli's 2007, *Le réenchantement du monde*.) In *The Time of the Tribes* we find a fairly succinct statement that gives us the intellectual context of the argument:

In fact, after the period of 'disenchantment with the world' (Weber's *Entzauberung*) I am suggesting that we are witnessing a veritable re-enchantment with the world, whose logic I will try to make clear. For the sake of brevity, let us say that, in the case of the masses which are diffracted into tribes, and the tribes which coalesce into masses, the common ingredient is a shared sensibility or emotion. (1996a: 28)

In *The Time of the Tribes* we are given further clues as to just what Maffesoli means by the this 're-enchantment of the world', and it is a wide-ranging phenomenon.

There is, for Maffesoli, a clear link between re-enchantment and what he calls "the restoration of the natural (naturalism)" (*ivi*: 39). This may, it might be suggested, be a reference to the rise in ecological thinking (on this, see 2017's *Écosophie*), and perhaps especially the rise within that of tendencies such as neo-paganism which stress a sort of pantheistic approach to ecology, sometimes in conjunction with



practices such as goddess worship. Maffesoli goes on to suggest that the 'social sleuth' will pick up on the phenomena that stress "fate, destiny, the stars, magic, tarot, horoscopes, nature, cults, etc." (1996a: 39). These are the signs of "another way of relating to the natural or cosmic environment than the one to which we had become accustomed by purely rationalist thinking" (*ibidem*). This new way of thinking has, of course, implications for our interactions with others.

Later in the same book, Maffesoli has a methodological passage which gives us a 'negative' clue to the re-enchantment of the world. Discussing the richness of ideas in themselves, which the positivism of the nineteenth century in its various guises ("Marxism, functionalism", *ivi*: 83) called into question, he argues that the economic logic that prevailed in modernity – which both favoured the political project and the atomising of the individual – was incapable of integrating the dimension of a collective imagination. "At the very most, it was able to conceive of this dimension as a spiritual supplement, a private and superfluous 'extra', leading, without any opposition to the familiar 'disenchantment with the world' (*Entzauberung*) which particularly prevailed in social theory, obscuring the mythical (utopian) weight of the workers' movement" (*ibidem*). This passage is important as it suggests that we need to connect the notion of the re-enchantment of the world to the mythologies through which the social imaginary functions. It is, therefore, not strange to see Maffesoli suggest that the success of films like *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* franchises are examples of this re-enchantment of the world. This notion, then, rather like the concept of orientalisation considered above, is not simply registering interesting facts. Rather, it is a statement that has some centrality in Maffesoli's account of the changes that are underway in society as we move into the postmodern epoch. Nothing, we have seen him argue, is frivolous today. He means this seriously, and these arguments – and examples – show it.

Maffesoli is not contesting Weber's argument about disenchantment. The 'spirit of the times' has simply changed. In large measure this relates to the question of identity within modernity. For Maffesoli this tended to a 'unique' identity – professional, sexual, ideological. This has now changed and identity is now more about a series of successive identifications (the swarming of the multitude of postmodern tribes which we enter, leave and maybe re-enter again, and which are not exclusive). The 'unique' identity Maffesoli sees as recent in origin "and took effect under the impulse of a rationalist conception of the individual and society. Here is the famous 'disenchantment with the world,' whose scope Max Weber well demonstrated" (1996b: 56). So, Weber's thesis was clearly not wrong if considered as specific to modernity. But times have changed.

Faced with this, postmodern re-enchantment, by means of the image, myth and allegory, gives rise to an aesthetic that essentially has an aggregative function: hence the accent placed on notions like magic, charm, vision, appearance – that characterize contemporary style and that are cause and effect, in everyday life, of that 'linking' that does not fail to astonish social observers. (*ivi*: 56–7)

The re-enchantment of the world is, accordingly, right at the heart of the process of tribalisation that is, for Maffesoli, a crucial feature of the contemporary world. This



re-enchantment is not a frivolous 'add-on' but is part and parcel of the construction of the myths and images that we live by and through. Maffesoli has been clear about the nature of these in the postmodern world. Noting that the polytheism of values may seem to put people into conflict with each other and that this might be mistaken for narcissism - narcissism being seen as a problem because it is a retreat into a private world- he argues:

It may, on the contrary, be quite legitimate to envisage a *collective narcissism*, if one understands by this the fact of producing and living a specific mythology. Such a collective narcissism, which certainly affects the individual, emphasizes the aesthetic, because what it involves is a particular style, a particular mode of life, of ideology, of dress, of sexual manners, in short, everything pertaining to the order of collective passion. (1991: 16)

We are, of course, here dealing with the 'Imaginary', for Maffesoli the ensemble of past and possible representations. For Maffesoli "the *all encompassing imaginary* strongly determines individual attitudes, lifestyles, ways of thinking, and the various interrelations (social, economic, political, ideological, or religious) which constitute life in society. It is their matrix, in the fullest sense of the term, ensuring their gestation and presiding over their birth" (1993: 9). Maffesoli's attitude to the imaginary seems to carry over into the approach that we take towards the world: "But in putting the accent on the imaginary we recognise a major change in the paradigm. Rather than dominating the world, rather than wishing to transform it or to change it - all three attitudes being Promethean - one attempts to integrate oneself with it by contemplation" (*ivi*). In other words, one becomes Dionysian. To summarise so far, the 'Spirit of the Times' are orientaliation and re-enchantment. These 'Signs of the Times' are not unimportant factors: rather they are key elements in the imaginary (or imaginaries) that are at work in the postmodern epoch. They play into the ethic of the aesthetic and are part of the mythologies that we are living out in the postmodern tribes.

Maffesoli's third 'Sign of the Times' is to be found in his argument that there is a strong element of the Baroque in the imaginary and the mythologies of our epoch, an argument developed at length in a chapter, "La baroquisation du monde", in *Au creux des apparences*. This is an important claim for him to make, as he regards style as being something of no little significance. "The history of art is in this respect instructive, since it shows how change in style is cause and effect of change in sensibility" (1996b: 5). Examples he gives here include Ruskin's reflections on the change from Romanesque to Gothic, and Wöfflin's on the shift from Renaissance to Baroque. In these cases "style is the essential characteristic of a collective sentiment" (*ibidem*). We've seen enough of Maffesoli's analysis to know how important that means style is for him.

Maffesoli expands on his argument about the contemporary importance of the Baroque by looking at what the Baroque can teach us about the emergence of a shared and tribal happiness in our developing postmodern condition, mentioning a "resemblance that seemed to exist between postmodernity and the Baroque" (*ivi*:





41). He argues that the Jesuits boosted the Baroque in architecture, painting and music in order to magnify the communitarian spirit against the individualism of the Protestant reformation. "In particular, it has been noted that decoration and ornamentation of baroque churches had the function of giving a foretaste of celestial beatitude. But the latter, we must not forget, is essentially communitarian" (*ibidem*). The luxuriousness of these churches was designed to give a religious pleasure in the etymological sense of the word – *religare*, binding – a linked, shared pleasure that bound the congregants together. "From this point of view, the Baroque is indeed a visible expression of an invisible force: that of the communitarian ideal" (*ibidem*).

Maffesoli has extended this idea more recently. He suggests:

So this is the path of thought initiated here: take leave of exhausted modern classicism and, perhaps, as was the case in the Catholic Counter-Reformation of the sixteenth century, return, against the Protestant Reformation, to a "baroquisation" of being together where body, senses, liturgy, rituals occupy a place of choice (2020: 12)



Maffesoli takes from Eugenio d'Ors the distinction between an historical style, limited in time, a finished style, and a cultural style, which can be reborn and translate its inspiration into new forms. Baroque is a cultural style because we find it in different art forms and also because it can be reborn. And just in case there is any doubt on exactly what Maffesoli means by the Baroque style, he has clarified: "The baroquisation of the world is, at once, the flamboyant iconophilia which adorns the walls of our cities, this putting of the world into images, and this adjustment to the chiaroscuro of existence, accommodation to this very world rather than a projection towards the Lights of the future." (2004b: 27)

The rebirth of the Baroque in the postmodern shows us the role of the aesthetic style: we can see in it the plurality of elements in the social formation and, on the other hand,

one can see how these elements manage to enter into synergy and lead to a new form of equilibrium, even if the latter is changing, dynamic, aleatory and always unstable. For our purposes, such a comparison allows us above all to integrate, as structuring elements, hedonism and the pleasure of being-togetherness. (1996b: 42)

This is why, later in the same book, Maffesoli can argue that the metaphor of the "baroquization of the world" (*ivi*: 94) allows us to see how the heterogeneity of the postmodern social still hangs together to form a solid organicity. As he notes in *Au creux des apparences*, "the baroque sensibility, which rests, as we know, on the *a priori* of the complex" (Maffesoli, 1990: 167). To use another of the terms he has introduced, the concept of *baroquisation*, like those of *orientalisation* and *re-enchantment* help us to think the *unicity* of the postmodern world we live in, and this unicity is one of complexity. Indeed, to no small extent these terms are relating to the same phenomenon. This is shown in a passage that connects the notion of

orientalisation with that of the Baroque: “Thus, the orientalisation of the world that we can observe in our times can be understood as a modulation of a baroque type” (ivi: 168). This stress on the complexity of the postmodern also applies to re-enchantment of the world. “In brief, the re-enchantment of the world is only another way of saying the polytheism of values” (ivi: 183). These three characterisations of the spirit of our times can perhaps be seen as three different ways of looking at the same set of phenomena, which all link to the central notion of the imaginary.

To conclude this piece, two points can be raised, one concerning orientalisation that leads into empirical issues, and the other concerning the baroque in postmodernity, which leads into a wider methodological issue. Looking first at orientalisation, we should recall the stress Maffesoli put on the notion of the ‘mythical orient’, as well as mentioning phenomena such as the successes in the West of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism. Here it is worth noting that we perhaps need to explore just why our ‘mythical orient’ in the West take the form they do. Zen Buddhism points to an interesting example. A brief glance at the shelves of a bookshop will confirm its presence. But in Japan it is far from hegemonic. You’d be hard pushed to find a book in even the best stocked bookshop in London or Paris about Shin Buddhism, the Japanese form of Buddhism associated with the *Jōdoshinshū* organisation. And yet figures suggest that many more Japanese are affiliated with this form of Buddhism than with Zen. The rather outdated figures (from 2005) in Michael K. Roemer’s chapter (“Japanese Survey Data on Religious Attitudes, Beliefs and Practices in the Twenty First Century”) in the *Handbook of Contemporary Japanese Religions* (ed Prohl and Nelson) result in an informed estimate of around 6.3 millions of Jōdōshinshū Buddhists as against 2.2 millions of Zen Buddhists. (Prohl and Nelson, 2012: 33).

The failure of Shin Buddhism to make an impact in the UK has been the subject of academic consideration (Matsunaga, 2022) as has its failure to significantly break out of the Japanese diaspora community in the USA (Amstutz, 2010). One of the factors pointed to by Matsunaga is “a continuing negative evaluation of Jōdo Shinshū as “inauthentic” from the few who encountered it within Buddhist circles.” (Matsunaga, 2022: 8). (For the North American case, Amstutz in his book *Interpreting Amida, History and Orientalism in the study of Pure Land Buddhism*, has an interesting discussion on the role of D T Suzuki, renowned populariser of Zen in North America. Suzuki came from a Shin family, and wrote extensively on the tradition. See pages 85-86.) Shin Buddhism has historically not been associated with meditation, and one wonders if, as a result of this and other doctrinal factors, it has not become part of the West’s Imaginal ‘mythical orient’. This example raises some serious and interesting questions, that may have wider significance for Maffesoli’s approach, and makes it clear that the ‘mythical’ and ‘real’ orient can differ.

Turning to the issue of baroquisation in postmodernity, there is an important point that can be made by teasing out what Maffesoli has had to say on the issue of architecture in the modern and postmodern worlds. Briefly, a reading of the chapter “La baroquisation du monde” in the book *Aux creux des apparences* will show that for Maffesoli there is a connection between postmodern architecture and the baroque.



(1990:160-161; 168-169; 184-185). If we turn to *La Nostalgie du sacré* we find a consideration of the minimalism of modernist architecture. "It is the "minimalism" characterised in France by the buildings of Le Corbusier or the obscurity of the HLM (low-income housing) giving the suburbs of the big cities - the famous "cities"- their lugubrious aspect." (2020: 280.) Maffesoli then suggests that modern architecture's minimalism can be summarised by Mises van der Rohe's famous statement "less is more", and this is then contrasted with postmodern theorist Robert Venturi's response: "less is bore". (2008: 165-6.)

Let's look at a couple of examples from modernist architecture. Firstly, Le Corbusier's own *Unité d'Habitation* in Marseille. Much of the building conforms as we might expect to Maffesoli's strictures on minimalism. But look at the illustration



FIG. 1

Even the high priest of French modernism appears to have needed some element of the decorative, perhaps even of *iconophilie*.

Our second example comes from Manchester:



FIG.2

It is a decorative frieze, *Cosmos 1*, made in fibre-glass and applied to 160 square metres of the bottom level of the University of Manchester's Owen's Park Tower Hall of Residence, which in truth could easily be taken for a *banlieu* skyscraper in design. Much of this interesting artist's sculpture was used in similar ways on modernist buildings. (For Mitzi Cunliffe see Ann Sumner's *Mitzi Cunliffe, An American in Manchester*).

These examples reinforce a point made by Maffesoli in *L'Ordre des Choses*, where he discusses an order of things in which harmony is essentially conflictual, governed, as it were by a 'contradictorial logic, where the contradiction does not resolve in a synthesis. "This "contradictorial" logic, logic of the "given third": one can be this *and* that, such a phenomenon is plural, connective... this takes us back to the that immemorial popular wisdom, which it is common to be wary of or chuckle at. Wisdom that knows, of embodied knowledge, "that it needs everything to make a world"." (2014: 47) Maffesoli notes that this is close to the method of oriental knowledge, of antagonistic equilibrium, such as the Yin and Yang of Taoism. The point is this: we'll find elements of the baroque even in the most stringently modern minimalist architecture. Doubtless, if we look we'll find the seeds of a "less is more" aesthetic in the most playful areas of postmodern artistic production (a "post-postmodernist sensibility"?). Much of *L'Ordre des Choses* focuses on relativism and pluralism in social science, and it is a point that needs stressing here. (It is made by Maffesoli himself in *Aux Creux des apparences*, in a discussion of Christopher Wren, following a citation of Gilbert Durand on the baroque in the music of the Reformation as well as the Counter-Reformation. See page 184). Failure to keep this point in mind would result in losing much of the power of Maffesoli's approach to the Imaginary.

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