

# Sensation Seeking and Anesthetization: On Christoph Türcke and the Traumas of Modernization

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## Abstract

This article examines Christoph Türcke's theory of modernization as developed in *Erregte Gesellschaft: Philosophie der Sensation* (Türcke, 2002), focusing on its implications for understanding the genesis of capitalism and the transformation of human experience. It highlights two key dynamics: the autonomization of the market as a central organizing force of modern society, and the necessity of buffering the social and psychic disruptions produced by industrialization. According to Türcke, modernity could only stabilize itself by compensating for lost forms of experience through the production of sensory "surrogates". The article emphasizes the decisive role of modern media—from the printing press to digital technologies—in both processes. Media not only enabled the expansion of market logic through the imperative of self-advertisement and sensation production, but also provided forms of "concentrated distraction" that mitigated the nervous strain of modern life, while at the same time undermining long-standing cognitive capacities and weakening perception. Situating Türcke alongside Media Ecology and Sensory Studies, the article underscores the originality of his focus on libidinal economy and the sensory infrastructure of experience, including the centrality of touch. It further explores the interplay between sensation and anesthetization, arguing that modern media simultaneously stimulate and neutralize the sensorium. Through examples such as photography, shop windows, and railways, the article shows how modern experience is shaped by a dialectic of shock and soothing. Finally, it proposes that the erosion of historical continuity constitutes a third "cumulative trauma" of modernity, pointing toward the need for a renewed critical theory as a form of social therapeutics.

## Keywords

Christoph Türcke, Modernization, Sensation, Anesthetization, Trauma

## 1. Introduction

Although Christoph Türcke remains relatively under-translated and under-appreciated internationally, several recent contributions have offered brief introductions to his work (Da Silva Moreira, 2021; Cuomo & Scafoglio, 2023). In this article, I discuss the original theory of modernization—and thus of the genesis of capitalism—that Türcke (2002) develops in *Erregte Gesellschaft: Philosophie der Sensation* (*Excited Society: Philosophy of Sensation*; hereafter EG). My aim is to highlight two key aspects of the dialectics of the modernization process as reconstructed by Türcke. The first is the “autonomization of the market”, namely the historical process through which the market ceased to function as a subordinate social subsystem and became the primary organizing principle of society. This is a dynamic that, according to Türcke, has driven modernization since the early modern period. The second is the buffering of the social upheaval produced by capitalism and the nervous strain induced by industrialization. In Türcke’s account, industrial capitalism could not have sustained its relentless advance without this buffering—a process in which the provision of “surrogates” plays a central role. By “surrogates”, Türcke means substitute forms of experience compensating for the social, sensory, and libidinal losses produced by modernization. In order to establish itself, modernity had to “compensate” for the very experiences of which it had deprived individuals.

More specifically, I focus on the decisive role that modern media—from the printing press to the digital sphere—play, in Türcke’s account, in both of these aspects of the modernization process. On the one hand, the market could become the central instance of socialization only by allying itself with the media: it is through this alliance that the market was able to generalize what Türcke identifies as its specific imperative, namely the injunction to advertise oneself by *producing sensation*—that is, by generating perceptual impact through shock, novelty, and attention capture—across the whole of society. On the other hand, modern media, beginning with cinema, have provided crucial audiovisual surrogates that enable a form of relaxation suited to both market society and the psychic attrition produced by mechanical labor: what Türcke calls “concentrated distraction”. Thanks to this dual alliance with the media, the market has restructured not only society but even the most elementary forms of experience, perception, and identity in the modern and hypermodern subject. More precisely, Türcke denounces this restructuring as a wholesale *destruction* of cognitive capacities sedimented over millennia thanks to a mechanism that he terms, reinterpreting Sigmund Freud, the “traumatic compulsion to repeat”.

Because of this attention to the ways in which social transformations become inscribed in the sensory infrastructure of experience, I place Türcke’s theses alongside research traditions such as Media Ecology and, more recently, the Anthropology of the Senses and Sensory Studies. Rather than attempting an exhaustive comparison, I use this juxtaposition to highlight an original feature of the framework developed in EG: the centrality of the libidinal economy and its close

connection with the analysis of social transformations at the level of perceptual infrastructure and of the way media restructure it. This emphasis—arising from the intersection of critical social theory and Freudian psychoanalysis—also underlies another distinctive aspect of Türccke’s theory, namely the key role assigned to touch as a privileged sensory modality for interpreting the transformations of hypermodern experience, particularly regarding the coherence and the cohesion of the self.

Türccke’s genealogy of modernization is also original for another reason: it identifies an impulse toward sensation seeking as the driving force of modernization, whereas other interpretations have described the latter primarily as a dynamic of anesthetization or sensory impoverishment. For Türccke, modern anesthetization—that is, the defensive dampening or neutralization of sensory and affective responsiveness under conditions of overstimulation—is always the reverse side of the drive toward sensation promoted by the autonomization of the market. Sensation therefore holds genealogical priority over anesthetization, even though the two remain closely correlated.

Here again, my goal is not a systematic comparison between Türccke’s “paradigm of sensation” and a possible “paradigm of anesthetization”. Rather, drawing on insights from media ecology, I explore a specific aspect of this correlation: the way sensation and anesthetization intertwine in the structure of certain media which proved decisive in restructuring European experience during early industrial capitalism. In addition to photography, analyzed by Türccke, I consider the effects of the media structures of the shop window and the railway. All three media stimulate the sensorium while simultaneously offering a form of anesthetization—a distancing from the world, an aesthetic neutralization of experience. Without this anesthetizing balm, the shocking effect of these media on the modern sensorium—and indeed the entire process of industrialization—would have been unbearable.

To this must be added the fact that the modern media milieu manages to “co-zify” the very history from which it simultaneously separates us as it introduces extraordinarily rapid transformations in experiential regimes. This erosion of the sense of historical continuity—cushioned, so to speak, by this process of “cozification”—represents, in my view, a third important “cumulative trauma” structuring modern forms of experience alongside the two principal traumas identified by Türccke, namely social uprooting and industrial sensory wear. Beyond these and other possible extensions, however, Türccke’s work warrants serious consideration because it restores critical social theory to its vocation as a form of social therapeutics, placing theory at the service of an art of collective repair capable of addressing the profound traumas that our modern forms of life are called upon to work through. This article reconstructs Türccke’s theory of modernization as a sensory and libidinal genealogy of capitalism, situates it in relation to media ecology and sensory studies, and advances the claim that the erosion of historical continuity should be understood as a third cumulative trauma constitutive of moder-

nity. The analysis developed here treats modernization as a historically specific process originating in Christian-European society and subsequently generalized on a global scale through capitalism and modern media. Accordingly, the claims advanced throughout the paper concern this specific historical trajectory of Western modernity, rather than “modernity” understood as a transhistorical or culturally universal category.

## 2. The Birth of the Modern from the Autonomization of the Market

What set the process of modernization in motion? EG offers a very clear answer: the transition of the market from a subsystem to an autonomous system. Türcke’s thesis is that the process of modernization began between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when the market first decoupled itself from the sacred center of society—around which it had initially developed—and subsequently came to occupy that very center. In Christian Europe, the setting for this transformation, that center was the Mass (from which German trade fairs, *Messen*, in fact derived their name). More broadly, it comprised all the traditional spaces, practices, and public occasions around which the life of a still deeply religious society revolved.

Türcke’s thesis is that the market, and thus the commodity, literally supplanted the “temple” as society’s central authority—the primary site of social aggregation acting as an instance of election and condemnation, and a source of meaning. Yet, Türcke seeks to move beyond the countless philosophical, sociological, and anthropological interpretations that have generally pointed to the market as the locus of a secularized sacred and to the commodity form as a mysterious intertwining of the sensible and the supersensible, to use the words of Karl Marx. Instead, Türcke aims to identify the *condition of possibility* of this transition—an issue he contends has remained unaddressed. This condition of possibility is what he terms the “long sacred prehistory” of the profane commodity.

The theory of modernization developed in EG must be understood through the lens of Türcke’s broader theory of anthropogenesis and the deep genesis of culture. This theory, anticipated in the central chapter of EG and later developed in *Philosophie des Traums* (Türcke, 2013), serves as the very foundation of his account of modernization. According to Türcke, the cognitive, symbolic, social, and cultural capacities of *homo sapiens* emerged during the deep Paleolithic as a specific defensive strategy against environmental terror, to which hominids must have been particularly exposed due to their nervous constitution. By giving a distinctive twist to one of the most famous concepts of Sigmund Freud, Türcke calls this strategy the “traumatic compulsion to repeat”. Its function was to establish collective practices and spaces within which, through a long process of nervous training, environmental terror could be worked through insofar as the collective took it under its own direction and staged it ritually. In Türcke’s account, rather than fleeing *from* fright, certain hominids learned to flee *into* it: through controlled repetition, they managed to neutralize the terror.

The genesis of culture through this traumatic compulsion to repeat constitutes precisely the long sacred prehistory of the profane commodity, which in turn provides the condition of possibility for the market's transition from subsystem to autonomous system. It is a history of the progressive substitution of those mechanisms that once made terror bearable but eventually became intolerable themselves. Initially, terror was rendered bearable through ritual sacrifice in its various forms: first human, then animal, and finally monetary "sacrifice"<sup>1</sup>. In transitioning from a subsystem to an autonomous system, the market follows the same logic as any other "precipitate" of the cultural working through the founding trauma by means of ritual sacrifice. That is to say, it subjugates and replaces a previous system of trauma processing around which it had grown as an appendage. This was the case with the world of mental representation, which gradually stabilized only by subordinating the hallucinatory epoch within which it had developed. It was also the case with articulated profane language, which progressively subdued the sacred name that had initially functioned as an acoustic escape route from terror. And it was the case, moreover, with the increasingly less violent forms of ritual sacrifice—the last of which is precisely the exchange of metallic products—which successively replaced more violent sacrificial practices.

Yet, unlike all the other precipitates of the traumatic compulsion to repeat, the market does not simply continue its "long sacred prehistory": rather, it begins to unravel it in reverse. In other words, for roughly the past half millennium the market has threatened to erode the very capacities for concentration, representation, and symbolization that tens of thousands of years of traumatic compulsion to repeat bequeathed to us, at the cost of extremely arduous nervous labor. High technology, Türcke suggests, may even be on the verge of reawakening Paleolithic sedimentations of the human mind.

This erosion occurs because, in detaching itself from the sphere of the temple within which it had grown, the market found a formidable ally: the printing press. Türcke interprets the historical relation between movable-type printing and emerging capitalism as a reciprocal feedback loop. On the one hand, it was only within the economic conditions of early capitalism that printing could assume the role of a fundamental mediator of communication processes and thereby influence social forms as a whole. On the other hand, emerging capitalism fully exploited the intrinsic logic of printing as a medium. This reciprocal feedback loop between capitalism and media, which begins with printing, has intensified throughout the process of modernization, binding ever more tightly the successive stages of capitalism to the audiovisual technologies most suited to them: photography, cinema, television, and finally today's microelectronic technologies. With regard to the different stages of this alliance between capitalism and media, Türcke consistently maintains the same interpretive key: a medium can unfold its full po-

<sup>1</sup>According to Türcke, immolation was inherently a form of payment, and payment never fully shed its sacrificial character. That is the central thesis of Türcke (2015), where he expands upon the "long sacred prehistory" of the market first outlined in EG.

tential only within the framework of generalized competition imposed by the market, and conversely, the market can impose such a framework only because the specific form of socialization it tends to promote is able fully to exploit the capacities of the medium.

What Türrcke calls “sensation” is precisely the common denominator between the market’s mode of socialization and to the operation of audiovisual media from the printing press onward. From the late medieval beginnings of capitalism to its most recent microelectronic and neoliberal configuration, the imperative of sensation has remained essentially the same: in order to be socially included, every person and object must appear on the market and produce sensation, advertise themselves and make news by inflating trivialities, simplifying complex realities, and diverting public attention from one event to another. This is the form of spectacle whose inextricable co-belonging with the commodity form was already at the center of Guy Debord’s social critique. Over the past half century, under microelectronic conditions, this imperative has taken the form of an even more ruthless “compulsion to transmit” and “struggle to be there”: transmitting has become synonymous with being perceived and, ultimately, with *being*. The late modern risk is no longer merely that of being excluded from a society structured by the integrative force of the market; more profoundly, each individual risks experiencing a radical uncertainty about their own being, a sense of ontological inconsistency in identity, since the confirmation of one’s own ontological solidity increasingly lies in the hands of the incessant audiovisual irradiation which we are called upon to perform.

### **3. The Buffering of Modernization: Cumulative Traumas and Surrogates**

Türrcke’s genealogy of the modern “society of sensation” thus integrates theological, socioeconomic, and technological-media dimensions according to a precise model. The market becomes the central instance of socialization by both continuing and at the same time perverting a sacred prehistory that coincides with that of the human species. The reason the market succeeds in supplanting the sacred—while simultaneously undoing its cultural precipitates—lies in the alliance (a reciprocal feedback loop) it establishes with the media from the printing press onward.

At the same time, Türrcke knots together the three dimensions of theology, socioeconomics, and media within a fourth, fundamental one: the libidinal dimension. Sigmund Freud spoke of a “libidinal economy” with regard to the psychic apparatus. Yet every economy, we might say with Türrcke, is in reality a libidinal economy; this becomes all the more evident the more one investigates its theological presuppositions—that is, the way in which a given mode of production, in structuring a society, reconfigures elementary instances of the sacred, of salvation, and of meaning, in light of the role technologies and media assume in reformulating those very presuppositions.

To guarantee a framework of meaning, in physiological terms, means guaranteeing a metastable equilibrium in the circulation of libidinal energy. *Mutatis mutandis*, this principle holds for the social organism no less than for the individual. According to Türccke, the emerging society of sensation was likewise confronted with precisely such a task. The problem arose with particular urgency insofar as early capitalism, by calling into question cultural sedimentations thousands of years old, unleashed a volume of libidinal energy potentially destructive to the social body.

This occurred when the market, upon becoming an autonomous system, began systematically to disintegrate premodern society. From its very inception, modernization consisted in a general and violent mobilization that transformed large portions of the rural and artisanal population into a labor force concentrated in the new urban commercial centers. In this way, that population was deprived of an entire system of reference, exercised for centuries, through which premodern communities processed the blows of fate: customs and rituals, dogmas and sacraments, the proximity of kin, and social hierarchies. Labor power not only ceased to be a guarantee of vital subsistence; it was also stripped of its connection to acquired skills. With full industrialization, this dynamic of erosion not only intensified but was joined by the nervous wear produced by machines—an aspect to which Türccke assigns considerable importance.

Compensation for the vanished sacred and buffering of industrial wear: these, then, were the two fronts on which the modern form of life had to “compensate” both the nervous and social systems in order to establish itself. Adapting at the social level a concept introduced in individual psychology by Masud Khan, we might say that Türccke is concerned with two major “cumulative” traumas produced by modernization—traumas resulting not from a single radically shocking event but from a largely silent accumulation of breaches, tensions, and pressures affecting the protective envelopes a form of life requires in order to develop (Khan, 1996, ch. 3, 4).

Another tenet of drive theory which Türccke directly takes up is that a psychic system, when deprived of a love object, tends to seek a fetish: an object bearing sufficient resemblance to the lost one to compensate for its absence, yet distinct enough to avoid triggering the pain the loss itself. The fetish is also useful for “binding” an excitation that, under certain conditions, becomes simply unbearable for the nervous system, generating stress and anxiety. The erosion of the premodern fabric of rituals, customs, usages, and meanings capable of channeling nervous pathways certainly represented a paradigmatic case of such deprivation—especially once the wearing effect of machines was added to it. Indeed, Türccke argues that the vocabulary of addiction theory can quite legitimately be used to describe the society of the absolute market: it is a vast, ongoing phenomenon of withdrawal. Modernity’s entire technological and social development, he contends, has had to function as a buffer for the libidinal upheaval triggered by the rise of the market as the primary force of social integration.

On the one hand, then, the process of modernization has drawn—and continues to draw—its driving impulse from the reciprocal feedback loop between market and media. On the other hand, however, this movement could not continue, let alone accelerate, if it were not capable of constantly finding new forms of compensation, substitutes, and surrogates for everything it has taken away and continues to take away. In EG, Türrcke traces the history of this buffering through surrogates: from the proliferation of festivities in the Renaissance to today's epidemics of drug addiction, phenomena of sensation seeking, and the ever more widespread forms of digital hyperactivity. In recounting this history, rather than focusing on the epidemics of opium and spirits addiction that accompanied the first developments of industrial society, Türrcke concentrates on the surrogate role played by audiovisual technologies. These did not merely allow the market to absolutize its imperative of sensation; they also buffered its effects. Beginning with cinema, they were able to establish a relaxing trajectory compatible with the discipline of industrial labor by setting the photographic image in motion and thereby intensifying its shock effect. Leisure time, itself a vacuum produced by the exhaustion of industrial labor, is filled with forms of entertainment where both the incessant shaking of all social conditions and the concentrating-dispersing force of machine labor are transmuted into a relaxed form. This is the form Türrcke calls “concentrated distraction”: a mode of audiovisual entertainment that fixes attention on a single point only to erode that concentration through endless repetition. This dynamic, famously identified by Günther Anders in the 1950s, is evidently exacerbated in the era in which, under the influence of the microelectronic revolution, labor and leisure once again come to overlap almost indistinguishably. The analyses developed in EG can easily be updated here to cover the last quarter century: between the “projectile” of the cinematic image, as Walter Benjamin called it, and today's scrolling from one reel to the next—a form of concentrated distraction suited to a sensorium that has long since absorbed the old projectiles—there is a difference of degree, not of kind.<sup>2</sup>

#### **4. The “Average Perceptual Repertoire” and the Centrality of Touch**

The reason why Türrcke speaks of a “society of sensation” is very simple. Insofar as sensation succeeds in cushioning its own wearing effect and in substituting for the referential objects it removes, no sphere of modern life remains untouched by the compulsion to display oneself, to transmit, to generate sensation. This applies to modes of production and social structures as much as to the cultural values, myths, narratives and utopias that justify or inspire economic policies. Scientific research and culture—now turned into industry—are equally affected, as are geopolitical and macropolitical dynamics and the grassroots politics of antagonistic movements. Especially in the opening and closing chapters of EG, one finds a bril-

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<sup>2</sup>For a recent empirical confirmation of Türrcke's theses in relation to Hollywood cinema, see De Almeida Júnior et al., 2025.

liant survey of how the “paradigm of sensation” profoundly conditions each of these spheres, and thus the form of “society” as a whole.

Such a level of homogenization and integration among the various social spheres has been reached because the paradigm of sensation has managed to inscribe itself in the infrastructure of all these spheres: perception. What is structured by “sensation” is a specific way of sensing the world—which is to say, an entire way of being in the world. This is a fundamental point that Türrcke maintains firmly from the first to the last page of EG: cultural forms—our sense of self, of time and space, the forms of our social existence, our “values”—are rooted in the forms of perception and feeling. Türrcke employs a series of precise formulations to bring this level of analysis into focus. The escalation toward the sensational, he argues, enters the average perceptual repertoire, namely the historically sedimented ensemble of habitual sensory dispositions through which subjects ordinarily perceive and inhabit the world. It gradually becomes flesh and blood; it seeps into the gestures of ordinary people, from which even the powerful cannot exempt themselves, increasingly spreading as a form of mass behaviour. To the point that the compulsion to produce sensation, born of the modern intertwining of the press and the market, is now on the verge of becoming a universal perceptual compulsion.

From this perspective, as mentioned in the introduction, Türrcke can be associated with a whole constellation of reflections and studies that, to quote David Howes, seek to show how variations in the structuring of sensory experience from one culture to another affect the forms of social organization, conceptions of self and cosmos, the regulation of the emotions, and other domains of cultural expression (cf. Howes, 1991: p. 3). More precisely, Türrcke offers a major contribution to those studies that have analysed the singularity of modern civilization through the profound transformations that have characterized the formation of the specifically modern sensorium. Among these, the tradition of media ecology must certainly be mentioned, which—building on the teaching of pioneers such as Havelock, McLuhan and Ong—reflects on how media shape thought, behaviour and culture insofar as they produce deep perceptual restructurings. More recently, the anthropology of the senses and the rich field of sensory studies have provided extraordinarily diverse analyses of the relationship between sensory transformations and broader cultural transformations. Compared with media ecology, sensory studies are less tied to the primacy of technologies as the decisive factor of historical change, and are therefore less exposed to the risk of technological determinism that has always haunted perspectives derived from McLuhan<sup>3</sup>.

At the same time, the importance of Türrcke’s contribution is proportional to its originality. First of all, because of the centrality he assigns—as shown above—to the drive-related dimension: a centrality not found in approaches such as those of McLuhan or Ong, and which Türrcke instead derives from the hybridization of

<sup>3</sup>For recent developments in these two research traditions, see for example (Myers, 2020; Petricini, 2025; Howes, 2022; Howes, 2024).

Marxist social theory and psychoanalytic drive theory characteristic of the Frankfurt School, within whose tradition he innovatively situates himself. In light of the foregoing, it can be said that for Türcke the variations in the structure of sensory experience, fundamental for understanding modernization, must be interpreted as dialectical transformations of the libidinal economy. Transformations of the sensorium influence transformations of experience and of society as a whole insofar as they are traversed by drive dynamics.

From this follows a second aspect of Türcke's originality. Developing intuitions already present in Freud, the psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu—who, curiously, is not cited by Türcke—showed better than anyone how the fundamental functions of the psychic apparatus—in particular the sense of individual cohesion and the continuous feeling of existence—develop by “leaning on” the biological functions of the organ of the skin; for this reason, the structuring of the ego appears inextricably linked to the sense of touch (Anzieu, 2016). The key role of touch as a means of exploring modern and hypermodern forms of individuation deeply characterizes Türcke's sensory genealogy of modernization. In this respect too, it distinguishes his approach from many contributions that, especially in the wake of McLuhan, emphasize the hypertrophic development of the sense of sight brought about by movable-type printing, and the dialectic that emerges when electrical technologies disrupt typographic modernity by restoring a new centrality to the auditory channel.

This is because, it seems to me, Türcke implicitly maintains that touch is the sense most closely linked to the subject's existential cohesion. More precisely: in Türcke, the tactile dimension is the domain of the sensorium within which an elementary sense of cohesion, identity and reality takes shape within the sensorium itself. In EG, Türcke frequently insists on the idea that the cohesion of the organism—its being-there—depends closely on its perceptual capacity to fix something, to concentrate on something, and on the faculty of sensations to bind to other sensations and become durable experience. Only insofar as perception becomes a concrete unity of lived experience does the perceiving organism come to feel itself as the unity of its perceptions and sensations, and thus to exist. The possibility of “giving oneself a there” depends on this coherent weave that provides a univocal orientation and a point of support for the entire nervous system, from the sense of balance to the highest perceptual performances. And this weave is above all tactile, epidermal in nature, in a much more literal than metaphorical sense.

Türcke demonstrates this precisely in his analysis of the condition of wear and weakening of this weave under the impact of audiovisual bombardment. The compulsion to transmit produces a dialectic whereby what enhances personal irradiation simultaneously obscures it, instilling in the organism a peculiar sense of disempowerment: a pervasive anxiety stemming from the incessant sensation that a ubiquitous and ungraspable threat is attacking personal identity. Türcke compares this anxiety to the sensation of being deprived of one's epidermis, and thus

of one's contours, of that which grants each individual their specific perceptibility, their "there". This is the principal historical form that existential anxiety—never identical across epochs—assumes under our social, cultural and technical conditions. The overall sensory-identitary deficit from which this anxiety derives is expressed above all as a genuine haptic deficit, a deep nostalgia for tactile experience, a discomfort caused by the sensation of slipping into a padded cell lacking those reliable resistances through which a continuous experience of self could be attained. It is no coincidence that many of the surrogates through which this haptic deficit is compensated—whether "institutionalized" substitutes, subcultural aesthetics or fashions, or destructive behaviours pursued in solitude and despair—are themselves tactile in nature: cultural and pedagogical initiatives aimed at re-valuing the sense of touch, piercings and tattoos, and self-harming behaviours. More than the dialectic between eye and ear, it is thus the vicissitudes of the skin—of touching and being touched—that, from Türrcke's perspective (here very close to [Le Breton, 2003](#)), open a decisive breach onto the hypermodern condition and the way in which it inscribes itself in our sensorium.

## 5. The Sensation-Anaesthetization Circuit

The modern stimulation of the sensorium turns into a sensory deficit, which in turn reignites the quest for sensation: sensation is counterbalanced by anaesthetization, the neutralization of the sensorium, and sensory impoverishment. As early as 1997, Simmel, in his *Sociology of the Senses*, had grasped the importance of this dialectic for the formation of the modern sensorium and for the cultural values that are rooted in it ([Simmel, 1997](#)):

It is a fact, with a significance for social culture that has not yet been appropriately appreciated, that the perceptual acuity of all the senses evidently sinks as culture becomes more refined, whereas its emphasis upon liking and disliking rises. [...] The modern person is shocked by innumerable things, and innumerable things appear intolerable to their senses which less differentiated, more robust modes of feeling would tolerate without any such reaction. The individualizing tendency of modern human beings and the greater personalization and freedom of choice of a person's commitments must be connected to this ([Simmel, 1997](#): p. 118).

In EG, Türrcke repeatedly articulates the dialectic of mutual reinforcement whereby sensation seeking tends to turn into anaesthetization and vice versa. The primary case analyzed by Türrcke is precisely that of the enhancement of personal irradiation—driven by the compulsion to transmit—which turns into sensory-identitary disempowerment and haptic deficit, which in turn triggers new forms of sensation seeking. A circularity of this kind also appears in the narrative thread that connects several passages of the account of the modernization process proposed in EG. Commenting on Joachim Heinrich Campe's epistolary account of the French Revolution, Türrcke emphasizes how Campe's expressed need to bracket the external senses in order to give space and time to the internal ones

appears as a necessary defensive measure in the face of the atmosphere of spectacle and permanent fair produced by the disintegration of premodern society, which functioned as a basso continuo to the revolutionary event. In the absence of defensive mechanisms of this kind, a flood of events tends to blunt sensations, as Türcke stresses on several occasions. Conversely, an overall condition of sensory relaxation tends to heighten susceptibility to events, lowering the threshold of what is perceived as traumatic. This was the case, for example, with the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which—although a terrifying catastrophe—could provoke such a memorable upheaval of spirits only within the context of a comfortably ordered European world. Finally, Türcke insists that the measures that cushioned the sensory wear brought about by industrialization—the intoxication afforded by alcohol and drugs, the experience of concentrated distraction provided by audio-visual technologies—were able to provide such cushioning precisely insofar as their effect was also one of anaesthetization. In short, Türcke’s paradigm of sensation clearly takes into account the strict correlate of sensation: anaesthetization, in its various forms ranging from sensory impoverishment and experiential deficit to defensive mechanism against stimulus-overload, the softening of mores, the constitution of a comfortable environment, and sheer stupefaction.

On the other hand, it is still the “logic of sensation”—the relentless proliferation and escalation of sensational shock—that, for Türcke, constitutes the driving force of modernization. In his reading, the compulsion to generate sensation, implicit in the autonomization of the market, clearly holds a genealogical priority over the dynamics of anaesthetization, which are consubstantial with modernization only as a correlate of the dynamics of sensation. This is no minor point, insofar as it distinguishes Türcke’s genealogy from other major genealogies of modernization that, to use Simmel’s words, have instead identified the primary matrix of modern transformations in the forms of experience in a kind of “sinking” of “the perceptual acuity of all the senses”: for example, as the generalization of techniques of impulse discipline, affective cooling, and the shifting of thresholds of sensitivity exercised in late medieval court society (Elias, 2000), or as the gradual loss of a proportionate relation between the senses and the world brought about by a series of technical and mental transformations beginning with the introduction of new layout techniques in the twelfth century (Illich, 2004).

Türcke does not engage with these different genealogies of modern experience, and this is certainly not the place to argue whether a “paradigm of anaesthetization” could be placed alongside, if not prior to, that of sensation as a key to understanding the genesis of modernity. I will limit myself here to an observation that may contribute to the analysis of the relationship—as tight as it is complex—between tendencies toward sensory excitation and tendencies toward the impoverishment of the sensorium, a relationship that in any case seems to function as both the matrix and backbone of modernization.

This observation concerns the “metaphorical” character of certain modern media, to put it in media ecology terms: that is, the enormous—and largely unno-

ticed—power that media, technologies and devices have to shape the forms of the relationship between subject and world by virtue of their intrinsic structure. With regard to some of the media most instrumental in forging modern experience, it is crucial to note that their very metaphorical structure already points simultaneously in the direction of sensation and of anaesthetization. In short, these media place the sensorium under strain through a surplus of stimuli while simultaneously offering a palliative distancing from the world. They function like certain drugs, whose power of excitation goes hand in hand with effects of anaesthetization, depersonalization, and dissociation.

In a certain sense, this is already the case with movable-type printing, which compels individuals to generate sensation in order to appear on the market (Türcke), no less than it promotes a new relation to the world grounded in the primacy of sight, the sense of distance (McLuhan, Ong). Yet this dialectic appears to be tighter—and therefore more powerful—in some of the media, technologies and devices that were most influential in shaping European experience between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Let us take, for example, the case of the shop window, which emerged in the early eighteenth century and whose communicative model became generalized within capitalist-industrial society far beyond sites of sale, to the point that the Italian sociologist [Vanni Codeluppi \(2021\)](#) has spoken in this regard of a process of “social windowization”. The communicative model of the shop window, which functions as a template for the mediation of social relations and of aesthetic forms writ large, clearly promotes powerful factors of “sensation”: the capture of attention, the valorization of instantaneity, the gratification of novelty, subjection to visibility, and the impulse toward performance. Yet, tightly intertwined with these, the shop window as medium-metaphor also gives rise to equally strong vectors of the “aesthetic neutralization” of the subject’s involvement in the world. The shop window, in fact, promotes the partitioning of experience according to the stage-audience model; it introduces into everyday life a quasi-oneiric and apparently ideal sphere, unreachable and inefficacious, fostering a new tension toward transparency and immateriality; it democratizes that way of looking at the world “as if through a window” that first emerged in the Renaissance. Precisely insofar as it serves as a concrete example of the paradigm of sensation, “windowization” forcefully reveals those decisive aspects of anaesthetization that constitute its correlate.

There is also the railway, whose “metaphorical” effect on nineteenth-century Western experience and beyond [Wolfgang Schivelbusch \(2014\)](#) has explored magnificently, albeit without using this term. The pages in which Schivelbusch analyses the shock effect and the profound sensory stress produced by the introduction of rail transport on nineteenth-century individuals and society are well known. At the same time, Schivelbusch dwells just as extensively on the deep anaesthetizing effect that railway travel exerted on the average perceptual repertoire of ever broader social strata. Railway passengers felt reified like parcels, no

longer touched by the space they traversed, alienated from the *hic et nunc* of the places over which the train sped, literally deprived of the space-time and the organic bond with nature that had characterized earlier modes of transport. The railway too, writes Schivelbusch, contributes profoundly to transforming the world into spectacle, insofar as space becomes part of the railway line just as the stage is part of the theatre. Within the average perceptual repertoire, space becomes a stage setting, since the speed of the railway—which subjects the passenger to a continuously changing perspective as in a succession of pictures or scenes—gradually penetrates the gaze to the point of restructuring perceptual forms. Schivelbusch calls this new form of experience the “panoramic gaze”, emphasizing its deep affinity with the commodity form and the structure of capitalist society.

A similar argument applies, finally, to photography. In this case, the pages that Türrcke devotes to it capture perfectly the radical co-belonging of sensation and anaesthetization inherent in the photographic medium. Its instantaneous, sudden, and punctual character, its capacity to tear the moment with all its details from the flow of experience, do not merely unsettle the sensorium, reflecting the exhausting mobilization of industrial society. Precisely insofar as it is shock, Türrcke argues, photography reanimates the original meaning of image-making, as this can be inferred from the traces of the genealogy of culture through the traumatic compulsion to repeat. And this original meaning is that of fixing what is depicted—that is, of killing it, of rigidifying it in a fullness devoid of life. The instant is preserved: saved, but at the price of its death. It is precisely this elementary lure, for Türrcke, that explains the enormous commercial success of photography.

## 6. The Rupture of the Sense of Historical Continuity

Since at least the industrial era, the formation of the modern sensorium has been powerfully shaped by media that, to paraphrase Anders, soothe with the balm of anaesthetization the very wounds of excitation they themselves inflict, as if both processes were ultimately indistinguishable. One may hypothesize that, without this sedative effect to temper the initial trauma, their shock would have been too profound to be absorbed. Consequently, the attritional effect of industrial mobilization would have been too violent to be even partially cushioned.

This dialectical genealogical structure can be further developed by following one of its decisive articulations. To begin with, it must be reiterated that the powerful combination of excitation and anaesthetization with which modern media have impacted the sensorium has produced perceptual and social transformations of unprecedented velocity. This is partly because, as media ecology has brilliantly shown, media whose structure is biased toward delivering images and fragments deprive us of access to a historical perspective, eroding the sense of a coherent and usable past and imprisoning us in a continuous and incoherent present (see [Postman, 2006](#): pp. 136-137; [Moran, 1984](#)). Television has certainly contributed more than any other medium to this erosion of historical perspective; and yet, the foundations had already been laid in what Neil Postman ironically called the “peek-a-

boo world”, that is, in the environment shaped in the nineteenth century by the intertwining of the telegraph, photography, and the railway revolution.

From the rapid transformation of perceptual regimes and the erosion of historical perspective there has thus followed a further rupture of experience: a rupture in the sense of historical continuity, upon which the integrity of any form of psychic or collective individuation depends. This rupture, I argue, should be understood as a third cumulative trauma of modernization. It qualifies as a trauma insofar as it progressively undermines the temporal frameworks through which subjects integrate past experience into stable horizons of expectation and self-understanding. Unlike social uprooting and industrial sensory wear, however, this trauma primarily affects the continuity of historical experience itself: the subject’s capacity to situate itself within a meaningful temporal horizon linking past, present, and future.

Yet even for this wound, modern media have had a balm at the ready: what Anders called their power to “cozify” the very historical flux from which they uproot us (Anders, 2025: pp. 89-114). Here too television marked a watershed. And yet the very grammar of the photographic medium already pointed decisively toward the possibility of becoming “voyeuristic rulers of world-phantoms”: the photo camera with which tourists arm themselves, Anders observed in the 1950s, is a kind of syringe that promises instant relief to a subject now profoundly unsettled by the historical object, allowing them to possess it, even if only in effigy. The souvenir presents itself as a surrogate for an impossible, atrophied memory (Anders, 2025: pp. 156-160). To the point that the museum can appear as the “principle” and “paradigm” of our relation to the world as a whole, particularly with regard to our relation to the past and to cultural memory (cf. at least Baudrillard, 1994; Agamben, 2007; Fisher, 2009). This “museumifying” power is certainly one aspect, among others, of the overall anaesthetizing capacity of the modern media milieu; at the same time, it is an aspect that has increasingly come to the fore as a surrogate defensive mechanism in response to the historical-experiential rupture brought about by this very milieu. It has therefore contributed to that profound transformation in the historicity of experience to which the various diagnoses of a “post-historical” society have been addressed.

In short, the cozifying agency of modern media anaesthetizes the sense of historical discontinuity produced by these same media’s capacity to disrupt perceptual regimes by simultaneously hyper-exciting and anaesthetizing them: this is the *dialectical, self-reinforcing double circuit* without which it is difficult to understand how these media have been able to form a system with the various aspects of the capitalist form of life—and to make that form of life itself into a coherent system. One may hypothesize that this structure represents a decisive factor in imparting to modern history the pattern of exponential acceleration that critical social theory (Rosa & Scheuerman, 2009; Rosa, 2013) has in recent years brought to the forefront of attention, and which could equally well be described as an *acceleration in the transformation of the sensory infrastructures of experience*.

## 7. Conclusion: The Problem of the Limits of the Human and Critical Theory as Social Therapeutics

Yet it is precisely from the paradigm of social acceleration—as well as from Schivelbusch—that we receive an important warning for any critical theory concerned with highlighting vectors of experiential impoverishment and the development of pathological forms rooted in the process of modernization. One must be cautious, Rosa warns, in positing rigid limits to human experience that would be undermined by social transformations. Indeed, what in a given epoch, under the pressure of certain transformations, appears as the destruction of an insurmountable or even anthropologically grounded barrier, sometimes becomes—within only a few years—a new normality. Consequently, the psychic or physical irritations resulting from such destruction appear simply incomprehensible to subsequent generations, or in any case emptied of their pathological urgency. Such is precisely the case with the experience of railway travel which, as Schivelbusch shows, led its earliest users to believe that they had reached the limits of what the human body and sensorium could cope, only to be rapidly neutralized into a new relation to space-time and into new modes of perception and behaviour that incorporated mobility as a constitutive factor (Rosa, 2013: pp. 81-82). To the point that today, railway travel can be experienced as an oasis of deceleration, the very opposite of an unbearable acceleration. This is how Rosa generalizes the lesson drawn from Schivelbusch regarding the plasticity of the limits of experience:

The introduction of each speed-enhancing innovation led to a form of culture war in which the defenders of the new technology, who praised the new possibilities it promised, faced off against just as determined opponents who warned of both a loss of human scale and control of the lifeworld as well as the physically and psychologically damaging consequences. The warnings ran the gamut: from “bicycle face” caused by high wind resistance to brain damage and digestive problems caused by the high velocity of railroad and later automobile travel—all the way to apocalyptic visions of the complete disappearance of culture as a result of massive television consumption or incurable depressive isolation caused by the expansion of e-mail communication and excessive use of the Internet. Seen in this light, the widespread warnings of harmful effects on the brain from cell phone use give one a sense of *déjà vu* (Rosa, 2013: pp. 40-41).

On the other hand, it is Rosa himself who opens his work on social acceleration with a statement by Berman, asserting that the entire cultural history of modernity consists in working out, interpreting, and more or less bringing under control a radical transformation in the experience of time and space. An experience which, as Rosa puts it in terms similar to those of Türrcke, has since the industrial revolution been that of a world that crashes down upon subjects unceasingly, with the violence of an accident. Moreover, Schivelbusch hypothesizes that experiences of transformation that are initially traumatic do indeed tend to be gradually absorbed, becoming a new normality, but only through a collective strengthening of the “stimulus shield”, that is, the defensive mechanism against stimuli of which

Freud spoke with regard to the individual psyche, and which Türcke himself takes up on a psychosocial level in order to elaborate his theory of the traumatic compulsion to repeat as a culture-founding mechanism. In other words, the point that must be defended, it seems to me, is the following: *the fact that a given culture may have succeeded in absorbing and normalizing certain social, experiential, and perceptual ruptures that were initially shocking, does not mean that such a culture has not been—and does not continue to be—latently and intimately structured as a whole by the task of working through that shock.*

With his paradigm of sensation, Türcke offers new insights into two fundamental ruptures that our modern culture is wholly engaged in working through: that of social uprootedness and that of the sensory wear brought about by industrialization. To these two major cumulative traumas considered by Türcke, I have added a third: the radical rupture in the sense of historical continuity experienced by modern subjects, which other theorists such as Anders and Baudrillard, as well as Rosa himself, have placed more centrally in their reflections on modernization. I have proposed a sketch of a model in order to begin accounting for how this third dimension of trauma latent in the modern form of life develops in a dialectical relationship with the two dimensions described by Türcke. It is, precisely, a sketch, and as such requires extensive further development, deepening, and critical engagement.

I conclude by explaining why Türcke's paradigm seems to me particularly valuable for addressing the delicate issue of the plasticity of the limits of human experience, which I have taken up from Rosa. Certainly, many of Türcke's formulations on the dismantling, by the society of sensation, of millennia-old experiential sedimentations—and thus of the cognitive and perceptual depth that rested upon them—may resemble the “apocalyptic visions” of which Rosa speaks. Yet far stronger than the apocalyptic risk seems to me a fertile impulse deeply embedded in Türcke's framework, deriving from his integration of the dimension of drive economy into the sensory infrastructure within which he reads cultural transformations. This is an impulse that invites us to adopt toward social experience the same attitude with which many forms of therapy, as well as certain artistic practices, approach an individual's lived experience: a disposition to recognize and to deactivate—certainly with great care, but not without resoluteness—those fixations on trauma that prevent experience from attaining greater degrees of perceptual and sensory fulfillment, and thus of pleasure and freedom. To recognize and repair, with simultaneous lucidity and tact, the wounds of our history, often not yet fully scarred over in the tissue of our cultural and physiological memory, in order to allow experience to breathe in the world. It is an attitude that, from EG to Türcke's more recent writings, has led him in several directions: the claim that an ascetic care of one's senses can assume a political significance today; the hope for the development of therapeutic practices that engage with discourses and movements of social critique; a hypothesis of educational reform aimed at countering the “culture of attention deficit”; and an idea of a highly technological sub-

sistence society based on the individualized decentralization of the means of production (Türcke, , 2012, 2013, 2016, 2019). In all these “concrete utopias”, as Türcke likes to call them, there re-emerges the profound meaning and true vital core—often lost—of critical social theory: to be social therapeutics, an art of collective repair of the great traumas from which different forms of exploitation draw nourishment no less than they in turn sustain them, thereby preventing their creative working-through.

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The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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