The Observation of the Modern City: Architecture and the Critical Eye in the Age of Baudelaire

In the early nineteenth century, ideas about the nature of vision and observation were drastically changing. The new scientific age had spurred a series of experiments into the nature of human sensation, which concluded that vision was not a simple replication of the external world but a complex physiological process, involving both internal and external stimuli. This had a huge impact on ideas on vision, grounding it within the subjectivity of the observer, and therefore rendering the visual image faulty and unreliable. These new truths and uncertainties were put to the test in the modernising cities of the mid to late nineteenth century, which offered a wealth of new visual images and stimulations. Artificial lights, advertising, the new commodity culture and the concept of the urban crowd created what was known as a spectacle; where visual experiences and stimulations were prevalent and unavoidable. The modern city was therefore a huge draw for writers and artists alike, who wanted to explore this new and dynamic environment. The writings of Charles Baudelaire in particular were some of the first and the most noteworthy in this period. Through his writings, he showed what effect the idea of subjective vision within the new visual culture was having on literature and hence on the experience of the modern city.

Baudelaire is regarded as one of the greatest French poets of the nineteenth century and is widely studied as a leader of the Symbolist genre, but more importantly as a great poet of modernity. In *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne* (1863) Baudelaire called for writers and artists to look for the particular experience of modernity, and established a theory of beauty as the age, its fashions, its morals and its emotions. The beauty that he found in the modern city was its transitory and fleeting nature which he aimed to recreate in his poetry. He also praised other writers such as Honoré de Balzac, calling him the “painter of the passing moment and of all the suggestions of eternity that it contains”.1 Baudelaire is considered to be the first advocate for such immediate depictions of modernity,

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spurring a wealth of literature and art that was specifically focused on conveying the direct experience of modernity, rather than following previous rules and constraints.

Baudelaire placed a great emphasis on the objects of observation; these were to be the modern city and the modern experience. However, he also placed great emphasis on the manner of this observation. He fashioned himself as a flâneur, and took to the streets as a solitary and distant figure with the sole aim of watching and observing. Most of all he was looking for the quality of modernity within the urban crowd and described it as “an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement”.² The urban crowd of the nineteenth century was a new phenomenon in itself and the subject of a number of studies. Rather than being composed of a number of individuals, the crowd came to be seen as a separate being with its own motivation. The experience of being within this crowd was one of onrushing impressions and nervous stimulation.³ In Walter Benjamin’s essay Some Motifs in Baudelaire, he described being within the urban crowd as a “shock experience”, in which consciousness had to act as a screen against the constant stimuli. Baudelaire placed this shock experience at the centre of his work, and depicted it as an attitude of combat. This can be seen in Le Soleil, in which he equates his process of poetry to “practicing my fantastic fencing”.⁴ Baudelaire’s writing was therefore driven by this experience of fending off a constant onrush of impressions and shocks, causing his attention to move quickly from one thing to another in glances, rather than lingering on each object in a gaze.

In Baudelaire’s Les Fleurs Du Mal, the masses had become so much a part of him and were so integral to his experience of the city that they rarely appear in his poetry.⁵ However, even though the crowd is not specifically mentioned, it was an integral part of his experience of the modern city. In A Une Passante, the presence of the bustling crowd is only suggested in the first line: “La rue assourdissante autour de moi hurlait”. It is not

⁵ Ibid., p. 122.
alluded to again, but the event described in the poem is only made possible by the position of being within a crowd. An unknown woman comes into the poet’s field of vision in what he describes as “Un éclair”. Her glance has passed in a moment, suggesting this fleeting experience of being within the crowd. The poet is left in shock, “crispe comme un extravagant”, from this fleeting glance. The shows the nature of love within the modern city; it is transient and shocking, rather than lasting and fulfilled. Baudelaire also seems to be showing what happens when the shock experience in the crowd is not parried, since this glance leaves him shaking and amazed. His eye must be on guard and observe the city from a detached perspective so that his attention can quickly pass from one thing to another.6

This experience of the speed and energy of the city led to a new conception of space in the nineteenth century, as an infinite and centreless three-dimensional extension in which changes were described in terms of the action and interaction of forces, rather than the previous conviction that the cosmos was a finite place, in which things sought their proper place.7 The city therefore became, for Baudelaire, an irritable nervous energy rather than a static place. He sought to express this energy in his poetry through the raw description of the ever-changing surface appearances which encompassed the entire visual field, rather than focusing on each object in turn. This was much like the spirit of Impressionist painting at the time, which was concerned with the primary facts of sensation. Surface appearances were most important due to the idea of vision being located within the observer so that visual truth was no longer placed within the external environment but within the subjectivity of the observer. Therefore when describing the city, Baudelaire did not use descriptive detail, which comes from external reality, but impressionistic detail, which is controlled by the mind. Baudelaire described the city only as he was able to experience it, through changing surface appearances and sensations, and with a preference for colour over form.8 This focus on Impressionistic

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detail can be found in many works of literature in the nineteenth century. In Zola’s *La Curée* for example, the character Renée is shown looking through a window on to the boulevard. Unlike Baudelaire, whose eye is always on guard, Renée’s vision is passive as she cannot hold the urban scene in coherent focus so that the bright and mobile forms in the city become a blur. This gives the impression of the movement and energy of city within her eye, rather than focusing on the reality of distinct actions and occurrences.9

Through this energy and movement, the city became a special kind of visual and social space, open to the random gaze and unforeseen encounter.10 For the *flâneur* in particular, whose very aim it was to observe the spectacle of the city, this provided a wealth of visual experiences. The city as a spectacle was achieved primarily by new artificial light which was used both to light up the city at night and to lure the crowd into the new department stores. These lights made window shopping along the boulevards a standard form of Parisian *flânerie*.11 Thus, the *flâneur* became the equivalent of a moving panorama. Instead of focusing on a single important action or event, he was surrounded by a number of illuminated visual impressions, all of which fought for his attention. This led Baudelaire to look for marginal figures within the urban uniformity, such as rag-and-bone men and prostitutes. Baudelaire believed that the majority of writers had been concerning themselves with subjects such as victories and political heroism. He was one of the first poets to look beyond such certified and official subjects, towards the heroism he found in private life.12 Thus, he opened out his gaze, observing the panorama of modern life that surrounded him rather than writing about single momentous occasions with which he had little experience.

The idea of writing about the panorama of modern society was becoming particularly important within the nineteenth century novel. In this period, the ordinary urban people had become increasingly influential as the educated customers of consumer society, so

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10 Ibid., p. 180.
11 Ibid., pp. 183-186.
that they suddenly demanded attention within literature and art, not only as the urban
crowd, but also as the main protagonists. Victor Hugo was the first to address this in his
novel *Les Misérables*, in which he portrayed the struggle of the Parisian people of the
underworld. Following his example, there was an increasing trend towards literary
realism and the truthful representation of complex social structures, by reflecting society
in its totality. Honoré de Balzac, who was one of the leaders of the Realist movement
and also a *flâneur* of the modern city, produced a huge number of novels collected under
the name *La Comédie humaine*, in which each novel was based on a particular group of
society, in order to represent the infinite variety of human nature. Thus the novel began
to abandon its traditional concentration on a few exceptional heroes representative only
of an elite social group in order attempt to become a portrait of an entire people.\textsuperscript{13}

The importance placed on this panoramic view was demonstrated in the popularity of the
panorama of the nineteenth century. The panorama was a form of entertainment in which
the observer stood in the middle of a room, surrounded by a large circular painting, so
that they had to turn their heads to see the full picture. This marked a significant break
from the perspective image which focused on a single point and had been prevalent for
many centuries.\textsuperscript{14} Many writers began to use the panoramic view in order to give a fuller
description of the modern city. For example, in the Naturalist writings of Emile Zola’s
*Une Page d’amour*, he places wide panoramic descriptions of Paris at the end of each
chapter. These are often taken from a high point of view looking down on the city, which
permits a breadth of vision.\textsuperscript{15} Travel literature in the early nineteenth century also began
to use this perspective, with panoramic views from high vantage points to correlate and
combine a multitude of individual sights.\textsuperscript{16}

This fascination with panorama was the symptom of the growing aesthetic preoccupation
with the representation of life in its totality.\textsuperscript{17} However the actual result was somewhat

\textsuperscript{14} Catherine Stainland, ‘Expanding Vision: The Shift of the Visual Image from the External World towards
\textsuperscript{17} *Ibid.*, pp. 9-26.
more fleeting and discontinuous. The attempt to connect objects and events onto a flat plane resulted in momentary connections. Panoramic observation within the modern city was also unable to create a complete picture. This idea can be explored through the work of Walter Benjamin, with his use of the German words *erfahrung* and *erlebnis* which describe two notions of experience. Whilst *erfahrung* is the notion of integrated experience which comes from a gradual initiation into tradition, the experience of the modern city was one of *erlebnis*, of disconnected and unrelated moments which entered into conscious memory, but not into unconscious remembrance.\(^{18}\) Thus the writer’s panoramic observation was conditioned by the shock experience of the city. Baudelaire used the idea of the panorama to view everything around him, but this all-round view provided him with disconnected and superficial experiences. This can also be related to the artificial lights of the modern city, which did not make everything visible, like natural light, but illuminated selectively, creating a series of disconnected spectacles. Whilst the modern novel often attempted to connect these experiences together like the panorama, Baudelaire accepted the fleeting and disconnected modern condition.

In particular, Baudelaire used the disconnected nature of the panoramic view in order to pick out marginal figures, those who would traditionally appear as a backdrop to the main heroes. His preoccupation with these particular figures, such as rag-and-bone men and prostitutes, was often a way of expressing his own affiliation with these characters. The *flâneur* represented the gaze of the alienated man, who stood at the margin of the great city and the bourgeois class. The fact that he so often picked out the alienated and oppressed of the city is an insight into his association with these characters, and his very personal experience as he walked around the city.\(^{19}\) Therefore, he described the city is as he experienced it; as a fusion of what he saw in the external world and what he felt internally. For many writers in the modern city, this sense of alienation was at the centre of their work, and greatly affected the representation of what they saw in the city. The sense of alienation continued well into the twentieth century, especially in the writings of


Kafka and Rilke, so that literature of the city became based even more on the emotional experience of the writer than on its actual form.

Baudelaire’s sense of alienation in the city was also affected by the transformation of Paris by Haussmann in the middle of the nineteenth century. The streets that he had known so well as a child were constantly changing, leading to a feeling of loss, discontinuity and alienation. One of the best examples of this in *Les Fleurs Du Mal* is *Le Cygne*. Baudelaire associates himself with a swan, which has escaped from its captivity and which he imagines making gestures of distress in the dirt. This association between him and the displaced swan was due to his understanding that “La vieux Paris n’est plus”. In this fickle city of stone, Baudelaire began to rely on his thought and memory to become the guarantors of fidelity and permanence. Thus, as he walked, he shut out the industrial world that had become so hostile, so that the city as a physical place gave way to the city as a state of mind. The sweeping panoramic gazes of Realist and Naturalist authors in the earlier part of the century had described a centripetal city, based in external reality. Baudelaire’s city however, was centrifugal because his observation of the city led to an even wider picture that encompassed symbolic correspondences in time and space. Each *flânerie* through the streets of Paris was a time for introspection and recollection, as objects and spectacle in the city provoked him to recall memories and make associations in his mind. For example, as he wanders through the streets of Paris in *Le Cygne*, the sight of the debris of the modern city brings back the prehistory of Paris and of the poet, so that through his imagination and memory he is able to bring permanence to a changing city. He was also particularly fascinated by the urban window, which invited a voyage of the imagination. In his great prose poem *Les Yeux des Pauvres*, the window through to the interior of a café invites a fantasy of comfort and luxury, far from the reality of the city. Baudelaire, therefore, wandered the streets not merely to observe the forms and energy of the city, but to allow those visual

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forms to take him on a journey of the mind and imagination, creating a city of his mind rather than a physical place.

In Baudelaire’s poetry, this experience of the city is often written in the style of a stream-of-consciousness, replicating exactly what he experienced and thought as he wandered the streets of Paris and not just what he saw. Due to his influence, much of modern literature has since removed physical descriptions of the city and replaced them with the corresponding thoughts and emotions of the writer. By relying on the mind, rather than physical form, to create points of reference of the city, the city has increasingly lost its shape, no longer being described in terms of institutions and important landmarks but in terms of memory and experience. Shape is what makes a city recognisable, therefore a city without shape seems a form of disorder, and gives an impression of anxiety and loss of coherence. This links with the speed and fleetingness of the modern city, in which nothing seems permanent so that objects have become more a function of time than place.23 This idea of urban shapelessness and disorder became particularly prevalent in the twentieth century, for example in Musil’s Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften, which begins with the screeching of brakes on the streets of a recognisable city and ends in an incoherent and disembodied realm.24 The loss of a sense of shape in the literature of the modern city has resulted from the increasing subjectivity of vision and the increasing speed and disorder of the modern city. Observation is no longer based on the truth of the physical form of the city, but on its transient nature as perceived by the onlooker.

The modern industrial city provided an unrivalled setting to test this modern emphasis on subjective vision, with its endless sources of stimulation and fleeting visual experiences. The importance in reading Baudelaire is that his writings coincided with this change in the nature of experience and that he was the first to embrace these changes in his writings. In an age when novels and poetry were important forms of communication with the public, his poetry was particularly successful because he managed to express this

experience of the city to the masses who were able to empathise with what they were reading. Such literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has an important part to play in the understanding of our post-industrial cities today, where the spectacle, shock experience and urban crowd are even more prevalent.\textsuperscript{25} The spectacle of the post-industrial city is largely based on technology, which has the ability to be even more fleeting and intrusive. Therefore, the city has become viewed as a fluid rather than static space, which encourages the city dweller, like Baudelaire, to withdraw further from the impermanence of the external world to the permanence of their thoughts and memories. Thus, the modern city has encouraged and enhanced the idea of subjective vision, rendering the external world untrustworthy, so that truth and reality are increasingly found only in subjective vision and experience.

Bibliography

Books


Journal Articles
