THE MODERN CITY

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Abstract: In my paper, I wish to explore the figure of the flaneur. I will begin with a discussion of the "modern" city, proceed on to an analysis of the "street", then discuss the gaze of the flaneur. I would also like to draw attention to Susan Sontag's views on photography, linking it to the concept of flanerie and end with a discussion of DzigaVertov's "Man With A Movie Camera".

Keywords: Flaneur, modernism, photography

To wander is human, to flaner is Parisian.Victor Hugo
The flaneur has been described as the Parisian idler who sampled the sights and thesounds of the city as he strolled the streets with no particular destination in mind. He was a common figure of the nineteenth century, essential to any picture of the streets of Paris. He was the one true sovereign of Paris. Infact, Hugo went to the extent of remarking that the flaneur can be born anywhere, but survive only in Paris. The 'city' does not merely refer to a set of buildings in a particular place. It designates the space produced by the interaction of historically and geographically specific institutions, social relations of production and reproduction, practices of government, forms and media of communication and so on.Georg Simmel posited the city as the arena of modernity, in his 1903 essay – "The Metropolis and the Mental Life" . The city was the realm of modern experience. The nineteenth century witnessed unprecedented urban expansionism. For Simmel, the modern city was a disorientating realm that generated neuroses such as claustrophobia. He contends that the city harboured a population plagued by alienation and a sense of dislocation. In order to cope with life in the modern city, an individual must adopt a blasé attitude, its "essence" described by Simmel as "consisting of the blunting of discrimination….The meaning and the differing values of things, and thereby the things themselves, are viewed as insubstantial". Historically, the city of Paris represented the coincidence between the birth of the modern city in the nineteenth century and the birth of the flaneur as a social type. Paris existed in people's imagination as the capital of love and fashion, before they even actually arrived in the city. In Paris, lovers could be private in public. This particularly Parisian phenomenon was facilitated by the boulevards and cafes of the 1860s, '70s, resulting from the architectural configuration of the city. Martin Bulmer remarks that this

> "romantic experience could be felt especially intensely in front of the endless parades of strangers moving up and down the boulevards – it was those strangers whom they gazed upon and who in turn gazed at them. The multitude of passers-by enhanced the lovers' vision of themselves and in turn provided an endlessly fascinating source of curiosity" .

Paris formed the quintessential urban palimpsest that was repeatedly represented in film, literature and popular culture. This tempered our experience of Paris. Victor Burgin remarked that the city in our actual experience is at the same time an actually existing physical environment and a city in a novel, a film, a city seen on TV and so on.In the mid-nineteenth century, what was of central importance to Paris was the reconstruction of the urban space that allowed new ways of seeing and being seen. Prefect Haussmann constructed grand boulevards that celebrate the spectacle that was modern life. His network of new boulevards helped make Paris a

> "uniquely enticing spectacle, a visual and sensual feast" .

The boulevards opened up the city, destroying social and geographical barriers that separated the classes and as a consequence, rendered the social tableau visible. This 'new' Paris democratized mobility and vision. The architectural change in Paris also involved the creation of the arcades. Arcades are successions of arches supported by columns. They also refer to walking areas enclosed by a line of arches. The idea of an arcade containing shops originated in France. It was appreciated for protection from the weather. The construction of the arcades was the phenomenon that Walter Benjamin designated as most emblematic of Parisian modernity.In 1852, Le Guide Illustre – a Parisian guide-book, described the arcades as glass-roofed, marble-panelled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings. Lining both sides of these corridors are the most elegant shops, so that the arcade is a city, a world in miniature.Withinthese arcades, one is able to stroll at leisure, even going to the extreme of allowing a pet turtle to set one's pace, observing people, the facades, the objects on sale, while simultaneously

> "enriching and entertaining one's mind with the secret language of the city"

, as Baudelaire points out. The flaneur is completely at home in this cross between the interior and exterior worlds because his own personal interior-exterior boundaries are ambiguous. Parkhurst-

Ferguson points out that "the arcades offer the flaneur a privileged site because the space they offer is at once private and public...neither fully outside nor fully inside" .Baudelaire writes, "The walls are the desks against which [the flaneur] presses his note-books, news-stands are his libraries and the terrace-cafes are the balconies from which he looks down on his household after his work is done" . The flaneur represented for Baudelaire and Benjamin a way of comprehending modernity, of making its landscape "visible and legible" . The flaneur tried to come to terms with fleeting modernity, with the fragmented world of contemporary urban existence. He was the central agent of the articulation of modernity – since his analysis of observable phenomenon can lead to the discovery of the social structure and hence enable its critique. The flaneur never speaks to the subjects he observes but interprets or imagines the meaning of the visual signs he sees:

"With the aid of a word I overhear or an expression I glimpse at in passing, I reconstruct an entire existence" .

In the fifteen years after 1821 (the year in which Baudelaire was born), around thirty arcades were created in Paris. According toBenjamin, prior to this development, it had been "impossible to stroll about everywhere in the city. Before Haussmann, wide pavements were rare, the narrow ones afforded little protection from vehicles. Flanerie could hardly have assumed the importance it did without the arcades....It is in this world [of arcades and boulevards] that the flaneur is at home; he provides the arcade...with its chronicler and philosopher" .Janet Wolff, in her discussion of the "street", echoes a similar thought –

"The streets and the arcades of the city are the home of the flaneur....The arcade turns the street into a home for the flaneur"

The Street - The essence of the street lies in its non-acknowledgement by the public – it is viewed as an intermediary point – a space between places that functions as the connecting link of the social network. We move through and along streets. For us, destinations are more important. But the flaneur stops, acknowledges and reflects upon the streets. For him, the streets are an important location for the social to play itself out. He stops to interpret the "temporal continuum" of the street, points out Rob Shields. Shields also remarks that

"time in the street is the continual collision of the past and the future with the present. The past simply 'comes by'. The future streams into thepresent with such immediacy that it could be said to implode into the present"

In Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne (The Painter of Modern Life), Baudelaire discusses Constantin Guys in the third section, which is entitled – "The Artist, Man of the World, Man of the Crowd and Child". Guys was an illustrator and reporter for the Illustrated London News. He was an old soldier who had fought in the struggle for the independence of Greece. He is Baudelaire's model for the flaneur. Baudelaire uses the initials "C.G." because Guys did not want to be named. Baudelaire introduces Guys as "a strange man, a man of so powerful and so decided an originality that it is sufficient unto itself and doesn't even seek approval". Guys was also a "great traveller and cosmopolitan". Baudelaire uses the phrase "man of the world"for Guys and not simply "artist" because the former is a broader term. He calls Guys the "spiritual citizen of the universe". For him, this 'man of the world' is similar to a child because the child sees everything in a state of newness, he is always "drunk with curiosity". Further, Baudelaire writes,

"The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect flaneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world –such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito. The lover of life makes the wholeworld his family, just like the lover of the fair sex who builds up his family from all the beautiful women that he has ever found, or that are-or are not-to be found; or the lover of pictures who lives in a magical society of dreams painted on canvas. Thus the lover of universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy. Or we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its own movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life".

Guys was a journalist, trained to watch and look closely at the details or the "beauty of the circumstances".

He observed, scribbled, and then, using his memory, completed his thought later in a sketch-like record. Baudelaire viewed Guys as the

"painter of the passing movement and of all the suggestions of eternity it contains".

Baudelaire's flaneur (as modelled on Guys) is, not thus an aimless wanderer or loiterer. He's endowed with an active imagination, he's an observer of

modernity and also a creative artist, a reproducer of the images he has seen. Baudelaire's poem – "A UnePassante" – from Les Fleurs du Mal , captures the relationship between the flaneur and the inhabitants of the city:

"The deafening street around me roared.
Tall, slender, in deep mourning, stately suffering,
A woman passes, one luxurious hand
Raising, swaying her scallop and hem;
Me, I drank, tense like one wild,
In her eye, a sky pallid with the beginnings of a storm,
The softness which fascinates and the pleasure that kills".
A flash of lightning - then the night! Fugitive beauty
Whose glance suddenly returned me to life?
Shall I not see you again in all eternity?"

The stranger in the poem has been considered a prostitute or a widow. The flaneur sees her for a brief moment. She quickly vanishes from his sight and he's left wondering –

"Shall I not see you again in all eternity?". In the modern city of Paris, it is possible to see a person but once. Each encounter on the street is, to use Baudelaire's words, "fugitive, fleeting and transitory" . The encounter with the woman is "love- not at first sight, but at last sight" , remarks Benjamin. One could relate it to James Blunt's song – You Are Beautiful –which expresses something similar –

"I don't think that I'll see her again,/But we shared a moment that'll last till the end..."

The Gaze of the Flaneur - The flaneur desires to "see the world, to be at the very centre of the world and yet to be unseen of the world" . The flaneur is more identifiable for what he does – i.e., engaging in the activity of flanerie – rather than what he looks like or who he is. The flaneur observes from within the mass of people he's surrounded by, rather than from a height – i.e., he gazes 'at' the city and doesn't look down 'upon' it from a height. Observing in such a way, i.e. looking at the city on the same level as one stands, or, in the case of the flaneur, moves around, offers a disconnected, fragmentary view of the cityscape, whereas gazing down upon the city from a height serves to provide a more totalizing view of the city. Physically, the flaneur is close to others in the crowd, he is a part of the crowd, yet, he is detached as he moves around and amongst others. Benjamin's interest in the flaneur, as Mike Savage points out,

"Wasn't primarily concerned with delineating it as an actual social type which existed in specific urban historical settings, but as a theoretical, critical counter to the idea of the mass"

.Strolling differentiates and distances the flaneur from the functional flow of the crowd. Ironically, the most attentive observer of modernity is someone who is out of step with the rapid circulation of the mass in the modern metropolis. The flaneur is peripheral – and this peripherality is the basis of his existence. It is interesting to note that the flaneur was frequently pictorially depicted as a man strolling with his pet turtle tied to a leash, thereby connoting that the flaneur is someone who walks at a different, slower pace than the crowd around him, who takes time to observe, inspect, reflect, imagine, dream and desire. This reflective drifting of the flaneur enables him to see the city in a different way. Benjamin increasingly emphasised the dehumanizing tendencies at work in the crowd: towards conformity, passivity and uniformity. The crowd was, for him, a threatening, undifferentiated mass. For him, the distinctive heroism of the flaneur lies in his refusal to become one flesh with the crowd, in retention of his individuality, in his investigation of the surface and the mundane to reveal the hidden "deeper, underlying social forces" . Flanerie does not merely refer to indulgence in the spectacle of modernity, instead, it is a way of coming to terms with modernity. The flaneur's gaze is not superficial. It aims to penetrate the surface and discover the hidden meaning and beauty beneath it. The flaneur is always attentive to details – normally overlooked by the fast-paced crowd of the passants around him. His perception requires anonymity and estrangement. Although he plunges into the crowd, he doesn't aim to establish any personal bonds with the people around him. Companionship is undesirable because it compromises detachment and movement – i.e. flanerie itself. The central characteristic of the flaneur's gaze is the ability to see the city and the people as if for the first time:

"To walk out your front door as if you have just arrived from a foreign country, to discover the world in which you ordinarily live, to begin the day as if you have never seen your own doormat or the people on the landing...it is this that reveals humanity before you, unknown until now" .

Sontag, photography and the flaneur - According to Susan Sontag, photography first comes into its own as an "extension of the eye of the flaneur" . Gazing "with curiosity, with detachment, with professionalism, the ubiquitous photographer operates as if that activity transcends class interests, as if its perspective is universal" .The photographer is the armed version of the solitary walker, strolling, cruising the urban city, the stroller who discovers the city as a "landscape of voluptuous extremes" . The flaneur finds the world "picturesque". Sontag asserts that photography is an act of non-intervention. The person who intervenes cannot record; the person who is recording cannot intervene. Vertov's film gives the ideal image of the photographer as someone in perpetual movement,

someone moving through a panorama of disparate events through such agility and speed that any intervention is out of the question. Using the camera is a form of participation. Sontag refers to the camera as an "observation station" . The act of photographing is, for her, more than an act of passive observation. It is a way of encouraging "whatever is going on to keep on happening" . To photograph is to have an interest in things as they are, remarks Sontag. Vertov'sMan with the Movie Camera - Vertov asserted that cinema can function as a "Truly international language of expression and communication" .

He believed that the link between art and society could be forged by the pursuit of actual events as found in everyday reality. In a 1924 essay, Vertov discusses his method of 'Film – Eye' , which offers the opportunity of "making the invisible – perceptible, the unclear – clear, the concealed – public, the acted – non-acted and the false – true". This method implied for Vertov deciphering "Life-As-It-Is" by the direct recording of facts found in real life. He insisted that authentic film material – i.e. Life-Facts – be organized into cinematic structures – i.e. Film Things. He never hesitated to reveal the unpleasant aspects of contemporary life in the U.S.S.R. For instance, in Man with the Movie Camera, he shows the not-so-pretty-side of life in Moscow – drunkards, beggars, poorly dressed people, barefoot maids and so on. Vertov's Film-Eye method also included another important principle – all people must continue to function in front of the camera just as they do in everyday life. Vertov referred to this strategy of shooting as "Life-Caught-Unawares". In Man with the Movie Camera, the cameraman – Mikhail Kaufman, shoots people at work, at various events, locations and sites, but not for one moment does he disturb them. Vertov and Kaufman insisted that their camera "strives to shoot events unnoticed and approach people in such a way that the work of the cameraman does not impede the work of the others" and conversely, not to hide when people react to the camera even if they express their dissatisfaction at being photographed. Vertov was extremely concerned with the authenticity of each separate shot as the basis of the documentary film. Another strategy that he used was that of "Film-Truth" – i.e. the concept of building a film in segments. This is related to montage. Vertov remarked that Film Truth is made up of materials as a house is made of bricks. Using bricks, one can make an oven and many other things. Similarly, from filmed material, one can construct various films. He also insisted that the film-maker, while filming, must select details from reality, not merely shoot them at random. He stressed the need for obtaining 'good film material' in order to make a 'good film': just as one needs good bricks to make a solid house, so one needs good film material to organize a good film. Vertov outlined three ways of observation –observation of the place (for instance, a reading room); observation of moving characters or objects (people or cars), observation of a theme (laughter, cities). Vertov was aware of the contradiction between direct observation of reality and its cinematic transformation into 'Film-Thing'.He wrote

"Film-Thing is the conclusive result of a complete observation refined and enhanced by the camera. The field of viewing – life, material used – life, sets – life, actors – life" .

It is interesting to note Vertov's ideas about documentary cinema.According to him, the cameraman is an ordinary man. He doesn't possess any 'supernatural power'. He only uses a mechanical tool which helps him veer in the "boisterous ocean of life" . He must be ready to 'move' through reality and not merely shoot with a stationary camera. He does not need a pre-written scheme or script. Speed and dexterity are his most important skills, he must 'keep up' with the 'pace of life's events' in order to maintain the genuine rhythm of events. He should photograph people with the intention of remaining unnoticed – he should not bother other people at work, just as he would expect them not to disturb him. He should immerse himself in life's struggle yet remain detached.

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