

WALTER BENJAMIN

Walter Benjamin German literary theorist and critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) was a key theorist of modernity. He was above all a theorist of modernity as *urban* modernity. For Benjamin, it was through the jostling crowds of the city, and the decaying fabric of its buildings as they passed into obsolescence that one could understand modernity.

During the course of his life Benjamin became increasingly obsessed with the city. Following a series of inspired portraits of cities such as Berlin, Moscow, Marseilles and Naples, Benjamin devoted himself to a lengthy and sprawling study of the Parisian arcades, the *Passagenwerk*, or 'Arcades Project', a study which sadly remained incomplete, when he committed suicide on the Spanish border while fleeing the Nazis. An extract of the fragmentary remains of this work, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', is included here. The figure whom Benjamin associates most with the arcades is the *flâneur*, who, feigning disinterest, is generated in opposition to – yet equally spawned by – the anonymity of modern existence. Unlike Simmel's blasé individual, the *flâneur* is not so much a creature of the crowd as someone who remains aloof from the crowd, and observes it from afar. Yet the *flâneur* is also to some extent blasé. The nerves of the modern metropolitan individual are constantly being bombarded with stimuli. Drawing on Freud, Benjamin explains how consciousness acts as a buffer, inducing an anaesthetizing defence against the fragmentary, alienating nature of modernity.

Benjamin offers a novel insight into the modern metropolis. Benjamin's metropolis is one entwined with myth, a seemingly paradoxical position in that, for many, modernity is seen as the obviation of myth, the disenchantment of the world. For Benjamin the metropolis is a form of dreamworld, the intoxicating site of the phantasmagoric, the kaleidoscopic and the cacophonous. The metropolis is *enslaved* by myth, a myth that adopts new guises in the supposedly progressive, fashionable world of the commodity. For Benjamin it is precisely the fetishization of the commodity, the repetition of the 'nothing-new' within the fashion industry, and the 'deception' of progress which constitutes and fuels the 'myth' of the metropolis.

Benjamin's work has much in common with that of Georg Simmel and Siegfried Kracauer. However, his position is markedly different to that of Heidegger, especially in relation to the work of art. The significance of Benjamin's thought should not be underestimated. Benjamin sowed the seeds of a critical engagement with the image which has influenced the work of Jean Baudrillard and many other subsequent theorists.

ON SOME MOTIFS IN BAUDELAIRE

Benjamin

The crowd – no subject was more entitled to the attention of nineteenth-century writers. It was getting ready to take shape as a public in broad strata who had acquired facility in reading. It became a customer; it wished to find itself portrayed in the contemporary novel, as the patrons did in the paintings of the Middle Ages. The most successful author of the century met this demand out of inner necessity. To him, crowd meant almost in the ancient sense – the crowd of the clients, the public. Victor Hugo was the first to address the crowd in his titles: *Les Misérables*, *Les Travailleurs de la Mer*. In France, Hugo was the only writer able to compete with the serial novel. As is generally known, Eugène Sue was the master of this genre, which began to be the source of revelation for the man in the street. In 1850 an overwhelming majority elected him to Parliament as representative of the city of Paris. It is no accident that the young Marx chose Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* for an attack. He early recognized it as his task to forge the amorphous mass, which was then being wooed by an aesthetic socialism, into the iron of the proletariat. Engels' description of these masses in his early writings may be regarded as a prelude, however modest, to one of Marx's themes. In his book *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Engels writes:

A city like London, where one can roam about for hours without reaching the beginning of an end, without seeing the slightest indication that open country is nearby, is really something very special. This colossal centralization, this agglomeration of three and a half million people on a single spot has multiplied the strength of these three and a half million inhabitants a hundredfold . . . But the price that has been paid is not discovered until later. Only when one has tramped the pavements of the main streets for a few days does one notice that these Londoners have had to sacrifice what is best in human nature in order to create all the wonders of civilization with which their city teems, that a hundred creative faculties that lay dormant in them remained inactive and were suppressed . . . There is something distasteful about the very bustle of the streets, something that is abhorrent to human nature itself. Hundreds of thousands of people of all classes and ranks of society jostle past one another; are they not all human beings with the same characteristics and potentialities, equally interested in the pursuit of happiness? . . . And yet they rush past one another as if they had nothing in common or were in no way associated with one another. Their only agreement is a tacit one: that everyone should keep to the right of the pavement, so as not to impede the stream of people moving in the opposite direction. No one even bothers to spare a glance for the others. The greater the number of people that are packed into a tiny space, the more repulsive and offensive becomes the brutal indifference, the unfeeling concentration of each person on his private affairs.

This description differs markedly from those to be found in minor French masters, such as Gozlan, Delvau, or Lurine. It lacks the skill and ease with

Benjamin which the *flâneur* moves among the crowd and which the journalist eagerly learns from him. Engels is dismayed by the crowd; he responds with a moral reaction, and an aesthetic one as well; the speed with which people rush past one another unsettles him. The charm of his description lies in the intersecting of unshakeable critical integrity with an old-fashioned attitude. The writer came from a Germany that was still provincial; he may never have faced the temptation to lose himself in a stream of people. When Hegel went to Paris for the first time, not long before his death, he wrote to his wife: 'When I walk through the streets, people look just as they do in Berlin; they wear the same clothes and the faces are about the same – the same aspect, but in a large crowd.' To move in this crowd was natural for a Parisian. No matter how great the distance which an individual cared to keep from it, he still was coloured by it and, unlike Engels, was not able to view it from without. As regards Baudelaire, the masses were anything but external to him; indeed, it is easy to trace in his works his defensive reaction to their attraction and allure.

The masses had become so much a part of Baudelaire that it is rare to find a description of them in his works. His most important subjects are hardly ever encountered in descriptive form. As Dujardin so aptly put it, he was 'more concerned with implanting the image in the memory than with adorning and elaborating it'. It is futile to search in *Les Fleurs du Mal* or in *Spleen de Paris* for any counterpart to the portrayals of the city which Victor Hugo did with such mastery. Baudelaire describes neither the Parisians nor their city. Forgoing such descriptions enables him to invoke the ones in the form of the other. His crowd is always the crowd of a big city, his Paris is invariably overpopulated. It is this that makes him so superior to Barbier, whose descriptive method caused a rift between the masses and the city.¹ In *Tableaux Parisiens* the secret presence of a crowd is demonstrable almost everywhere. When Baudelaire takes the dawn as his theme, the deserted streets emanate something of that 'silence of a throng' which Hugo senses in nocturnal Paris. As Baudelaire looks at the plates in the anatomical works for sale on the dusty banks of the Seine, the mass of the departed takes the place of the singular skeletons on these pages. In the figures of the *danse macabre*, he sees a compact mass on the move. The heroism of the wizened old women whom the cycle 'Les petites vieilles' follows on their rounds, consists in their standing apart from the crowd, unable to keep its pace, no longer participating with their thoughts in the present. The mass was the agitated veil; through it Baudelaire saw Paris. The presence of the mass determines one of the most famous components of *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

In the sonnet 'À une passante' the crowd is nowhere named in either word or phrase. And yet the whole happening hinges on it, just as the progress of a sailboat depends on the wind.

*La rue assourdissante autour de moi hurlait.
Longue, mince, en grand deuil, douleur majestueuse,
Une femme passa, d'une main fastueuse
Soulevant, balancant le feston et l'ourlet;*

*Agile et noble, avec sa jambe de statue.
Moi, je buvais, crispé comme un extravagant,
Dans son oeil, ciel livide où germe l'outrage,
La douceur qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue.*

*Un éclair . . . puis la nuit! – Fugitive beauté
Dont le regard m'a fait soudainement renaître,
Ne te verrai je plus que dans l'éternité?*

Benjamin

*Ailleurs, bien loin d'ici! Trop tard! Jamais peut-être!
Car j'ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais,
O toi que j'eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais!*

The deafening street was screaming all around me.
Tall, slender, in deep mourning – majestic grief –
A woman made her way, with fastidious hand
Raising and swaying festoon and hem;

Agile and noble, with her statue's limbs.
And there was I, who drank, contorted like a madman,
Within her eyes, that livid sky where hurricane is born
Gentleness that fascinates, pleasure that kills.

A lightning-flash . . . then night! – O fleeting beauty
Whose glance all of a sudden gave me new birth,
Shall I see you again only in eternity?

Far, far from here! Too late! or maybe, *never?*
For I know not where you flee, you know not where I go,
O you I would have loved (o you who knew it too!)

In a widow's veil, mysteriously and mutely borne along by the crowd, an unknown woman comes into the poet's field of vision. What this sonnet communicates is simply this: far from experiencing the crowd as an opposed, antagonistic element, this very crowd brings to the city dweller the figure that fascinates. The delight of the urban poet is love – not at first sight, but at last sight. It is a farewell forever which coincides in the poem with the moment of enchantment. Thus the sonnet supplies the figure of shock, indeed of catastrophe. But the nature of the poet's emotions has been affected as well. What makes his body contract in a tremor – *crispé comme un extravagant*, Baudelaire says – is not the rapture of a man whose every fibre is suffused with *eros*; it is, rather, like the kind of sexual shock that can beset a lonely man. The fact that 'these verses could only have been written in a big city', as Thibaudet put it, is not very meaningful. They reveal the stigmata which life in a metropolis inflicts upon love. Proust read the sonnet in this light, and that is why he gave his later echo of the woman in mourning, which appeared to him one day in the form of Albertine, the evocative caption 'La Parisienne'.

When Albertine came into my room again, she wore a black satin dress. It made her pale, and she resembled the type of the fiery and yet pale Parisian woman, the woman who is not used to fresh air and has been affected by living among the masses and possibly in an atmosphere of vice, the kind that can be recognized by a certain glance which seems unsteady if there is no rouge on her cheeks.

This is the look – even as late as Proust – of the object of a love which only a city dweller experiences, which Baudelaire captured for poetry, and of which one might not infrequently say that it was spared, rather than denied, fulfilment.²

Benjamin A story by Poe which Baudelaire translated may be regarded as the classic example among the older versions of the motif of the crowd. It is marked by certain peculiarities which, upon closer inspection, reveal aspects of social forces of such power and hidden depth that we may count them among those which alone are capable of exerting both a subtle and a profound effect upon artistic production. The story is entitled 'The Man of the Crowd'. Set in London, its narrator is a man who, after a long illness, ventures out again for the first time into the hustle and bustle of the city. In the late afternoon hours of an autumn day he installs himself behind a window in a big London coffee-house. He looks over the other guests, pores over advertisements in the paper, but his main focus of interest is the throng of people surging past his window in the street.

The latter is one of the principal thoroughfares of the city, and had been very much crowded during the whole day. But, as the darkness came on, the throng momentarily increased; and by the time the lamps were well lighted, two dense and continuous tides of population were rushing past the door. At this particular period of the evening I had never before been in a similar situation, and the tumultuous sea of human heads filled me, therefore, with a delicious novelty of emotion. I gave up, at length, all care of things within the hotel, and became absorbed in contemplation of the scene without.

Important as it is, let us disregard the narrative to which this is the prelude and examine the setting.

The appearance of the London crowd as Poe describes it is as gloomy and fitful as the light of the gas lamps overhead. This applies not only to the riffraff that is 'brought forth from its den' as night falls. The employees of higher rank, 'the upper clerks of staunch firms', Poe describes as follows:

They had all slightly bald heads, from which the right ears, long used to pen-holding, had an odd habit of standing off on end. I observed that they always removed or settled their hats with both hands, and wore watches, with short gold chains of a substantial and ancient pattern.

Even more striking is his description of the crowd's movements.

By far the greater number of those who went by had a satisfied business-like demeanour, and seemed to be thinking only of making their way through the press. Their brows were knit, and their eyes rolled quickly; when pushed against by fellow-wayfarers they evinced no symptom of impatience, but adjusted their clothes and hurried on. Others, still a numerous class, were restless in their movements, had flushed faces, and talked and gesticulated to themselves, as if feeling in solitude on account of the very denseness of the company around. When impeded in their progress, these people suddenly ceased muttering, but redoubled their gesticulations, and awaited, with an absent and overdone smile upon the lips, the course of the persons impeding them. If jostled, they bowed profusely to the jostlers, and appeared overwhelmed with confusion.³

One might think he was speaking of half-drunken wretches. Actually, they were 'noblemen, merchants, attorneys, tradesmen, stockjobbers'.⁴ Benjamin

Poe's manner of presentation cannot be called realism. It shows a purposely distorting imagination at work, one that removes the text far from what is commonly advocated as the model of social realism. Barbier, perhaps one of the best examples of this type of realism that come to mind, describes things in a less eccentric way. Moreover, he chose a more transparent subject: the oppressed masses. Poe is not concerned with these; he deals with 'people' pure and simple. For him, as for Engels, there was something menacing in the spectacle they presented. It is precisely this image of big-city crowds that became decisive for Baudelaire. If he succumbed to the force by which he was drawn to them and, as a *flâneur*, was made one of them, he was nevertheless unable to rid himself of a sense of their essentially inhuman make-up. He becomes their accomplice even as he dissociates himself from them. He becomes deeply involved with them, only to relegate them to oblivion with a single glance of contempt. There is something compelling about this ambivalence where he cautiously admits to it. Perhaps the charm of his '*Crépuscule du soir*,' so difficult to account for, is bound up with this.

Baudelaire saw fit to equate the man of the crowd, whom Poe's narrator follows throughout the length and breadth of nocturnal London, with the *flâneur*. It is hard to accept this view. The man of the crowd is no *flâneur*. In him, composure has given way to manic behaviour. Hence he exemplifies, rather, what had to become of the *flâneur* once he was deprived of the milieu to which he belonged. If London ever provided it for him, it was certainly not the setting described by Poe. In comparison, Baudelaire's Paris preserved some features that dated back to the happy old days. Ferries were still crossing the Seine at points that would later be spanned by the arch of a bridge. In the year of Baudelaire's death it was still possible for some entrepreneur to cater to the comfort of the well-to-do with a fleet of five hundred sedan chairs circulating about the city. Arcades where the *flâneur* would not be exposed to the sight of carriages that did not recognize pedestrians as rivals were enjoying undiminished popularity.⁵ There was the pedestrian who would let himself be jostled by the crowd, but there was also the *flâneur* who demanded elbow room and was unwilling to forgo the life of a gentleman of leisure. Let the many attend to their daily affairs; the man of leisure can indulge in the perambulations of the *flâneur* only if as such he is already out of place. He is as much out of place in an atmosphere of complete leisure as in the feverish turmoil of the city. London has its man of the crowd. His counterpart, as it were, is the boy Nante (Ferdinand), of the street corner, a popular figure in Berlin before the March Revolution of 1848; the Parisian *flâneur* might be said to stand midway between them.⁶

How the man of leisure looks upon the crowd is revealed in a short piece by E. T. A. Hoffmann, the last that he wrote, entitled 'The Cousin's Corner Window'. It antedates Poe's story by fifteen years and is probably one of the earliest attempts to capture the street scene of a large city. The differences between the two pieces are worth noting. Poe's narrator observes from behind the window of a public coffeehouse, whereas the cousin is installed at home. Poe's observer succumbs to the fascination of the scene, which finally lures him

Benjamin outside into the whirl of the crowd. Hoffmann's cousin, looking out from his corner window, is immobilized as a paralytic; he would not be able to follow the crowd even if he were in the midst of it. His attitude toward the crowd is, rather, one of superiority, inspired as it is by his observation post at the window of an apartment building. From this vantage point he scrutinizes the throng; it is market day, and they all feel in their element. His opera glasses enable him to pick out individual genre scenes. The employment of this instrument is thoroughly in keeping with the inner disposition of its user. He would like, as he admits, to initiate his visitor into the 'principles of the art of seeing'.⁷ This consists of an ability to enjoy *tableaux vivants* – a favourite pursuit of the Biedermeier period. Edifying sayings provide the interpretation.⁸ One can look upon the narrative as an attempt which was then due to be made. But it is obvious that the conditions under which it was made in Berlin prevented it from being a complete success. If Hoffmann had ever set foot in Paris or London, or if he had been intent upon depicting the masses as such, he would not have focused on a market place; he would not have portrayed the scene as being dominated by women; he would perhaps have seized on the motifs that Poe derives from the swarming crowds under the gas lamps. Actually, there would have been no need for these motifs in order to bring out the uncanny elements that other students of the physiognomy of the big city have felt. A thoughtful observation by Heine is relevant here: 'Heine's eyesight,' wrote a correspondent in a letter to Varnhagen in 1838,

caused him acute trouble in the spring. On the last such occasion I was walking down one of the boulevards with him. The magnificence, the life of this in its way unique thoroughfare roused me to boundless admiration, something that prompted Heine this time to make a significant point in stressing the horror with which this centre of the world was tinged.

Fear, revulsion and horror were the emotions which the big-city crowd aroused in those who first observed it. For Poe it has something barbaric; discipline just barely manages to tame it. Later, James Ensor tirelessly confronted its discipline with its wildness; he liked to put military groups in his carnival mobs, and both got along splendidly – as the prototype of totalitarian states, in which the police make common cause with the looters. Valéry, who had a fine eye for the cluster of symptoms called 'civilization', has characterized one of the pertinent facts.

The inhabitant of the great urban centres reverts to a state of savagery – that is, of isolation. The feeling of being dependent on others, which used to be kept alive by need, is gradually blunted in the smooth functioning of the social mechanism. Any improvement of this mechanism eliminates certain modes of behaviour and emotions.

Comfort isolates; on the other hand, it brings those enjoying it closer to mechanization. The invention of the match around the middle of the nineteenth century brought forth a number of innovations which have one thing in common: one abrupt movement of the hand triggers a process of many steps. This development is taking place in many areas. One case in point is the telephone, where the lifting of a receiver has taken the place of the steady

movement that used to be required to crank the older models. Of the countless movements of switching, inserting, pressing and the like, the 'snapping' of the photographer has had the greatest consequences. A touch of the finger now sufficed to fix an event for an unlimited period of time. The camera gave the moment a posthumous shock, as it were. Haptic experiences of this kind were joined by optic ones, such as are supplied by the advertising pages of a newspaper or the traffic of a big city. Moving through this traffic involves the individual in a series of shocks and collisions. At dangerous intersections, nervous impulses flow through him in rapid succession, like the energy from a battery. Baudelaire speaks of a man who plunges into the crowd as into a reservoir of electric energy. Circumscribing the experience of the shock, he calls this man 'a *kaleidoscope* equipped with consciousness'. Whereas Poe's passers-by cast glances in all directions which still appeared to be aimless, today's pedestrians are obliged to do so in order to keep abreast of traffic signals. Thus technology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training. There came a day when a new and urgent need for stimuli was met by the film. In a film, perception in the form of shocks was established as a formal principle. That which determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the basis of the rhythm of reception in the film.

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Marx had good reason to stress the great fluidity of the connection between segments in manual labour. This connection appears to the factory worker on an assembly line in an independent, objectified form. Independently of the worker's volition, the article being worked on comes within his range of action and moves away from him just as arbitrarily. 'It is a common characteristic of all capitalist production . . .,' wrote Marx, 'that the worker does not make use of the working conditions. The working conditions make use of the worker; but it takes machinery to give this reversal a technically concrete form.' In working with machines, workers learn to co-ordinate 'their own movements with the uniformly constant movements of an automaton'. These words shed a peculiar light on the absurd kind of uniformity with which Poe wants to saddle the crowd – uniformities of attire and behaviour, but also a uniformity of facial expression. Those smiles provide food for thought. They are probably the familiar kind, as expressed in the phrase 'keep smiling'; in that context they function as a mimetic shock absorber. 'All machine work,' it is said in the above context, 'requires early drilling of the worker.' This drill must be differentiated from practice. Practice, which was the sole determinant in craftsmanship, still had a function in manufacturing. With it as the basis, 'each particular area of production finds its appropriate technical form in *experience* and *slowly* perfects it'. To be sure, it quickly crystallizes it, 'as soon as a certain degree of maturity has been attained'. On the other hand, this same manufacturing produces

in every handicraft it seizes a class of so-called unskilled labourers which the handicraft system strictly excluded. In developing the greatly simplified specialty to the point of virtuosity at the cost of the work capacity as a whole, it starts turning the lack of any development into a specialty. In addition to ranks we get the simple division of workers into the skilled and the unskilled.

The unskilled worker is the one most deeply degraded by the drill of the machines. His work has been sealed off from experience; practice counts for

Benjamin nothing there.⁹ What the Fun Fair achieves with its dodgem cars and other similar amusements is nothing but a taste of the drill to which the unskilled labourer is subjected in the factory – a sample which at times was for him the entire menu; for the art of being off centre, in which the little man could acquire training in places like the fun fair, flourished concomitantly with unemployment. Poe's text makes us understand the true connection between wildness and discipline. His pedestrians act as if they had adapted themselves to the machines and could express themselves only automatically. Their behaviour is a reaction to shocks. 'If jostled, they bowed profusely to the jostlers.'

NOTES

- 1 Characteristic of Barbier's method is his poem 'Londres' which in 24 lines describes the city, awkwardly closing with the following verses:

*Enfin, dans un amas de choses, sombre, immense,
Un peuple noir, vivant et mourant en silence.
Des êtres par milliers, suivant l'instinct fatal,
Et courant après l'or par le bien et le mal.*
(Auguste Barbier, *lambes et poèmes*. Paris, 1841.)

Finally, within a huge and sombre mass of things,
A blackened people, who live and die in silence.
Thousands of beings, who follow a fatal instinct,
Pursuing gold with good and evil means.

Barbier's tendentious poems, particularly the London cycle, *Lazare*, influenced Baudelaire more profoundly than people have been willing to admit. Baudelaire's 'Crépuscule du soir' concludes as follows:

... ils finissent

Leur destinée et vont vers le gouffre commun;
L'hôpital se remplit de leurs soupirs. – Plus d'un
Ne viendra plus chercher la soupe parfumée,
Au coin du feu, le soir, auprès d'une âme aimée.

... their fate

Accomplished, they approach the common pit;
Their sighings fill the ward. – More than one
Will come no more to get his fragrant soup,
At night, by the fireside, next to a beloved one.

Compare this with the end of the eighth stanza of Barbier's 'Mineurs de Newcastle':

*Et plus d'un qui rêvait, dans le fond de son âme
Aux douceurs du logis, à l'oeil bleu de sa femme,
Trouve au ventre du gouffre un éternel tombeau.*

And more than one who in his heart of hearts had dreams
Of home, sweet home, and of his wife's blue eyes,
Finds, within the belly of the pit, an everlasting tomb.

With a little masterful retouching Baudelaire turns a 'miner's fate' into the commonplace end of big-city dwellers.

- 2 The motif of love for a woman passing by occurs in an early poem by Stefan George. The poet has missed the important thing: the stream in which the woman moves past, borne along by the crowd. The result is a self-conscious elegy. The poet's glances – so he must confess to his lady – have 'moved away, moist with longing/before they dared mingle with yours' ('*feucht vor sehnen fortgezogen/leh sie in deine sich zu tauchen trauten*'). Stefan George, *Hymnen. Pilgerfahrten. Algalal*. Berlin, 1922). Baudelaire leaves no doubt that *he* looked deep into the eyes of the passer-by.
- 3 This passage has a parallel in 'Un Jour de pluie'. Even though it bears another name, this poem must be ascribed to Baudelaire. The last verse, which gives the poem its extraordinarily sombre quality, has an exact counterpart in 'The Man of the Crowd'. Poe writes: 'The rays of the gas lamps, feeble at first in their struggle with the dying day, had now at length gained ascendancy, and

threw over everything a fitful and garish lustre. All was dark yet splendid – as that ebony to which has been likened the style of Tertullian.' This coincidence is all the more astonishing here as the following verses were written in 1843 at the latest, a period when Baudelaire did not know Poe.

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*Chacun, nous coudoyant sur le trottoir glissant,
Egoïste et brutal, passe et nous éclabousse,
Ou, pour courir plus vite, en s'éloignant nous pousse.
Partout fange, déluge, obscurité du ciel.
Noir tableau qu'eût rêvé le noir Ezéchiël.*

Each one, elbowing us upon the slippery sidewalk,
Selfish and savage goes by and splashes us,
Or, to run the faster, gives us a push as he makes off.
Mud everywhere, deluge, darkness in the sky.
A sombre scene that Ezekiel the sombre might have dreamed.

- 4 There is something demonic about Poe's businessmen. One is reminded of Marx, who blamed the 'feverishly youthful pace of material production' in the United States for the lack of 'either time or opportunity . . . to abolish the old world of the spirit'. As darkness descends, Baudelaire has 'the harmful demons' awaken in the air 'sluggish as a bunch of businessmen'. This passage in '*Crépuscule du soir*' may have been inspired by Poe's text.
- 5 A pedestrian knew how to display his nonchalance provocatively on certain occasions. Around 1840 it was briefly fashionable to take turtles for a walk in the arcades. The *flâneurs* liked to have the turtles set the pace for them. If they had had their way, progress would have been obliged to accommodate itself to this pace. But this attitude did not prevail; Taylor, who popularized the watchword 'Down with dawdling!', carried the day.
- 6 In Glassbrenner's character the man of leisure appears as a paltry scion of the *citoyen*. Nante, Berlin's street-corner boy, has no reason to bestir himself. He makes himself at home on the street, which naturally does not lead him anywhere, and is as comfortable as the philistine is in his four walls.
- 7 What leads up to this confession is remarkable. The visitor says that the cousin watches the bustle down below only because he enjoys the changing play of the colours; in the long run, he says, this must be tiring. In a similar vein, and probably not much later, Gogol wrote of a fair in the Ukraine: 'So many people were on their way there that it made one's eyes swim.' The daily sight of a lively crowd may once have constituted a spectacle to which one's eyes had to adapt first. On the basis of this supposition, one may assume that once the eyes had mastered this task they welcomed opportunities to test their newly acquired faculties. This would mean that the technique of Impressionist painting, whereby the picture is garnered in a riot of dabs of colour, would be a reflection of experiences with which the eyes of a big-city dweller have become familiar. A picture like Monet's 'Cathedral of Chartres', which is like an ant-heap of stone, would be an illustration of this hypothesis.
- 8 In his story E. T. A. Hoffmann devotes edifying reflections, for instance, to the blind man who lifts his head toward the sky. In the last line of 'Les Aveugles', Baudelaire, who knew this story, modifies Hoffmann's reflections in such a way as to disprove their edifying quality: '*Que cherchent-ils au Ciel, tous ces aveugles?*' [What are all those blind people looking for in the sky?]
- 9 The shorter the training period of an industrial worker is, the longer that of a military man becomes. It may be part of society's preparation for total war that training is shifting from the practice of production to the practice of destruction.

PARIS, CAPITAL OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The waters are blue and the vegetation pink;
The evening sweet to behold;
People are out walking. Great ladies promenade;
and behind them walk the small ladies.

Nguyen-Trong-Hiep: *Paris, Capital of France* (1897)

1. Fourier, or The Arcades

De ces palais les colonnes magiques
A l'amateur montrent de toutes parts

Benjamin Dans les objets qu'étaient leurs portiques
Que l'industrie est rivale aux arts.

Nouveaux tableaux de Paris (1828)

Most of the Paris arcades are built in the decade and a half after 1822. The first condition for this new fashion is the boom in the textile trade. The *magasins de nouveauté*, the first establishments to keep large stocks of goods on their premises, begin to appear, precursors of the department stores. It is the time of which Balzac wrote, 'The great poem of display chants its many-coloured strophes from the Madeleine to the Porte-Saint-Denis.' The arcades are a centre of trade in luxury goods. In their fittings art is brought in to the service of commerce. Contemporaries never tire of admiring them. They long remain a centre of attraction for foreigners. An *Illustrated Guide to Paris* said:

These arcades, a recent invention of industrial luxury, are glass-roofed, marble-walled passages cut through whole blocks of houses, whose owners have combined in this speculation. On either side of the passages, which draw their light from above, run the most elegant shops, so that an arcade of this kind is a city, indeed, a world in miniature.

The arcades are the scene of the first gas lighting.

The second condition for the construction of the arcades is the advent of building in iron. The Empire saw in this technique an aid to a renewal of architecture in the ancient Greek manner. The architectural theorist Bötticher expresses a general conviction when he says, 'with regard to the artistic form of the new system, the formal principle of the Hellenic style' should be introduced. *Empire* is the style of revolutionary heroism for which the state is an end in itself. Just as Napoleon failed to recognize the functional nature of the state as an instrument of domination by the bourgeois class, neither did the master builders of his time perceive the functional nature of iron, through which the constructive principle began its domination of architecture. These builders model their pillars on Pompeian columns, their factories on houses, as later the first railway stations are to resemble chalets. 'Construction fills the role of the unconscious.' Nevertheless the idea of the engineer, originating in the revolutionary wars, begins to assert itself, and battle is joined between constructor and decorator, Ecole Polytechnique and Ecole des Beaux-Arts.

In iron, an artificial building material makes its appearance for the first time in the history of architecture. It undergoes a development that accelerates in the course of the century. The decisive breakthrough comes when it emerges that the locomotive, with which experiments had been made since the end of the 1820s, could only be used on iron rails. The rail becomes the first prefabricated iron component, the forerunner of the girder. Iron is avoided in residential buildings and used in arcades, exhibition halls, stations – buildings serving transitory purposes. Simultaneously, the architectonic scope for the application of glass expands. The social conditions for its intensified use as a building material do not arrive, however, until a hundred years later. Even in Scheerbart's 'glass architecture' (1914) it appears in utopian contexts.

Chaque époque rêve la suivante.

Michelet, *Avenir! Avenir!*

Corresponding in the collective consciousness to the forms of the new means of production, which at first were still dominated by the old (Marx), are images in which the new is intermingled with the old. These images are wishful fantasies, and in them the collective seeks both to preserve and to transfigure the inchoateness of the social product and the deficiencies in the social system of production. In addition, these wish-fulfilling images manifest an emphatic striving for dissociation with the outmoded – which means, however, with the most recent past. These tendencies direct the visual imagination, which has been activated by the new, back to the primaeval past. In the dream in which, before the eyes of each epoch, that which is to follow appears in images, the latter appears wedded to elements from prehistory, that is, of a classless society. Intimations of this, deposited in the unconscious of the collective, mingle with the new to produce the utopia that has left its traces in thousands of configurations of life, from permanent buildings to fleeting fashions.

Benjamin

This state of affairs is discernible in Fourier's utopia. Its chief impetus comes from the advent of machines. But this is not directly expressed in his accounts of it; these have their origin in the morality of trade and the false morality propagated in its service. His phalanstery is supposed to lead men back to conditions in which virtue is superfluous. Its highly complicated organization is like a piece of machinery. The meshing of passions, the intricate interaction of the *passions mécanistes* with the *passion cabaliste*, are primitive analogies to machinery in the material of psychology. This human machinery produces the land of milk and honey, the primaeval wish symbol that Fourier's utopia filled with new life.

In the arcades, Fourier saw the architectonic canon of the phalanstery. His reactionary modification of them is characteristic: whereas they originally serve commercial purposes, he makes them into dwelling places. The phalanstery becomes a city of arcades. Fourier installs in the austere, formal world of the Empire the colourful idyll of Biedermeier. Its radiance lasts, though paled, till Zola. He takes up Fourier's ideas in *Travail*, as he takes leave of the arcades in *Thérèse Raquin*. Marx defends Fourier to Carl Grun, emphasizing his 'colossal vision of man'. He also draws attention to Fourier's humour. And in fact Jean Paul in *Levana* is as closely related to Fourier the pedagogue as Scheerbart in his 'glass architecture' is to Fourier the utopian.

LOUIS-PHILIPPE, OR THE INTERIOR

Une tête, sur la table de nuit, repose
Comme un renoncule.

Baudelaire, 'Un martyr'

Under Louis-Philippe the private citizen enters the stage of history. The extension of the democratic apparatus through a new franchise coincides with the parliamentary corruption organized by Guihot. Under its protection the ruling class makes history by pursuing its business interests. It promotes railway construction to improve its share holdings. It favours Louis-Philippe as a private citizen at the head of affairs. By the time of the July Revolution, the bourgeoisie has realized the aims of 1789 (Marx).

For the private person, living space becomes, for the first time, antithetical to

Benjamin the place of work. The former is constituted by the interior; the office is its complement. The private person who squares his accounts with reality in his office demands that the interior be maintained in his illusions. This need is all the more pressing since he has no intention of extending his commercial considerations into social ones. In shaping his private environment he represses both. From this spring the phantasmagorias of the interior. For the private individual the private environment represents the universe. In it he gathers remote places and the past. His drawing room is a box in the world theatre.

Excursus on art nouveau. About the turn of the century, the interior is shaken by art nouveau. Admittedly the latter, through its ideology, seems to bring with it the consummation of the interior – the transfiguration of the solitary soul appears its goal. Individualism is its theory. In Vandervelde the house appears as the expression of personality. Ornament is to this house what the signature is to a painting. The real meaning of art nouveau is not expressed in this ideology. It represents art's last attempt to escape from its ivory tower, which is besieged by technology. Art nouveau mobilizes all the reserves of inwardness. They find their expression in mediumistic line-language, in the flower as the symbol of naked, vegetal nature confronting a technically armed environment. The new elements of iron building, girder forms, preoccupy art nouveau. In ornamentation it strives to win back these forms for art. Concrete offers it the prospect of new plastic possibilities in architecture. About this time the real centre of gravity of living space is transferred to the office. The de-realized individual creates a place for himself in the private home. Art nouveau is summed up by *The Master Builder* – the attempt by the individual to do battle with technology on the basis of his inwardness leads to his downfall.

Je crois . . . à mon âme: la Chose.

Léon Deubel, *Oeuvres* (Paris 1929)

The interior is the retreat of art. The collector is a true inmate of the interior. He makes the transfiguration of things his business. To him falls the Sisyphean task of obliterating the commodity-like character of things through his ownership of them. But he merely confers connoisseur value on them, instead of intrinsic value. The collector dreams that he is not only in a distant or past world but also, at the same time, in a better one, in which, although men are as unprovided with what they need as in the everyday world, things are free of the drudgery of being useful.

The interior is not only the universe but also the *etui* of the private person. To live means to leave traces. In the interior these are emphasized. An abundance of covers and protectors, liners and cases is devised, on which the traces of objects of everyday use are imprinted. The traces of the occupant also leave their impression on the interior. The detective story that follows these traces comes into being. His 'philosophy of furniture', along with his detective novellas, shows Poe to be the first physiognomist of the interior. The criminals of the first detective novels are neither gentlemen nor apaches, but private members of the bourgeoisie.

BAUDELAIRE, OR THE STREETS OF PARIS

Tout pour moi devient Allégorie.

Baudelaire, 'Le cygne'

Baudelaire's genius, which is fed on melancholy, is an allegorical genius. In Baudelaire Paris becomes for the first time a subject of lyric poetry. This poetry is not regional art; rather, the gaze of the allegorist that falls on the city is estranged. It is the gaze of the *flâneur*, whose mode of life still surrounds the approaching desolation of city life with a propitiatory lustre. The *flâneur* is still on the threshold, of the city as of the bourgeois class. Neither has yet engulfed him; in neither is he at home. He seeks refuge in the crowd. Early contributions to a physiognomics of the crowd are to be found in Engels and Poe. The crowd is the veil through which the familiar city lures the *flâneur* like a phantasmagoria. In it the city is now a landscape, now a room. Both, then, constitute the department store that puts even *flânerie* to use for commodity circulation. The department store is the *flâneur's* last practical joke.

Benjamin

In the *flâneur* the intelligentsia pays a visit to the marketplace, ostensibly to look around, yet in reality to find a buyer. In this intermediate phase, in which it still has patrons but is already beginning to familiarize itself with the market, it appears as bohemianism. The uncertainty of its political function corresponds to the uncertainty of its economic position. This is most strikingly expressed in the professional conspirators, who are certainly a part of Bohemia. Their first field of activity is the army; later it becomes the petit bourgeoisie, occasionally the proletariat. Yet this stratum sees its opponents in the real leaders of the latter. The *Communist Manifesto* puts an end to their political existence. Baudelaire's poetry draws its strength from the rebellious emotionalism of this group. He throws his lot in with the asocial. His only sexual communion is realized with a whore.

Facilis descensus Averni

Virgil, *Aeneid*

What is unique in Baudelaire's poetry is that the images of women and death are permeated by a third, that of Paris. The Paris of his poems is a submerged city, more submarine than subterranean. The chthonic elements of the city – its topo-graphical formation, the old deserted bed of the Seine – doubtless left their impression on his work. Yet what is decisive in Baudelaire's 'deathly idyll' of the city is a social, modern substratum. Modernity is a main accent in his poetry. He shatters the ideal as spleen (*Spleen et Idéal*). But it is precisely modernity that is always quoting primaeval history. This happens here through the ambiguity attending the social relationships and products of this epoch. Ambiguity is the pictorial image of dialectics, the law of dialectics seen at a standstill. This standstill is utopia and the dialectic image therefore a dream image. Such an image is presented by the pure commodity: as fetish. Such an image are the arcades, which are both house and stars. Such an image is the prostitute, who is saleswoman and wares in one.

Le voyage pour découvrir ma géographie

Note of a madman (Paris 1907)

The last poem of the *Flowers of Evil*, 'The Journey': 'Oh death, old captain, it is time, let us weigh anchor.' The last journey of the *flâneur*: death. Its destination: the new. 'To the depths of the unknown, there to find something new.' Novelty is a quality independent of the intrinsic value of the commodity. It is the origin of the illusion inseparable from the images produced by the collective

Benjamin unconscious. It is the quintessence of false consciousness, whose indefatigable agent is fashion. The illusion of novelty is reflected, like one mirror in another, in the illusion of perpetual sameness. The product of this reflection is the phantasmagoria of 'cultural history', in which the bourgeoisie savours its false consciousness to the last. The art that begins to doubt its task and ceases to be 'inseparable from utility' (Baudelaire) must make novelty its highest value. The snob becomes its *arbiter novarum rerum*. He is to art what the dandy is to fashion. As in the seventeenth century the canon of dialectical imagery came to be allegory, in the nineteenth it is novelty. The *magasins de nouveauté* are joined by the newspapers. The press organizes the market in intellectual values, in which prices at first soar. Nonconformists rebel against the handing over of art to the market. They gather around the banner of '*l'art pour l'art*'. This slogan springs from the conception of the total artwork, which attempts to isolate art from the development of technology. The solemnity with which it is celebrated is the corollary to the frivolity that glorifies the commodity. Both abstract from the social existence of man. Baudelaire succumbs to the infatuation of Wagner.

HAUSSMANN, OR THE BARRICADES

J'ai le culte du Beau, du Bien, des grandes choses,
De la belle nature inspirant le grand art,
Qu'il enchante l'oreille ou charme le regard;
J'ai l'amour du printemps en fleurs: femmes et roses.

Baron Haussmann, *Confession d'un lion devenu vieux*

The blossomy realm of decoration,
Landscape and architecture's charm
And all effects of scenery repose
Upon perspective's law alone.

Franz Böhle, *Theatrical Catechism*

Hausmann's urban ideal was of long perspectives of streets and thoroughfares. This corresponds to the inclination, noticeable again and again in the nineteenth century, to ennoble technical necessities by artistic aims. The institutions of the secular and clerical dominance of the bourgeoisie were to find their apotheosis in a framework of streets. Streets, before their completion, were draped in canvas and unveiled like monuments. Hausmann's efficiency is integrated with Napoleonic idealism. The latter favours finance capital. Paris experiences a flowering of speculation. Playing the Stock Exchange displaces the game of chance in the forms that had come down from feudal society. To the phantasmagorias of space to which the *flâneur* abandons himself, correspond the phantasmagorias of time indulged in by the gambler. Gambling converts time into a narcotic. Lafargue declares gaming an imitation in miniature of the mysteries of economic prosperity. The expropriations by Hausmann call into being a fraudulent speculation. The arbitration of the Court of Cassation, inspired by the bourgeois and Orleanist opposition, increases the financial risk of Hausmannization. Hausmann attempts to strengthen his dictatorship and to place Paris under an emergency regime. In 1864 he gives expression in a parliamentary speech to his hatred of the rootless population of big cities. The

latter is constantly increased by his enterprises. The rise in rents drives the proletariat into the suburbs. The *quartiers* of Paris thus lose their individual physiognomies. The red belt is formed. Haussmann gave himself the name of 'artist in demolition'. He felt himself called to his work and stresses this in his memoirs. Meanwhile, he estranges Parisians from their city. They begin to be conscious of its inhuman character. Maxime du Camp's monumental work *Paris* has its origin in this consciousness. The *Jérémiades d'un Haussmannisé* give it the form of a biblical lament.

Benjamin

The true purpose of Haussmann's work was to secure the city against civil war. He wanted to make the erection of barricades in Paris impossible for all time. With such intent Louis-Philippe had already introduced wooden paving. Yet the barricades played a part in the February Revolution. Engels studies the technique of barricade fighting. Haussmann seeks to prevent barricades in two ways. The breadth of the streets is intended to make their erection impossible, and new thoroughfares are to open the shortest route between the barracks and the working-class districts. Contemporaries christen the enterprise 'strategic embellishment'.

Fais voir, en déjouant la ruse,
O République, à ces pervers
Ta grande face de Méduse
Au milieu de rouges éclairs.

Workers' song (about 1850)

The barricade is resurrected in the Commune. It is stronger and better secured than ever. It stretches across the great boulevards, often reaching the height of the first floor, and covers the trenches behind it. Just as the *Communist Manifesto* ends the epoch of the professional conspirator, the Commune puts an end to the phantasmagoria that dominates the freedom of the proletariat. It dispels the illusion that the task of the proletarian revolution is to complete the work of 1789 hand in hand with the bourgeoisie. This illusion prevailed from 1831 to 1871, from the Lyons uprising to the Commune. The bourgeoisie never shared this error. The struggle of the bourgeoisie against the social rights of the proletariat has already begun in the Great Revolution and coincides with the philanthropic movement that conceals it, attaining its fullest development under Napoleon III. Under him is written the monumental work of this political tendency: Le Play's *European Workers*. Besides the covert position of philanthropy, the bourgeoisie was always ready to take up the overt position of class struggle. As early as 1831 it recognizes, in the *Journal des Débats*, 'Every industrialist lives in his factory like the plantation owners among their slaves.' If, on the one hand, the lack of a guiding theory of revolution was the undoing of the old workers' uprisings, it was also, on the other, the condition for the immediate energy and enthusiasm with which they set about establishing a new society. This enthusiasm, which reached its climax in the Commune, for a time won over to the workers the best elements of the bourgeoisie, but in the end led them to succumb to their worst. Rimbaud and Courbet declare their support for the Commune. The Paris fire is the fitting conclusion to Haussmann's work of destruction.

My good father had been in Paris.

Karl Gutzkow, *Letters from Paris* (1842)

Benjamin Balzac was the first to speak of the ruins of the bourgeoisie. But only Surrealism exposed them to view. The development of the forces of production reduced the wish symbols of the previous century to rubble even before the monuments representing them had crumbled. In the nineteenth century this development emancipated constructive forms from art, as the sciences freed themselves from philosophy in the sixteenth century. Architecture makes a start as constructional engineering. The reproduction of nature in photography follows. Fantasy creation prepares itself to become practical as commercial art. Literature is subjected to montage in the *feuilleton*. All these products are on the point of going to market as wares. But they hesitate on the brink. From this epoch stem the arcades and interiors, the exhibitions and panoramas. They are residues of a dream world. The realization of dream elements in waking is the textbook example of dialectical thinking. For this reason dialectical thinking is the organ of historical awakening. Each epoch not only dreams the next, but also, in dreaming, strives toward the moment of waking. It bears its end in itself and unfolds it – as Hegel already saw – with ruse. In the convulsions of the commodity economy we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled.