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## The City Observed

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### *The Flâneur in Social Theory*

Flânerie is a kind of reading of the street, in which human faces, shop fronts, shop windows, café terraces, street cars, automobiles and trees become a wealth of equally valid letters of the alphabet that together result in words, sentences and pages of an ever-new book. In order to engage in flânerie, one must not have anything too definite in mind.

Franz Hessel, *Spazieren in Berlin*

The city as a mnemotechnical aid for the solitary stroller calls up more than his childhood and youth, more than its own history. What it opens up is the immense drama of flânerie that we believed to have finally disappeared.

Walter Benjamin, 'The Return of the Flâneur'

In the article I wrote about the city I leaned rather heavily on the information I had acquired as a reporter regarding the city. . . . Sociology, after all, is concerned with problems in regard to which newspaper men inevitably get a good deal of first hand knowledge. Besides that, sociology deals with just those aspects of social life which ordinarily find their most obvious expression in the news and in historical and human documents generally. One might fairly say that a sociologist is merely a more accurate, responsible, and scientific reporter.

Robert E. Park 'Notes on the Origins of  
the Society for Social Research'

## I

Any investigation of the flâneur in social theory must commence with the contribution of Walter Benjamin towards a history and analytic of this ambiguous urban figure, whose existence and significance was already announced a century earlier by Baudelaire and others. In so doing, we are compelled to recognize that, in his variously termed ‘prehistory of modernity’, his excavation of ‘Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century’, his Arcades Project and in his many other writings, Benjamin revealed himself to be not merely an outstanding literary critic and writer in his own right, nor merely a subtle philosopher of history, nor indeed merely a stimulating and often unorthodox Marxist – and all of these groupings have claimed their Benjamin as *their own* – but also a *sociologist* and, in the context of his still unrivalled investigation of the origins of modernity, an astute practitioner of historical sociology.<sup>1</sup> Such a claim must be made against the background of Benjamin’s own resistance to sociological orthodoxy, to ‘the detectivistic expectation of sociologists’,<sup>2</sup> to ‘the euphemistic whisperings of sociology’,<sup>3</sup> and also in the light of his praise for Siegfried Kracauer’s *Die Angestellten (The Salaried Masses)*, whose author has fortunately left ‘his sociologist’s doctoral hood behind’.<sup>4</sup> (In fact, Kracauer’s doctorate was in architecture, although he had also published on sociology.)

The fundamental *ambiguity* of the figure of the flâneur, sometimes verging on that of the mere stroller, at other times elevated to that of the detective, to the decipherer of urban and visual texts, indeed to the figure of Benjamin himself, was amplified by Benjamin’s own analysis. It is necessary to trace some of the dimensions of Benjamin’s own history of the flâneur in the context of his prehistory of modernity and to distinguish this figure from the idler, the gaper (*badaud*) and others in Benjamin’s historical explorations.

Yet the flâneur functions, for Benjamin, not merely as a historical figure in the urban context, but also as a contemporary illumination of his own methodology. In this sense, the flâneur/detective is a central, albeit often metaphorical, figure that Benjamin employs to illuminate his own activity and method in the Arcades Project, together with the archaeologist/critical allegorist and the collector/refuse collector. An investigation of flânerie as *activity* must therefore explore the activities of *observation* (including listening), *reading* (of metropolitan life and of texts) and *producing* texts. Flânerie, in other words, can be associated with a form of *looking*, observing (of people, social types, social contexts and constellations); a form of *reading the city* and its population (its spatial images, its architecture, its human configurations); and a form of *reading written texts* (in

Benjamin's case both of the city and the nineteenth century – *as* texts and of texts *on* the city, even texts as urban labyrinths). The flâneur, and the activity of flânerie, is also associated in Benjamin's work not merely with observation and reading but also with *production* – the production of distinctive kinds of texts. The flâneur may therefore not merely be an observer or even a decipherer; the flâneur can also be a producer, a producer of literary texts (including lyrical and prose poetry as in the case of Baudelaire), a producer of illustrative texts (including drawings and painting), a producer of narratives and reports, a producer of journalistic texts, a producer of sociological texts. Thus, the flâneur as producer of texts should be explored both with regard to Benjamin's historical investigation from the conjuncture of the emergence of the flâneur and the production of the physiognomies of urban life in the 1830s and 1840s down to the presumed decline in the possibility of flânerie, as well as with regard to Benjamin's own research activity and textual production, especially within his Arcades Project.

Insofar as the flâneur is a significant figure for elucidating Benjamin's own unorthodox historical investigations – and to the extent that the serious and directed observations of the flâneur announces, for Benjamin, the emergence of the (private) detective or investigator – the exploration of this paradoxical figure of the flâneur and the ambiguous activity of flânerie can also illuminate some modes of sociological practice. It is possible that such investigations can deepen our understanding of the practice of social research as detection, both with respect to historiography (for instance, when Benjamin declares, 'I am in the Arcades', he is in fact in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris)<sup>5</sup> and to urban ethnography (as in Benjamin's excavation of the 'mythological topography of Paris',<sup>6</sup> or his explicit aim with respect to mid-nineteenth century Paris 'to build up the city topographically, ten times and a hundred times over').<sup>7</sup> Benjamin also detected a connection between the flâneur and the journalist, thereby pointing, in turn, to an affinity between the flâneur-journalist and social investigation from Henry Mayhew, through many other urban explorations in the nineteenth century to some of the work of Georg Simmel, Robert Park, Siegfried Kracauer and others, including Benjamin himself.

Such connections have often been obscured by sociology's own desire to lay claim to its academic credentials as a scientific discipline, as *the* science of society, by purging its historical development of any figures other than the most scientific and often formalistically acceptable. In reality, however, sociology's contacts with more modest and sometimes dubious occupations may reveal procedures for acquiring knowledge of social experience that do not immediately set up an abstract distance from everyday experiences of modernity and replace them with what Benjamin referred to as 'the euphemistic whisperings of sociology'. The question as

to how knowledge of the social world is made possible may be explored in ways other than recourse to such self-referential abstractions as are generated today in rational choice theory or micro–macro debates, and other such paradigms borrowed parasitically from another ‘dismal’ social science’s century-old paradigms, in the hope of gaining some of the latter’s presumed but illusory scientific status and grandeur.

An exploration of the flâneur in social theory should therefore turn to an examination of the contributions of those who were not recognized as sociologists at all, such as Benjamin, or those whose work has often been incorporated into the negative caricature of formal sociology, such as Simmel, or those who were installed in sociology’s ‘shirt-sleeved’ hall of fame, such as Robert Park, or those whose sociological contribution was seldom even acknowledged in Anglo-American discourse, such as Siegfried Kracauer.

## II

In one of his earliest references to the flâneur, in the notes on the Arcades Project from the late 1920s, Benjamin already intimates the connection between flânerie and modern representations of the city: ‘Surrealism – *vague de rêves* – the new art of flânerie. New past of the nineteenth century – Paris its classical location’.<sup>8</sup> It is the past that is revealed to us in the present through a reading of surrealist texts, above all of Aragon’s *Paris Peasant* and Breton’s *Nadja*, as revelations of the dream-worlds of the city, of the ‘primal landscape of consumption’ in the decaying arcades. And, in keeping with the surrealist exposure of the dream, there is ‘the figure of the flâneur. He is similar to the hashish eater’.<sup>9</sup> But already Benjamin wishes to break out of the dream-world of the metropolis, to destroy its mythology in the historical space that is now first revealed to us as the world of modernity of the nineteenth century. The flâneur is immersed in this world in contrast to the person who waits: ‘the person waiting as opposite type to the flâneur. The apperception of historical time to be insisted upon in the case of the flâneur against the time of the person waiting’.<sup>10</sup>

What is to be emphasized here in these early notes is, first, the recognition of the figure of the flâneur in the nineteenth century as the result of reading the then avant-garde literature of surrealism (not itself part of the current avant-garde in Weimar Germany). Second, the flâneur, through this reading, is associated with the dream-world of the surrealist perspective on the city – an intoxicated world, a particular form of remembrance or recall of the past as an immediacy in our present. Third, even in these

earliest notes on the Arcades Project, there is indication of a not yet fully explored attempt to go beyond the revelation of the mythical dream-world of modernity. And in these earliest notes, it is not yet clear what role the flâneur might play in such a critique. Finally, Benjamin is already convinced that the origins of the flâneur as figure lay in Paris: 'Paris created the flâneur type. . . . It opened itself to him as a landscape, it enclosed him as a parlour.'<sup>11</sup>

Yet even by 1929, in his critical assessment of surrealism as 'The last snapshot of the bourgeois intelligentsia', Benjamin had already turned away from the mere intoxicating representations of modernity on the grounds that:

the most passionate investigation of the hashish trance will not teach us half as much about thinking . . . as the profane illumination of thinking about the hashish trance. The reader, the thinker, the loiterer, the flâneur, are types of illumination just as much as the opium eater, the dreamer, the ecstatic. And more profane.<sup>12</sup>

What were the origins, then, of this profane illuminator, of the flâneur as Parisian urban figure?

Although Benjamin was the first to recognize the flâneur as a significant cultural figure of modernity and to excavate the historical location of this ambiguous figure in mid-nineteenth-century Paris, some of Benjamin's own analyses, read in isolation from his other texts, are apt to produce their own ambiguities. In Benjamin's writings on Baudelaire translated into English, which contain a section on the flâneur (*Charles Baudelaire*),<sup>13</sup> the flâneur as historical figure is seen largely as a social type who flourished in the period after the Revolution of 1830 down to the period of the development of the grand boulevards and department stores. In particular, the flâneur as figure flourished in the same period as the Parisian arcades, during the Second Empire of Louis-Philippe. In fact, in the period from 1799 to 1830 a total of 19 arcades were constructed in Paris and down to 1855 a further seven were erected. In Benjamin's account, the flâneur is located in relation to the arcades, to journalism and especially the feuilleton and physiologies of the 1830s and 1840s and to the urban crowd.<sup>14</sup> The flâneur is an urban stroller, observer, even idler (Benjamin cites taking a turtle for a walk as a demonstration against the division of labour). At times, the figure of the flâneur is close to that of the dandy (as a downwardly mobile aristocratic and gentry figure) and the bohemian. As indicated earlier, Benjamin also views the flâneur as producer of texts in this period – the feuilleton's emergence in the 1830s and 1840s – and this also included feuilleton pieces on the figure of the flâneur as part of the much wider production of physiognomies. Benjamin's analysis of this form of

literary production is, of course, critical, since it is the production of a literature that renders the dangers of the metropolis harmless, through the creation of caricatures of figures in the urban crowd, whose figures from the ‘dangerous classes’ are transformed and incorporated into part of the bourgeois *bonhomie*.

Similarly, Benjamin emphasizes that such literary texts are produced by a social figure who is intimately associated with the commodity form, indeed who circulates like a commodity himself and who, in seeking a marketplace for his literary productions, goes in search of the magical field of commodity circulation. There are two important implications of this identification. The first is the affinity with the crowd and the commodity:

The *flâneur* is someone abandoned in the crowd. In this he shares the situation of the commodity. He is not aware of this special situation . . . [which] permeates him blissfully like a narcotic that can compensate him for many humiliations. The intoxication to which the *flâneur* surrenders is the intoxication of the commodity around which surges the stream of customers.<sup>15</sup>

The *flâneur* and his productions as commodities are here seen as caught up in the narcotic intoxication of the mass (of individuals and of commodities) that stand like a veil between the *flâneur* and his goal. However, in the previous paragraph, Benjamin also intimates the social context for the demise of the *flâneur* – the development of the department store, the shift from the street as *intérieur* to the department store as its commodified embodiment:

If the arcade is the classical form of the *intérieur*, which is how the *flâneur* sees the street, the department store is the form of the *intérieur*’s decay. The bazaar is the last hangout of the *flâneur*. If in the beginning the street had become an *intérieur* for him, now this *intérieur* turned into a street, and he roamed through the labyrinth of merchandise as he had once roamed through the labyrinth of the city.<sup>16</sup>

The implication here is that the transformation of the *flâneur*’s social place and social space in the arcade and the street, with the development of the department store and – what Benjamin mentions elsewhere – Haussmann’s grand boulevards, signifies the decline of *flânerie* and the figure of the *flâneur* in this guise.

Yet we should not lose sight of the fact that Benjamin’s Arcades Project came increasingly to focus upon Charles Baudelaire as *flâneur*. In its earlier projections, the figure of the *flâneur* remains ambiguous and contradictory. This is most evident in the 1935 ‘exposé’ – ‘Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century’ – and the section there on Baudelaire, where Benjamin

declares that Baudelaire's lyrical poetry with Paris as its object, betrays 'the allegorist's gaze',

the gaze of alienated man. It is the gaze of the *flâneur*, whose way of living still bestowed a conciliatory gleam over the growing destitution of man in the great city. The *flâneur* still stood at the margin, of the great city as of the bourgeois class. Neither of them had yet overwhelmed him. In neither of them was he at home. He sought his asylum in the crowd. . . . The crowd was the veil from behind which the familiar city as phantasmagoria beckoned to the *flâneur*. In it, the city was now landscape, now a room.<sup>17</sup>

Again Benjamin concludes these reflections with reference to the department store as 'the *flâneur*'s final coup', thereby signifying once more the decline of the *flâneur*. But attention should be drawn here not merely to the *flâneur* (in this case Baudelaire) as producer of lyrical poetry and prose poems thematizing metropolitan life, but also the *marginality* of the *flâneur*'s location within the city (seeking asylum in the crowd) and within his class (marginal to the bourgeoisie and, presumably downwardly mobile). In addition, the *flâneur*'s gaze upon the city is 'veiled', 'conciliatory' and presented as a 'phantasmagoria'. It is the metropolis at a distance.

But in this same section, Benjamin draws a connection between the figure of the *flâneur* and that of other figures and groups revealing a problematical *political* dimension to his analysis. He maintains that:

As *flâneurs*, the intelligentsia came into the market-place. As they thought to observe it – but in reality it was already to find a buyer. In this intermediate stage . . . they took the form of the *bohème*. To the uncertainty of their economic position corresponded the uncertainty of their political function. The most spectacular expression of this was provided by the professional conspirators, who without exception belonged to the *bohème*.<sup>18</sup>

The *flâneur* is here linked socially and politically to the *bohème*, the analysis of whom constitutes the opening section of his 1938 draft on 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire'. This political connection virtually disappears in the 1939 article 'Some Motifs in Baudelaire', written after Adorno's critique of the 1938 draft, perhaps as a result of the narrower focus upon Baudelaire. Be that as it may, the *flâneur* appears in 'Some Motifs in Baudelaire' largely in the context of the crowd and the shocks of metropolitan existence.

We can read of the *flâneur* in all these drafts as if this is a transitory figure, whose literary productions were conditional upon the market for the feuilleton sections of the new press,<sup>19</sup> whose identification of the street with an *intérieur* 'in which the phantasmagoria of the *flâneur* is concentrated is hard to separate from the gaslight',<sup>20</sup> and whose habitat is challenged by

the decline of the arcades, the advent of Haussmann's grand boulevards and, associated with them, the department stores. However, such a reading can be challenged in a number of ways, not least by reference to Benjamin's other writings (including his review of Franz Hessel's *Spazieren in Berlin*<sup>21</sup> entitled 'The Return of the Flâneur' ('Die Wiederkehr des Flâneurs', 1929)<sup>22</sup> and his extensive notes on the flâneur in *Das Passagen-Werk*<sup>23</sup>). Susan Buck-Morss, for instance, in *The Dialectics of Seeing* has pointed to the contemporary political relevance of many of Benjamin's remarks on the flâneur as a critical warning to intellectual flâneurs in the inter-war period – exemplified with obvious reference to protofascist journalists – in such notes as: 'Flâneur-sandwichman-journalist-in-uniform. The latter advertises the state, no longer the commodity.'<sup>24</sup> The contemporary relevance of the flâneur is drawn out more dramatically in another passage cited by Buck-Morss on the *flâneur* and the crowd, as a 'collective' that

is nothing but illusory appearance (*Schein*). This 'crowd' on which the flâneur feasts his eyes is the mold into which, 70 years later, the '*Volksgemeinschaft*' was poured. The flâneur, who prided himself on his cleverness . . . was ahead of his contemporaries in this, that he was the first to fall victim to that which has since blinded many millions.<sup>25</sup>

Buck-Morss here draws attention to an unexplored political dimension of flânerie in totalitarian societies, in which mere strolling becomes suspicious behaviour and the activities of the stranger do contain, as Simmel suggested, 'dangerous possibilities'. The full consequences of the ambiguity of the flâneur's stance in relation to the market place and to socio-political movements are not drawn out by Benjamin.

There is another sense in which the discussion of the flâneur and flânerie cannot be confined to a single historical conjuncture. In his detailed study of the literary history of the flâneur, Eckhardt Köhn in his *Strassenrausch* has traced the relationship between *flânerie* and the short prose form from 1830 down to 1933, commencing with Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *Tableau de Paris*<sup>26</sup> (in book form in 1781), through the Second Empire; and then, shifting his perspective to Berlin, he traced this urban literary form from the 1850s to the turn of the century (and such figures as Robert Walser), before devoting half of his analysis to three twentieth-century figures: Franz Hessel, Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer. Such a configuration suggests that we should look more broadly at Benjamin's discussion of the flâneur, in the context of which he can also be seen as a flâneur, in which some of his writings are the literary products of flânerie and in which his reflections upon his own method of textual production may open up a wider relevance of the flâneur as illuminating some aspects at least of social investigation.

## III

Benjamin creates not merely one of the first attempts at a history of the flâneur; he also provides us with an analytic of flânerie that reveals potential affinities between this activity and the sociologist's investigation of the social world. In part, this analytic emerges out of Benjamin's own reflections upon his methodology for the Arcades Project. It shifts the focus on the flâneur from the negative conception of the stroller and producer of harmless physiognomies to the notion of the more directed observer and investigator of the signifiers of the city.

This may become clearer if we start out for the moment with Benjamin's 1938 draft of 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire' and, in particular, with his examination of the relationship between the flâneur and the detective. This connection brings out the possibilities of flânerie as a *positive* activity of individuals not totally submerged in the crowd (and its phantasmagorias). It distinguishes this activity from that of the passive spectator: 'In the *flâneur*, the joy of watching is triumphant. It can concentrate on observation; the result is the amateur detective. Or it can stagnate in the gaper; then the *flâneur* has turned into a *badaud*.'<sup>27</sup>

Benjamin, with Baudelaire and Dickens as counter-instances, goes on to observe that 'the revealing presentations of the big city have come from neither' – i.e. the flâneur, or the *badaud*; rather from 'those who have traversed the city absently'. Such a judgement must be challenged in the light of Benjamin's own literary production, his own analysis of flânerie and the social investigative activities of figures such as Henry Mayhew, Simmel, Park and others.

The connection that Benjamin draws between the flâneur and the detective, however, is one that breaks the confining identification of flânerie with the Second Empire and its 'soothing' physiologies, since the latter 'were soon passé'. In contrast:

a literature which concerned itself with the disquieting and threatening aspects of urban life was to have a great future. This literature, too, dealt with the masses, but its method was different from that of the physiologies. It cared little about the definition of types; rather, it investigated the functions which are peculiar to the masses in a big city.<sup>28</sup>

If, for Benjamin, the masses are 'the asylum that shields an asocial person from his prosecutors' and if this 'menacing aspect' is 'at the origin of the detective story', then we would wish to claim some affinity with the origins of urban social theory and investigation. To anticipate later discussion, a

plausible case can be made for the kind of connection between the masses and sociology that Simmel makes and for social investigation of more general social typifications (again Simmel's studies of processes, such as conflict, and typifications such as the stranger, the poor, the blasé person), away from individualistic explanations of the social world and a preoccupation with individual types common to the physiologies.

If we accept this interpretation, then we can read Benjamin's suggestive comments on detection not merely with reference to the origins of detective literature, but also as an explication of dimensions of *flânerie* that illuminate the nature of social investigation. In addition, his own notes on detection and his own methodological procedures are relevant for an understanding of his own activity of investigation and his own textual productions. The *flâneur* author as producer also applies to Benjamin himself. Such an interpretation thereby challenges the largely negative interpretation of the *flâneur* which confines this figure to that of seeing, observing and, in general, being confined to a mere spectator. In the historical explorations destined for his Arcades Project, Benjamin's activities surely qualify for inclusion within, while at the same time critically transcending, the procedures that Robin Winks outlined some time ago in his *The Historian as Detective*<sup>29</sup> as exemplary of a form of detection and inferential practices in historical research, in which

the routine must be pursued, or the clue may be missed; the apparently false trail must be followed in order to be certain that it is false; the mute witnesses must be asked the reasons for their silence, for the piece of evidence that is missing from where one might reasonably expect to find it is, after all, a form of evidence in itself.<sup>30</sup>

In this context, the *flâneur* can engage in his or her intellectual *flânerie* in an archive, in a library, indeed in an *intérieur*, perhaps even as Adorno portrayed Kierkegaard: 'Thus the *flâneur* promenades in his room; the world only appears to him reflected by pure inwardness'.<sup>31</sup> In fact, Benjamin's own sojourns in the Bibliothèque Nationale proved a rich, dynamic and innovative source for his investigations of the historical arcades and much else.

But let us return for the moment to Benjamin's exploration of detection and *flânerie*. For Benjamin, 'the figure of the detective is prefigured in that of the *flâneur*'.<sup>32</sup> But, on occasion, the *flâneur* is 'turned into an unwilling detective'.<sup>33</sup> Such occasions are those of political crisis, of social crisis, of periods of terror. Hence, 'in times of terror, when everyone is something of a conspirator, everybody will be in a situation where he has to play detective'.<sup>34</sup> This role is best achieved through strolling, which in such situations is a politically charged activity that is hinted at by others, such as Simmel's notion that the detached stranger's view 'contains dangerous

possibilities' or Hessel's opening account of *flânerie* in Berlin entitled 'The Suspicious Person' that refers to 'the suspicious role of the spectator'.<sup>35</sup> Benjamin, for his part, cites Baudelaire's view in this context that 'an observer is a *prince* who is everywhere in possession of his incognito',<sup>36</sup> before commenting that the *flâneur*'s seemingly passive spectator role

only seems to be indolent, for behind this indolence there is the watchfulness of an observer who does not take his eyes off a miscreant. Thus the detective sees rather wide areas opening up to his self-esteem. He develops forms of reaction that are in keeping with the pace of a big city. He catches things in flight; this enables him to dream that he is like an artist.<sup>37</sup>

This 'watchfulness of an observer, this figure who 'catches things in flight' can signify the detective, the artist of modernity, the journalist and certain types of urban sociologist. And, unlike the detective, the *flâneur* is interested in murders *and* rebellions.

The *flâneur* as urban observer who 'goes botanizing on the asphalt', collecting and recording urban images, social interactions and social typifications, is someone clearly at home in the metropolis and capable of combining observation, watchfulness and the preserving of his incognito. Hessel's insistence upon the suspicious activity of the *flâneur* and Baudelaire's emphasis upon the *flâneur*'s incognito together provide the elements of that which Benjamin refers to as 'the dialectic of *flânerie*: on the one hand, the man who feels himself observed by everyone and everything, the totally suspicious person, on the other, the completely undiscoverable, hidden person.'<sup>38</sup>

This hidden figure, who is totally at home in the urban milieu, however strange it may appear in the course of his explorations, possesses the capacity for reading the signs of the crowded impressions of the metropolis, including the faces of the crowd. This is what Benjamin refers to as 'the phantasmagoria of the *flâneur*: reading off the occupation, the social origin, the character from the faces'<sup>39</sup> in the street and the crowd. *Flânerie* is an activity that requires training – in order not to overlook the obvious in one's own city and in order to engage in meaningful collection of images – and a particular social habitus. For Benjamin, 'the *flâneur* is an uprooted person. He is at home neither in his class nor in his birthplace but rather only in the crowd'.<sup>40</sup> Such marginality creates a distance between this figure and that which is observed. Similarly, the 'watchfulness' and capacity to catch 'things in flight' in the metropolis is accompanied by a necessary reserve with regard to his intentions. The capacity for rapidly reading off social characteristics from fleeting appearances and the slightest clues led Benjamin to insist upon 'how urgent must the interest in the hiding of his motives be in order to create a place for such thread-like theses'.<sup>41</sup>

The flâneur as observer cannot therefore be reduced to the passive spectator, to the mere idler or to the gaper (*badaud*). Rather, the activity of watchful observation in the modern metropolis is a multifaceted method for apprehending and reading the complex and myriad signifiers in the labyrinth of modernity. 'For the flâneur "there is always something to see".'<sup>42</sup> When the flâneur 'seems to be indolent', this apparent idling can be suddenly transformed into acute observation. In this context, Benjamin draws an analogy with other figures and their apparent idling: 'the spontaneity that is common to the student, the gambler and the flâneur is perhaps akin to that of the hunter, in other words to the oldest kind of work that above all may be closely interlinked with idling'.<sup>43</sup> The flâneur as prefiguring the detective also draws this figure closer to the hunter, to that transformation of the flâneur from a 'philosophical stroller' into a 'werewolf' in the social wilderness of the metropolis, which Benjamin took to be the theme of Poe's 'The Man of the Crowd'.<sup>44</sup>

It has often been pointed out that Benjamin's conception of observation and recording of metropolitan modernity is by no means confined merely to the activity of seeing or viewing the signifiers of modernity. Rather, in many places, Benjamin insists upon the significance of a *tactile* ability in the flâneur that brings this figure in proximity to that of the collector as ragpicker (*chiffonnier*), as well as the less well-drawn figure of the archaeologist, all three of whom are important for understanding dimensions of Benjamin's methodology. Here it must suffice, for the moment, to take seriously his comment that the flâneur is nourished 'not merely from that which appears seriously there before his eyes, but often will seize upon mere knowledge, even dead data, like experienced and lived-through data'.<sup>45</sup> The flâneur must listen carefully to sounds, stories, scraps of quotations as well as search for clues amongst the 'dead data' of the metropolis – just like the detective; or in the archive – just like a historical social investigator such as Benjamin himself.

If, as David Grossvogel has argued for the detective story, 'the detective is traditionally an "eye" in a story about acuities of seeing . . . a "private" eye inasmuch as his sight is his alone',<sup>46</sup> and if we accept the affinities between flânerie and detection, then flânerie as observation involves modes of seeing and of reading. The location of this activity is the metropolis as a complex labyrinth of spaces, structures and populations. Indeed, 'the city is the realization of the ancient dream of the labyrinth. Without knowing it, the flâneur goes in search of this reality'.<sup>47</sup> But although 'the city is the genuine holy ground of flânerie', its actual reality is not necessarily that which the flâneur confronts; rather, 'a new romantic view of landscape emerges that appears instead to be a cityscape'.<sup>48</sup> What remains an open question here is the extent to which the flâneur contributes to the reproduction of a romantic cityscape in his own textual productions. Benjamin's

acquiescence to Baudelaire's praise of Constantine Guys and Charles Meryon suggests other possibilities. At all events, Benjamin at times views the relationship between the flâneur and the city as one of estrangement: 'To the flâneur his city – even if he was born in it, like Baudelaire – is no longer home. For him it represents a showplace'.<sup>49</sup> Again, elsewhere, Benjamin suggests that one needs to be schooled in a particular form of estrangement in order, as in 'A Berlin Chronicle' and 'Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert' ('Berlin Childhood around 1900'), to read one's own earlier images of the city.

The flâneur, however, is also interested in the social space of the metropolis. Not only does the flâneur gaze starry-eyed at space but 'the "sensational phenomenon of space" is the fundamental experience of the flâneur'.<sup>50</sup> There is a concern with the sensational *intérieurs* of the nineteenth century but, above all, a preoccupation with streets and their architecture, both of which together constitute for Benjamin a further 'dialectic of flânerie: the *intérieur* as street (luxury), the street as *intérieur* (poverty)'.<sup>51</sup>

The streets and their architecture, the ostentatious architecture of mass transit (railway station), mass of spectators (exhibition halls) and mass consumers (department stores), to which the flâneur is drawn, remain also to be read and deciphered by Benjamin as flâneur. But it is not merely the spaces and structures of the metropolis to which the flâneur is drawn. The flâneur also explores the labyrinth of the populace, the metropolitan masses. This mass

lies like a veil before the *flâneur*: it is the newest intoxication of the isolated person – it erases, secondly, all traces of the individual: it is the newest asylum of the hunted – it is, finally, in the labyrinth of the city, the newest and least researched labyrinth.<sup>52</sup>

This human labyrinth is researched in different modes by the flâneur as physiologist, as journalist, as 'sensational' and realist novelist (such as Zola) and as social investigator. In his own investigations, Benjamin focuses only upon the physiologist (of the 1830s and 1840s), the journalist and the early detective story writer (such as Poe's detective stories or Dumas's *Mohicans of Paris* where 'criminological sagacity [is] coupled with the pleasant nonchalance of the flâneur').<sup>53</sup>

What all of these figures might have in common is their connections at some time with journalism. Indeed, Benjamin insists that 'the social foundation of flânerie is journalism' – a thesis also developed by Kracauer.<sup>54</sup> The flâneur wishes to sell his or her images of the metropolis, to sell his or her socially necessary labour time spent on the boulevards, traversing the signifiers of modernity. The extensive literature of flânerie extends into our own century with some of the work of Hessel, Kracauer and Benjamin,

as well as Simmel, Park and others. The positive evaluation of such textual production is perhaps hampered by Benjamin's own concentration upon explorations of the flâneur's milieu in the mid-nineteenth century and a correspondingly largely unreflected relevance of *his own activity* as flâneur for his own textual production. At all events, the two sets of explorations are seldom brought together. Exceptions, including a positive assessment of flânerie, are scattered in his notes for the Arcades Project and other writings, as well as in his reviews of Hessel's *Spazieren in Berlin*. In the 1939 notes for reworking the flâneur chapter of his Baudelaire study, he decisively distinguishes flânerie from mere distraction: 'Distraction and amusement as contrast to flânerie. The *badaud* of the distracted. Isolation and nonconformity of the flâneur. Contemplative residual elements transformed into the armed watchfulness of the hunter'.<sup>55</sup>

A positive evaluation of the flâneur in our century was provided by Benjamin himself a decade earlier in his review of Hessel's *Spazieren in Berlin*, entitled 'The Return of the Flâneur'. The origins of Benjamin's own Arcades Project lay in a visit to Paris with Hessel a few years earlier, with the intention of writing an article on the Parisian arcades. In his review, Benjamin contrasts a stranger's reading of a city that focuses on the exotic, the picturesque, with that of one of its inhabitants: 'to acquire an image of a city as a native requires other, deeper motives. Motives for which extend into the past instead of the distance'.<sup>56</sup> The city as an aid to historical memory opens up 'the immense drama of flânerie that we believed to have finally disappeared'.<sup>57</sup> Hessel's exploration of Berlin, his own sense of flânerie as 'a kind of reading of the street', is portrayed by Benjamin as an instance of 'the perfected art of the flâneur', namely:

the knowledge of living. The primal image of living, however, is the *matrix* or the casing (*Gehäuse*). . . . Indeed, if one merely recalls that not only human beings and animals but also spirits and above all images inhabit, then it is abundantly clear with what the *flâneur* is concerned and what he seeks. Namely, images wherever they are housed. The *flâneur* is the priest of the *genius loci*. This inconspicuous passer-by with the dignity of the priest and the detective's sense for clues'.<sup>58</sup>

And, in contrast to much of his critical commentary upon the *flâneur* of the mid-nineteenth century, Benjamin suggests that this figure is capable of grasping concrete historical experience (*Erfahrung*) and not merely subjective lived-out experience (*Erlebnis*): 'Individual experience (*Erlebnis*) seeks the unique and the sensational, concrete experience (*Erfahrung*) the ever-same.' The flâneur, personified by Hessel, creating a topographical 'register' of the city, 'remembers like a child', and 'insists firmly like the sage upon his wisdom'.<sup>59</sup> Hessel himself insists at the end of his Berlin

flânerie that he should not be accused of having overlooked important things. Rather, he suggests to the reader: ‘go yourself just like me without destination on the small journeys of discovery of the fortuitous’.<sup>60</sup>

#### IV

Hessel was not alone in making important contributions to the literature of flânerie, nor was he alone in seeking a living from journalistic activities. Benjamin himself, without a salaried occupation throughout his life, was also engaged in endless flâneries. The activity of the flâneur is not exhausted in strolling, observing or reading the signifiers of the modern metropolis. Benjamin’s *own* activity in producing the hitherto most illuminating account of the flâneur involved the *reading* of texts *on* metropolitan modernity and the *production* of texts *on* that modernity. In addition, as Köhn and others have insisted, many of Benjamin’s other texts belong to the literature of flânerie. It is precisely the author of an article entitled ‘The Author as Producer’, who should prompt us to look at how Benjamin himself produces texts and to ask what is distinctive about the flâneur as producer.

When Benjamin announced to Kracauer in March 1929, ‘I am in the arcades – “it’s as if I were in a dream”, “as if it were a piece of myself”’,<sup>61</sup> he was referring to one of the many intense periods of working on his Arcades Project, an intense sense of being embedded in the context of the Parisian arcades of the nineteenth century. In fact, this intensive work on the textual reconstruction of ‘Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century’ was undertaken in the Bibliothèque Nationale. This was the site of his excavations. His friend Stephan Morgenroth (Lackner) could declare that Benjamin’s ‘pride was introducing me to the secrets of the Bibliothèque Nationale’.<sup>62</sup> Here and elsewhere Benjamin, like the flâneur, would go in search of the traces, literally read the traces of the nineteenth century from hard-earned clues and insist upon the ‘necessity of listening for every accidental quotation, every fleeting mention of a book over many years’.<sup>63</sup> Like the flâneur as detective, Benjamin sought to assemble the facts into concrete constructs: ‘Formula; construction from facts. Construction through the complete elimination of theory. That which only Goethe attempted in his morphological writings.’<sup>64</sup> Yet this early insistence upon citation – ‘I have nothing to say, only to show’ – and the montage principle, gave way to the notion of dialectical images of modernity. And here, again, there is a connection with the flâneur, namely in the notion of illustrative seeing: ‘The category of illustrative seeing is basic

for the flâneur. He writes just as Kubin did when he wrote “The Other Side”, his dreamings as text to the illustrations.<sup>65</sup> The graphic nature of Benjamin’s texts and his creation of a ‘metaphorical materialism’, renders an orthodox analysis of them difficult.

Benjamin’s Arcades Project constitutes an astonishing ensemble of quotations and commentaries that are systematically ordered under central themes with cross-referencing possibilities. The most diverse texts, quotations, scraps of information are placed together in a constellation of meaning that is rendered possible by their similarity. In this respect, Benjamin’s procedure may be seen as a combination of a flânerie through the extensive archives of the Bibliothèque Nationale and a desire to bring some order to the scraps of information and citations gathered that is suggestive of one of the other figures who is illustrative of his method, namely the collector, both as learned collector and as *chiffonnier*. This dimension of collection, of placing the similar in conjunction with one another, is a feature, too, of detection, of that activity which assumes importance with the increasingly serious nature of flânerie. This reading, recording, extracting, ordering, reconstituting, deciphering and the like that is an essential feature of historiography and archival research may also be viewed as a form of *ethnography*. This seems particularly apposite in Benjamin’s case where his object is the construction of constellations of objects, figures and experiences in Paris in the mid-nineteenth century. His research and ‘viewing’ of its streets, its social types, its buildings, its whole topography, layer by layer, has affinities with other forms of urban ethnography.

There is a third illustrative figure for comprehending Benjamin’s methodology, namely the reader of texts that remain to be deciphered. This figure, at times the critical *allegorist*, at others the *archaeologist*, is one whose activity emphasizes both the significance of language and the research for traces of the past in the layers of its representations from the present downwards. This activity and the specific configuration of concern for language and traces is brought together in Benjamin’s brief reflection ‘Ausgraben und Erinnern’ (‘Excavate and Memory’):

Language has unmistakably signified that memory is not an instrument for the reconnaissance of what is past but rather its medium. It is the medium of that which has been lived, just as the soil is the medium in which ancient cities lie buried. Whoever seeks to gaze more closely at one’s own buried past must proceed like a man who excavates. Above all, he must not shy away from coming back time and time again to one and the same fact – scatter it just as one scatters earth, root it up just as one roots up the soil. . . . Indeed the images that are extracts from all earlier contexts stand as valuables in the frugal chambers of our later insight – like torsos in the collector’s gallery.<sup>66</sup>

In addition, Benjamin insists upon the necessity for a hermeneutic intention in such excavations insofar as ‘a good archaeological report must not only indicate the strata from which its discovered object emanates, but those others above all which had to be penetrated’.<sup>67</sup> This intention is evident in Benjamin’s own ordering of objects for his Arcades Project that extend through an A to Z of objects, and an incomplete low case collection from a to v, and includes such objects as ‘A Arcades, department stores, calicot’; ‘H The Collector’, ‘I Intérieur, the trace’, ‘L House of dreams, museums, spa’, ‘Y Photography’, all with cross-references to other objects.

The flâneur, as embodiment of all these dimensions of exploration, traverses metropolitan modernity in search of that which is hidden: the ever-same in the new; antiquity in modernity; representatives of the real in the mythical, the past in the present and so on. But it is not merely the flâneur exploring the city, it is also Benjamin exploring the texts of the city, the texts on the experience of modernity, the representations of modernity, all of which are themselves as labyrinthine as the metropolis itself. This constellation of the city and text and the text as city is explored by Michael Opitz in his essay ‘Lesen und Flanieren’ (‘Reading and Flânerie: On the Reading of Cities, on Flâneries in Books’).<sup>68</sup> To explore Benjamin’s theories of language and the doctrine of similarity and mimesis and the art of reading would take us away from our theme. But this is the context within which Opitz locates the detective dimension of the flâneur and Benjamin himself. The flâneur as marginal figure, collecting clues to the metropolis, like the ragpicker assembling the refuse, like the detective seeking to bring insignificant details and seemingly fortuitous events into a meaningful constellation – all are seeking to read the traces from the details. Benjamin’s Arcades Project with over a thousand pages of notes, commentaries and the like is a complex *inventarium* that is also to be rendered meaningful. In this context Opitz draws out the dialectical relationship between flâneur and reader:

‘The text’, Benjamin writes in the Arcades Project, ‘is a forest in which the reader is a hunter. Not every reader is struck by inspiration’. The reader as hunter and the flâneur as reader of traces; they are both in search of something. Benjamin took a notion of Adorno’s as being ‘outstanding’ (V, p. 1112) that viewed the city as a ‘hunting ground’. To the reader and to the flâneur the book and the city become a hunting ground.<sup>69</sup>

Similarly, the ‘illustrative seeing’ so fundamental to the flâneur is placed in conjunction with reading: ‘Like the astrologer, the flâneur interprets from the signs of other constellations. The flâneur reads the city. In so doing, he is guided by the streets and buildings just as is the reader of the text by the script.’<sup>70</sup> Benjamin’s construction of the prehistory of modernity

and its projection into our present requires a distinctive mode of remembering. The painstaking construction of the origins of modernity in the Arcades Project is built up out of details and traces into dialectical images and the ‘tiger’s leap’ into our present. This construction commenced from a myriad of fragments whose meaning could often not be recalled except through their construction and re-presentation in a new constellation. In this process, the flâneur and Benjamin played a crucial role As Opitz concludes:

In order to be able to see things in their hardly still remembered significance, the flâneur had to wrest the details from out of their original context. To read them means to produce new constructions, means to derive more meaning from them than they possessed in their own present. ‘That which is written is like a city, to which the words are a thousand gateways’ (VII, p. 877).<sup>71</sup>

Benjamin excavates Paris, capital of the nineteenth century as a text, just as the Berlin of his childhood is a text. He does so not merely through texts *on* the city, but also through recognizing the text *as* a city.

The preceding study has sought to shift the discussion of the flâneur and flânerie from the restricted negative application to the Second Empire on the grounds that it neither does justice to the more extensive elucidation by Benjamin nor does it bring out the wider relevance for some forms of social investigation and textual production. Indeed, research still needs to be undertaken on the relevance of the flâneur and flânerie for elucidating social investigation and textual production. This is quite apart from the use made by researchers in other fields such as art history in their contextualization of some movements such as impressionism and metropolitan modernity. Drawing upon Benjamin and Simmel’s discussion of the stranger, Robert L. Herbert in his *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society*<sup>72</sup> has developed the connections between the flâneur artist as investigator of urban life and observer of *intérieurs* in the impressionist tradition of self-avowed flâneurs such as Manet and Degas. The exploration of metropolitan modernity, with its myriad cross-cutting interactions, its momentary shocks, its fleeting impressions and all that which Baudelaire signified as ‘the transitory, the fleeting and the fortuitous’, posed problems – in different ways – for artists, writers and social investigators alike.

If a case has been made for regarding the flâneur as producer of texts, it is important to examine the nature, however briefly, of the texts themselves. In addition, although the preceding discussion has concentrated upon the work of Benjamin, it seems fruitful to outline how far the flâneur and flânerie may be of wider significance in social theories of the metropolis and explorations of modernity. Thus far, a number of configurations have

been intimated between flâneur and journalist, flâneur and detective and, more generally, the flâneur as producer of texts resulting from flânerie, which might suggest possible connections between forms of investigating metropolitan modernity and reporting and narrating this modernity in textual forms.

To remain with Benjamin for the moment, there are evident connections between flânerie and a number of his textual productions, above all *One-Way Street*, *Berlin Childhood* and the Arcades Project itself. To take but one example, *One-Way Street* is itself a constellation or ‘construction’ of aphorisms as a street ‘just like, for instance, the famous stage set of Palladio in Vicenza: the street’.<sup>73</sup> Köhn suggests that the contents of *One-Way Street* do not indicate a random sequence of titles that is common in many aphorism collections, but rather that they

are taken from the linguistic material of the street, or more precisely mirror the written material of the street as it is offered to the observer in a stroll down a metropolitan street on nameplates, posters, advertising hoardings, house façades, shop windows and exhibition showcases. What at first sight looks like a register of inscriptions of everyday street signs, nonetheless for Benjamin stands in the context of the street as a constructive idea of presentation.<sup>74</sup>

The reader is invited to stroll along the textual one-way street, that is itself the product of a kind of flânerie. In this context, Köhn asks ‘who traverses the textual street built out of urban linguistic material? No longer as earlier in urban literature, the figure of the flâneur, but rather a mode of thought engaged in flânerie (ein flanieren des Denken)’.<sup>75</sup> In the case of some of Benjamin’s other texts, such as the Arcades Project itself, only essays relating to the whole project were published in his lifetime. The Project itself remains ‘a torso’, an *inventarium* of research in Paris and elsewhere.

If we turn to other writers who have strong affinities with the figure of the flâneur and flânerie in social theory, then one of them must be Georg Simmel, who is strangely accorded brief attention in Köhn’s study of textual forms of flânerie. Simmel’s early foundation for a sociology that can investigate any and all forms of social interaction or sociation starts out from a recognition of social rather than individual explanations of social life as a result of the emergence of complex mass societies and mass social movements. The customary identification of his sociology with the problem of the relationship between individual and society obscures the extent to which that sociology is frequently concerned with a mass of individuals as part of a wider problematic of social differentiation.

However, what is distinctive about Simmel’s investigations of metropolitan modernity is his concern to capture this dynamic reality through

its 'delicate invisible threads', through 'the fortuitous fragments of reality', through exploring the intersection of social circles' as well as the broader processes of sociation and social differentiation. In my *Sociological Impressionism*<sup>76</sup> an attempt was made to locate Simmel's distinctive approach with that of a 'sociological flâneur'. Perhaps drawing too heavily on the negative associations of the flâneur from some of Benjamin's discussion of this figure in the Second Empire, and by seeking to encompass all his social investigations within this mode, the study failed to do justice to the full and systematic range of Simmel's achievement.<sup>77</sup> Nonetheless, the exploration of the figure of the flâneur and that of the stranger with reference to Simmel's approach to metropolitan modernity remains an illuminating one. In what follows, further lines of investigation are merely indicated rather than fully substantiated.

The affinities are most striking with respect to Simmel's essays and, in particular, his early often anonymous newspaper and journal articles. In all probability, the number of anonymous newspaper articles attributable to Simmel could be greatly increased with further investigation. The connection with journalism is strengthened by the knowledge that Simmel's brother Eugen was himself a journalist by profession.

The multiplicity of themes relevant to an exploration of metropolitan modernity by someone who, as Kracauer remarks, 'seeks . . . in his work – and this is very typical – to preserve his incognito, often even nervously',<sup>78</sup> calls for a fuller examination of Simmel's Berlin milieu. Similarly, the acknowledged mastery of the essay form requires not merely a recognition of the essay's significance as a textual production but also its place within modernity. This suggests not merely an investigation of discussions of the essay form by those with an interest in modernity itself, such as Lukács, Adorno and others, but also an examination of Simmel's own essay production within the modernist tradition. As Matthias Christen has argued, Simmel's statement of Rodin's aesthetic modernist problematic as one in which 'art no longer merely mirrors a world in flux, rather its mirror has itself become dynamic' can apply to Simmel's own practice in his *Philosophische Kultur*, namely 'to offer a mirror image of modernity with the *Philosophische Kultur*'.<sup>79</sup> In other words, we need to investigate further how far Simmel produces dynamic presentations of the modernity that he wishes to grasp in motion.

Earlier in the preface to his *Philosophy of Money*, Simmel also seeks to bring his *presentation* of the exploration of the site of modernity, the mature money economy, into some accord with the *object* of study itself:

The significance and purpose of the whole undertaking is simply to derive from *the surface level of economic affairs* a guideline that leads to the ultimate values and things of importance in all that is human. . . . The

unity of these investigations does not lie . . . in an assertion about a particular content of knowledge . . . but rather in *the possibility . . . of finding in each of life's details the totality of its meaning*.<sup>80</sup>

This exploration of 'the symbol of the essential forms of movement within the world' is one that retains methodologically elements from that to which Simmel often referred, namely the 'snapshots *sub specie aeternitatis*'. In a sense, this most systematic of Simmel's works, with its symmetrical construction, is the culmination of over a decade's investigation of 'fortuitous fragments of reality', 'the superficial and transitory'.

In his excellent and original study of the Chicago School of Sociology's urban sociology, Rolf Lindner<sup>81</sup> points out that, as an inspirational figure in the naturalistic observation of the metropolis, Robert Park seldom wrote much on the methodological presupposition of his approach. As a newspaper journalist, both reporter and editor in the period 1887–98 in New York, Chicago and elsewhere, Park's investigations of the metropolis were to be fundamental for his subsequent sociological urban analysis. So, too, was his period of study with Simmel in Berlin and his acquaintance with a sociological programme that focuses upon the forms of social interaction and sociation, and in particular the forms of sociation in the metropolis. For Park it was the acute observation of metropolitan interaction in specific locales that not merely accords with the activity of the flâneur as investigator but also makes intelligible both his seemingly simple methodological advice, distinguishing between 'acquaintance with' and 'knowledge about' in favour of the former: 'It is, in the last analysis, from acquaintance knowledge and nowhere else that we derive the raw materials for our more recondite and sophisticated ideas about things',<sup>82</sup> and his view of the exemplary nature of the metropolis as the site for sociological investigation. In his 1915 essay 'The City', Park declared that:

a great city tends to spread out and lay bare to the public view in a massive manner all the characters and traits which are ordinarily obscured and suppressed in smaller communities. The city, in short, shows the good and evil in human nature in excess. It is this fact, more than any other, which justifies the view that would make of the city a laboratory or clinic in which human nature and social processes may be most conveniently and profitably studied.<sup>83</sup>

The plurality of forms of differentiation and heterogeneity opened up the possibility for a plethora of studies of social types, spatial locations, social milieu, social groups and, in fact, the wealth of studies with which the members of the Chicago School and its students were concerned in the inter-war period.

As Park himself pointed out, his own version of urban ethnography had strong affinities with that of the newspaper reporter<sup>84</sup> and, though Park does not make this connection, with the *flâneur-as-detective's* directed gaze at urban life. Park's remarks on journalism, too, could apply to the urban ethnography of the Chicago School: 'The newspaper is, like art to the artist, less a career than a form of excitement and a way of life.'<sup>85</sup> The explorations of 'low' life, of forms of existence previously only sensationalized, recalls an earlier tradition of social investigation in the mid-nineteenth century as practised by figures, such as Henry Mayhew, who also had an interest in social reform.<sup>86</sup>

In the 1920s, when students of the Chicago School were investigating 'the city as a natural phenomenon', the 'journalist' Siegfried Kracauer was conducting his explorations of metropolitan modernity in Berlin and elsewhere.<sup>87</sup> Kracauer was certainly driven in Paris and probably elsewhere by 'an urge to engage in *flânerie*', and a desire that at various times was stated as the 'mastery of the immediately experienced social reality of life',<sup>88</sup> or later, in correspondence with Ernst Bloch, as an interest in 'the most superficial things', in 'the instances of superficial life'.<sup>89</sup>

Such urban explorations, even of the contemporary Berlin metropolis, often retained a strong historical sense, especially in his comparisons of Berlin as city of modernity and Paris as city of historical tradition. This led Kracauer in exile to work on a study – contemporary with Benjamin's Arcades Project in Paris in the mid-1930s – of the Paris of Jacques Offenbach which, like Benjamin, draws attention to the flourishing of *flânerie* and journalism on the boulevards.<sup>90</sup>

But, in addition, Kracauer also retained a wider interest in the figure of the *flâneur*. Two examples must suffice here. The first (from 1931) emerged out of a brief visit to Paris from Berlin. In a section headed '*Flânerie*', he draws a contrast between the two cities as follows:

Speed is a result of the mode of building cities. Can a person in Paris adopt the tempo of Berlin even though they are in a total hurry? They cannot do it. The streets in the inner sections of the city are narrow, and whoever wishes to pass through them must exercise patience. . . . And even though the grand boulevards are broadly set out, they nonetheless connect thickly populated districts with one another. The urge to engage in *flânerie* is indeed a sweet one, and seldom is such a wonderful virtue made out of the necessity of limited space. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to transpose such activity to Berlin. Our architecture is dreadfully dynamic: either it shoots undisturbed in a perpendicular line upwards or seeks out breadth in a horizontal manner. And the streets themselves – if I think, for instance, of the Kantstrasse, then I am immediately overcome by the irresistible urge to dash without stopping at all towards its vanishing point, that must lie somewhere in infinity, close to the Berlin Radio House (*Rundfunkhaus*).<sup>91</sup>

Such reflections upon the spatial and temporal preconditions for *flânerie* were taken up again several decades later with reference to the representation of life on the street in film. In his *Theory of Film* (1960), subtitled 'The redemption of physical reality', Kracauer returned, on occasion, to the experiences of the *flâneur*. In particular, he singles out the street and the masses as preconditions for the *flâneur's* continued existence in the context of the new technology of the film and, earlier, photography. The street is

a place where the flow of life is bound to assert itself. Again one will have to think mainly of the city street with its ever-moving anonymous crowds. The kaleidoscopic sights mingle with unidentified shapes and fragmentary visual complexes and cancel each other out, thereby preventing the on-looker from following up any of the innumerable suggestions they offer. What appear to him are not so much sharp-contoured individuals engaged in this or that definable pursuit as loose throngs of sketchy, completely indeterminate figures. Each has a story yet the story is not given. Instead, an incessant flow of possibilities and near-intangible meanings appears. This flow casts its spell over the *flâneur* or even creates him. The *flâneur* is intoxicated with life in the street – life eternally dissolving the patterns which it is about to form.<sup>92</sup>

These metropolitan streets gain their forceful impact from their populations – the historical emergence of the masses and their motion. Kracauer recalls Benjamin's observation that:

in the period marked by the rise of photography the daily sight of moving crowds was still a spectacle to which eyes and nerves had to get adjusted. The testimony of sensitive contemporaries would seem to corroborate this sagacious observation: The Paris crowds omnipresent in Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* function as stimuli which call forth irritating kaleidoscopic sensations; the jostling and shoving passers-by who, in Poe's *Man of the Crowd*, throng gas-lit London provoke a succession of electric shocks.<sup>93</sup>

The new technology of photography – unlike earlier art forms and techniques – was

equipped to portray crowds as the accidental agglomerations they are. Yet only film, the fulfillment of photography in a sense, was equal to the task of capturing them in motion. . . . It is certainly more than sheer coincidence that the very first Lumière films featured a crowd of workers and the confusion of arrival and departure at a railway station.<sup>94</sup>

Kracauer's concern here is, of course, with film. But his own early interest in this medium coincided with his intoxication with metropolitan existence

and the attempt to bring to life the analysis of crucial dimensions of mass urban experiences. In undertaking this latter project, in individual articles, in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, in brief snapshots (as in the series ‘Berliner Nebeneinander’) and in monograph form (notably the highly successful *Die Angestellten (The Salaried Masses)*<sup>95</sup> it is often evident that Kracauer was influenced by the new technology insofar as it opened up new approaches to presenting documentary material.

It is not possible here to develop the depth of Kracauer’s mostly brief, feuilleton-length explorations of the modern metropolis and especially Weimar Berlin.<sup>96</sup> But, in the context of Weimar Berlin, mention must be made of his exploration of white-collar employees in Berlin – *Die Angestellten* – published in article form in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* at the turn of 1929/1930 and in book form in 1930.<sup>97</sup> This investigation of the structure of the life experience and situation of white-collar workers in Berlin drew upon extensive interviews with workers, employers and others. It was an exploration of a social stratum ‘whose life is more unknown than that of the primitive tribes whose customs white collar workers marvel at in films’. It drew upon documents, interviews and articles or, as Kracauer put it, ‘quotations, conversations and observations’ constitute ‘the foundation of the study’.<sup>98</sup> However, such ‘data’ ‘are not to count as examples of some particular theory, but rather as exemplary instances of reality’.<sup>99</sup> Convinced that ‘there also is a flight into the concrete’, is not descriptive reporting, ‘the reproduction of what is observed’ appropriate here? Kracauer rejects reportage in favour of what he terms a ‘constructive standpoint’:

A hundred reports from a factory do not lend themselves to being added to the reality of the factory, but rather remain for all eternity a hundred views of the factory. *Reality is a construction*. Certainly life must be observed for it to come into being. But in no way is it embodied in the more or less arbitrary series of observations of reportage. Rather it is embodied solely in the *mosaic* that is assembled together from out of the individual observations on the basis of knowledge of its content. Reportage photographs life; such a mosaic would be its image.<sup>100</sup>

In a more pointed formulation, Kracauer states that ‘reality does not emerge out of uncontrolled descriptions but out of the dialectical interplay of viewpoints and concepts’.<sup>101</sup> Or elsewhere, in the descriptions of a then popular reportage, ‘one describes reality, instead of coming upon *the traces of its errors of construction*’.<sup>102</sup> Of course, Kracauer insists upon an investigation of ‘normal existence in all its imperceptible dreadfulness’, of ‘minor events out of which our normal social life is composed’ but, at the same time, his concern is with that which a title of one of his 1931 articles indicates lies, ‘Beneath the Surface’ (‘Unter der Oberfläche’).<sup>103</sup>

His 'constructive' standpoint also is 'directed towards a destructive procedure. It must unmask ideologies'.

Kracauer's reflections upon the nature of textual production and modes of representation of social life remain in his later writings too. Although they do not necessarily resolve all the methodological problems which they raise, they do indicate the difficulties to be encountered in social investigation, including the flâneur's collection of documentation of metropolitan modernity. The conclusion in Kracauer's article 'The Challenge of Qualitative Content Analysis' from 1952<sup>104</sup> contains the statement:

Documents which are not simply agglomerations of facts participate in the process of living, and every word in them vibrates with the intentions in which they originate and simultaneously foreshadows the indefinite effects they may produce. Their content is no longer their content if it is detached from the texture of intimations and implications to which it belongs and, taken literally, it exists only with and within this texture – a still fragmentary manifestation of life, which depends upon response to evolve its properties. Most communications are not so much fixed entities as ambivalent challenges. They challenge the reader or the analyst to absorb and react to them.<sup>105</sup>

Of Kracauer's own 'documents' and 'communications', it was *Die Angestellten* (*The Salaried Masses*) that had the greatest impact, 'indeed created a sensation and had a major influence on discussion of the internal political situation'.<sup>106</sup> That would probably not have been the case had it appeared in another form. In one of his two reviews Benjamin suggests that 'at one time, this text would have been called "Towards a Sociology of White-Collar Employees"'. Indeed it would not have been written at all'.<sup>107</sup> Rather, for Benjamin, its virtue lay precisely in avoiding 'the euphemistic whispering of sociology'.