

Expressions of the City

Ivy Lai Chun Chun

Hong Kong University

The city is full of strangers. Everywhere you look, every sheer sense of unfamiliarity culminates in the crowds. The insecurity of the crowd lays births to strangers and flaneurs. Both “strangers” of Simmel’s analytical concept, and “flaneurs” of Baudelaire’s idea converge on the crowd, yet “strangers” and flaneurs aim at different orientations in city life. Urbanization propels strangers to stay in the city to earn a better living whereas flaneurs express city life in the form of art. Both strangers and flaneurs take different perspectives: perspectives of sociology and of aesthetics respectively, to express their attitude, their consciousness of the city. In this essay, we shall discuss similarities shared by them, in which differences are found through their expressions of the city.

Both “strangers” and “flaneurs” are absorbed into the crowd. The crowd is the metonym of the city, a place in which city dwellers intersect with each other without being known. The great mobility of the crowd is what constructs the “synthesis of nearness and remoteness which constitutes the formal position of strangers”¹ and what fascinates, intoxicates flaneurs in delineating the city as a text. Every time there are wanderers who do not come and go tomorrow. Instead, they come today and “stay”² tomorrow. These are strangers constituted by closeness and remoteness. When strangers are absorbed into the crowd, which is like those set in detective stories, danger is signaled in the crowd.³ That is why strangers have to alienate themselves from others to protect themselves from being harmed in the crowd. This defense mechanism caused by alienation results in others claiming them as “strangers.” That is how the paradoxical synthesis of nearness and remoteness constituted by the great mobility of the crowd creates the social formation of strangers.⁴ Likewise, flaneurs are fascinated, intoxicated by the fluid crowd. In the prose “Crowds,” the flaneur is an ordinary person immersed in the crowd. “Multitude, solitude: identical terms, and interchangeable”⁵ indicates that

immersed in the crowd, the flaneur “enjoys feverish delights”⁶ by plunging himself interchangeably from multitude to solitude. The flaneur has a “privilege” to choose any state he likes to identify with in the fluid crowd. The intoxication to the crowd is thus stirred up by the high mobility of the crowd. Jenks metaphorically names the flaneur the prince: “An observer is a prince who is everywhere in possession of his incognito.”⁷ The flaneur as a prince connotes that only materialism enables the poet to loiter everywhere to attain the feverish state of disguising himself in different roles in the crowd. Loitering everywhere in the crowd, the flaneur resists the spectacle, the domination of power mediated by images, by searching for the aesthetic vision of his own. The flaneur has become both the “interactor and constitutor of the people’s crowd-likeness.”⁸ Both strangers and flaneurs share some similarities in being absorbed into the huge mobile crowd. Constrained by the money economy, strangers, who appear to be traders⁹ trespass land in order to stay in the city whereas flaneurs are allowed to loiter, stroll everywhere in the crowd to seek feverish enjoyment. The money economy functions differently according to different categories of people, being pushed by huge mobility. Huge mobility is the backbone of the money economy, underlying the rapid turning over of people and goods and services in the city. The money economy enables strangers and flaneurs to be absorbed into the mobile crowd.

Constituted as part of the crowd, both strangers and flaneurs need to adapt to the “strange” situation set in the crowd. The “strange” situation is the rapid and speedy changes in the city, in which seeing is above hearing, and transportation is everywhere that accelerates the pace of the city. Strangers need to cope with the sensory overload constituted by the speedy and changing city¹⁰ whereas flaneurs need to familiarize themselves with the way they connect with others through “seeing.”¹¹ To strangers, the sensory overload and alienation in the city propel them to seek ways to adapt to the city life. What concerns strangers most is connecting with others based on contingent similarities.¹² No wonder strangers normally are contingently connected to those people who share similar traits with them by the exercise of freedom.¹³ In a speedy city, strangers would find themselves being intimate with others within a short distance. That is intimacy without proximity. It is a characteristic of city people. This means that city people are easily being intimate with those who share similar traits in such a compact crowd. For example, colleagues are usually more intimate with who share similar backgrounds and ideologies. However, strangers cannot easily develop an in-depth intimacy with others in a speedy, changing city while connecting with someone who contingently shares similar traits. Not every stranger is able to acquire intimacy with others in short distances in the crowd. That is proximity without intimacy. Gilloch writes, “In the crowd, one may see many people, but one notices no one, one recognizes no one.”¹⁴ The incapability of developing an in-depth intimacy with others in the city adds to eccentric mannerism of strangers, critiquing the tyranny of speed in society. Simmel even expresses his nuanced thought in the erotic encounter of love. Even though one is not able

to establish a relation with other, someone else would establish the same meaning for the one.¹⁵ The same meaning could be derived from the “open” possibilities of similarities in the crowd, to which strangers connect, to establish intimate relationship with others and assert unique individuality at the same time. While the intimacy of strangers with others is based upon the distance with others, the flaneur is integrated into the crowd, walking leisurely with a tortoise or retracing the steps on the boulevard, to draw others’ attention of his unique aesthetic adoration in the crowd. The “seeing” is the leisurely gaze at the city in admiration. What the flaneur “sees” in the city is that people are nice and friendly, but are also competitive and secretive in anonymous identities.¹⁶ As a result, crimes are always embedded in the intertwining layers of the crowd,¹⁷ which is the origin of the detective stories; for example, in Poe’s “Man of the Crowd,” the crowd is the scene where crime takes place.¹⁸ The physiologies thus fashion the phantasmagoria of Parisian life that could be found in any literature of detective stories. The phantasmagoria of Parisian life made up of the intertwining layers makes the fluid crowd so fascinating and thrilling that the flaneur could hardly resist it. Like strangers who are so eccentric to be drawn to the secretive crowd, the flaneur exhibits his eccentric mannerism by strolling leisurely on the boulevard amid the mobile crowd to sentimentally express the melancholy of city in the form of art—poems. While loitering in the crowd, the flaneur with imagination disguises anyone in the crowd to depict the city life through poems and prose. The city that the flaneur “sees” has eventually been switched to a literary text. In some of Baudelaire’s poems, the speedy change of the city is melancholically depicted. In the poem “The Swan,” “The old Paris is gone (the face of a town is more changeable than the heart of mortal man)”¹⁹ ironically, cynically shows that the city changes faster than the heart of mortal man. The city dehumanizes human beings by Haussmann’s project on developing Paris. The tone of pathos is echoed. In the prose “Loss of A Halo,” “terror of horses and vehicles”²⁰ results in the loss of a halo dramatically. The rapid, speedy transportation of city has created chaos in the city. In the prose “The Eyes of the Poor,” the “eyes” that represent the split of modern self are seen. Every part is fragmented in modernity, like the “eyes.” The tyranny of speed smashes things up, and breaks things down into parts. It signifies the rejection of the autonomous self advocated by Enlightenment; “I think, therefore I am” by Descartes asserts the unity of self, which is rejected by fragmentation in modernity. The “eyes” are examples of tangible fragments that feature modernity.

In the poem “To a Passer-by,” “We might have loved”²¹ reveals that even lovers themselves do not realize they may have loved in rapid changes of the city. The instant moment of having loved each other could hardly be captured. What is retained in the city is the momentum of love at last sight. Both strangers and flaneurs exhibit eccentric mannerism when adapting to the “strange” city dominated by tyranny of speed. Strangers are more concerned with the intimacy based upon distance with others, whereas flaneurs are more

concerned with the devastating city they see to be reflected in the prose and poems. In the eyes of strangers, keeping intimacy with others with respect to proximity is out of their control. Keeping close to each other in short distances does not logically lead to close intimacy. On the contrary, being remote to others does not logically imply lack of intimacy. Fate/chance/contingence is the key of establishing a social relationship in the city that bothers strangers the most. Whereas strangers seem unable to have any control over a social relationship, flaneurs could transform the city life into art under their control. Having disguised one in the crowd by sheer observation, flaneurs could depict the devastating city life the one belongs to melancholically through poems and prose. Both strangers and flaneurs demonstrate various kinds of eccentric mannerism, which reflects how they come to terms with “strange” situations they are in. Comparatively speaking, flaneurs are more capable of adapting to “strange” situations by themselves than strangers.

Besides, both strangers and flaneurs are part of the “commodity” culture. Immersed in the crowd, both strangers and flaneurs are related ambivalently to the commodity culture. Both strangers and flaneurs belong to the money economy, as discussed above. Any wanderers who come and stay tomorrow are strangers, in the synthesis of remoteness and closeness.²² An obvious example in relation to the money economy that Simmel gives is traders. “The trader must be a stranger”²³ because trader does not get hold of an identity in the eyes of others. The trader has no land nor pure finance and intermediary trade.²⁴ The trader is perceived as a “commodity” in the money economy by the nature of trade. Other strangers, like the trader, are perceived as “commodities,” for strangers alienate from others in blasé attitude. Indifference is a nature of commodity. Likewise, the flaneur is abandoned in the crowd like a commodity.²⁵ The spectacular way the flaneur fashions himself is a commodity. The flaneur’s intoxication to the crowd is parallel to the intoxication to the commodity penetrating and perpetuating the massive crowd. The “spectacle of modernity” is thus seen in the flaneur. The flaneur enjoys the multiplication of numbers in the mass, as “enjoying a crowd is an art”²⁶ The crowd as an art enables the flaneur to play tricks with numbers, which demonstrates a feature of modernity, calculability. Moreover, secularities and domination of man are found in modern city, according to Jenks.²⁷ In the poem, “Loss of a Halo,” the loss of a halo symbolizes the secularization of modern man. Capitalism replaces God, and dominates the modern society. Therefore, modern man is secularized as a “commodity.” In the poem “To a Passer-by,” a woman “with a statue’s form”²⁸ is a widow passing by. The flaneur beautifies the widow, who is being mocked at, being discriminated against, in city life. In the modern city, women are stereotyped as the “other,” the ones who are abandoned, forlorn.

Furthermore, the distinction of classes is brought into “sight” in modernity. In the poem “The Eyes of the Poor”, the poor “sees” the rich couple in “equal () degree.”²⁹ The poor in tremendous fascination with consumption gaze at the rich. The repetitive boast of consumer goods: “How

beautiful it is!"³⁰ conjures up the picture of commodity in the eyes of the poor. Not only the flaneur is a commodity but also the people whom the flaneur sees in the city are commodities as well. Both strangers and flaneurs are constitutive of the commodity culture without consciously being known.

Even though both strangers and flaneurs are under the hegemony of money economy, however, both strangers and flaneurs protest against and antagonize the division of labor, specialization and industrialization in different ways. In the city, strangers usually hold the blasé or the indifferent attitude for self-preservation. If the external stimulus overrides the internal reactions, strangers would be hypersensitive to the external world. Reservation is the common response to the unfamiliar. If the reserve is not only limited to indifference, aversion that can break into hatred and conflict could be resulted.³¹ There is a wide spectrum of feeling of strangers in responding to others as a defense mechanism. Despite the fact that people congregate in a compact mass that breeds intimacy, strangers adopt a reserved proposition to safeguard themselves. Feeling alienated to others is the aftermath of engaging in the money economy. People are alienated not just from the products they produce but are also alienated from each other. This is especially true for strangers who have no roots at all.³² The act of self-preservation is a signal turning against the money economy. Whereas strangers uphold the blasé attitude to protect themselves in the money economy, the flaneur "shakes off blasé attitude to a critical appreciation of the falsehood, fabrication, and replication at the heart of postmodernist city."³³ The flaneur has transformed the social life into aesthetics. The everyday aesthetic social life denotes that the distinction between high and low art breaks down, leading to the stage of what scholars call post-modernity. In fact, the critical aesthetic appreciation of the city with the leisurely walking on the boulevard is a sign of acting against division of labor, specialization, and industrialization.³⁴ The flaneur is overwhelmed by fabricated images mediated in everyday social life, like the flaneur being tied to Baudrillard's TV sets, interestingly.³⁵ Overwhelmed by fabricated aesthetic images, the flaneur is critically aware of protesting against the money economy through aesthetic appreciation of city. Ironically, the flaneur has transformed the horrible society reality into the beauty of aesthetic poems and poems, like "the old suburbs drift off into allegory"³⁶ in the poem "The Swan." Both strangers and flaneurs resort to different attitudes and means to fight against the money economy in the modern city.

Moreover, both strangers and flaneurs "drift" to accomplish their goals in city life. It is also because of the city that they have to "drift" to construct the city life. Drifting is a swift movement from one place to another that accelerates mobility. Both strangers and flaneurs drift, but the way they drift reflects their different orientations in city. Strangers drift from outside the city to inside the city to maintain autonomy and freedom while acclaiming individual differences in the city.³⁷ The description "the purely mobile person comes incidentally into contact with every single element"³⁸ illustrates the fast, the speedy drifting of strangers in contacting with "every" single relation in the

city. Drifting by strangers is an individual act of opposing to the collective society. Yet, strangers alienate from others for self-protection in the versatile, mobile drifting. The dissociation resulted from which is in reality a kind of socialization.³⁹ In contrast to strangers who drift rapidly through trespassing borders, the flaneur drifts leisurely with idleness, watchfulness, and inquisitiveness on the boulevard.⁴⁰ The flaneur embodies subjectivity in art. Drifting on the boulevards with a tortoise or retracing steps, the flaneur leisurely walks in slow movements and gazes at the city with adoration. The slow, idle leisurely movement is a critique of tyranny of speed dominated in the city. The boulevard opens up a space for the flaneur to subjectivize every object he sees in the city. It is the artistic subjectivization of the objectification of environment. Lehan calls the subjectivization of objects “an inward turn,”⁴¹ an “intuitive intelligence” turning against rationalism, and science by the Enlightenment project.⁴² Berman argues that the construction of boulevard is at the expense of the poor.⁴³ The leisurely walk on the boulevard enables the flaneur to re-constitute steps in detournement—the psychological-geographical path to re-establish the psychic life, to catch things in flight, and dream like an artist.⁴⁴ Baudelaire describes modernity “ephemeral, fugitive, contingent” that he must capture in the form of art.⁴⁵ For example, in the poem “The Swan,” the flaneur yearns for an end to the “cage.”⁴⁶ The “cage” symbolizes the modern city that suffocates the swan, the flaneur. “Sifting city-dust,”⁴⁷ “remembered lake,”⁴⁸ the outrageous accusation of God—“As if God we the object of his hate”⁴⁹—correspond to the demolition of the suburb that has been replaced by the modern city. Longing for the good old past, the nostalgia in the suburb, the swan is desperate to rise above the predicament of modernity. The flaneur has transformed all the gloom of the city into a poem of the swan. The leisurely drifting on the boulevard in slow movements enables the flaneur to express his melancholic sentiments in his poems of the modern city. Both strangers and flaneurs drift, but they drift in different manners and speed that reflects their different orientations.

Furthermore, the notion of “strangers” and “flaneurs” share some similarities that both identities have been typified by certain elements. Weber coins the methodology as the “ideal” type. “Strangers” fall into the social categories whereas “flaneurs” fall into the aesthetic categories. Simmel has categorized strangers by the synthesis of remoteness and closeness.⁵⁰ In a sociological perspective, strangers are wonderers who stay in the city constituted by the synthesis of closeness and remoteness. I do not agree with Simmel’s view because Simmel seems to overlook strangers who are not constituted by the synthesis closeness and remoteness, and tends to focused too much on strangers in the city in a sociological view. In my view, strangers should go beyond the synthesis of closeness and remoteness and are perceived as the “others” who are opposed to the majority in society. “Others” are the marginalized figures, the minority. An example is woman, who is perceived as “other” of man under patriarchy. Women can be strangers in the eyes of men.

Similarly, the flaneur can be a stranger, insofar as the flaneur is the "other" in the eyes of the crowd. Unlike the fluid crowd in high mobility, the flaneur leisurely walks on the boulevard, with unique fashion and a tiny tortoise. The flaneur stands out as the "other" of the crowd, who does not conform to the high mobility of the crowd. The flaneur can thus be a "stranger." Similar to the notion of strangers that is open to interpretations, the notion of "flaneurs" has been decoded by Benjamin and Jenks differently. While Benjamin argues that the "flaneur" is restricted/limited to historical subjectivity as the spectacle of modernity, Jenks analyzes the process of retracing steps of flaneur on boulevard as a reconstitution of own psychic life. Sight precedes site. Vision conjures up a space of one's psychic life. Practically, it is quite true that the flaneur is limited to historical subjectivity, with reference to Benjamin. For example, the flaneur living out of the class of bourgeois cannot leisurely walk on boulevard with eye-catching fashion to catch others' attention. Yet, I agree with Jenks that the vision in the fluid crowd opens up a space for the flaneur to reconstitute his psychic life of city. How I interpret the notion of flaneur is that the flaneur could be anyone strolling leisurely in the crowd without any unusual or distinctive costumes and behavior. As far as the aesthetic strolling in retracing steps amid the crowd invokes the flaneur to plunge into the psychic artistic world, the flaneur could put the city life into pictorial poems. I would argue that the flaneur needs not to be physically present to stroll in the crowd to open up a creative space of his. Imagining himself leisurely loitering in the crowd, the flaneur could also trace back the steps he desires to conjure up the city life in pictorial poems. Hence, I would argue that imagination and aesthetic appreciation are two key elements categorizing the flaneur, rather than interpreting the flaneur in particular angles, like Benjamin and Jenks. Even though "strangers" from Simmel's concept could dress up like the flaneur in Baudelaire's text by monetary gain in the trade, and leisurely stroll everywhere in the crowd, strangers who have no imagination and aesthetic appreciation of the city can never reconstitute the city sentimentally and transform which into creative art. Money cannot replace imagination in arts, though money could financially support arts. City people cannot exchange money for imagination and creativity in arts in the money economy, but instead to "experience" the city life to be imaginatively depicted in the form of arts. This indicates that flaneurs are indeed particularly talented in creatively transforming what they have experienced in the city into arts.

To conclude, there are some similarities shared by both the strangers and the flaneurs, in which divergences occur by their different orientations in city life. Both strangers and flaneurs are absorbed into the crowd, in which strangers attempt to establish social relationships whereas flaneurs "see" to contact others. Constitutive of the "commodity" culture in the crowd, both strangers and flaneurs resort to their ways to protest against the money economy. "Drifting" has become significantly important in understanding their orientations in the city. Strangers fall into the social category whereas flaneurs fall into the aesthetic category. This creates the notions of "strangers" and

“flâneurs” which could be decoded differently. Nevertheless, the distinction of both social and aesthetic categories has implicated the following. The contradiction between modernization and modernism exists in modernity, as modernism, in the perspective of aesthetics departs from modernization, in the perspective of sociological changes.⁵¹ Cultural modernity is seemingly going against societal modernization in modernity. However, both strangers and flâneurs wear the spectacle of modernity to express the consciousness, the attitude of modernity through the city. This implies that both cultural modernity and societal modernization contribute to modernity in different perspectives.

Notes

- ¹ Georg Simmel, “The Stranger” in *On Individuality and Social Forms*, edited and with an introduction by Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 145.
- ² Simmel, “The Stranger,” 143.
- ³ Simmel, “The Stranger,” 146.
- ⁴ Simmel, “The Stranger,” 145.
- ⁵ Charles Baudelaire, “The Crowds,” Line 6 in *The Flowers of Evil*, Ed. Marthiel and Jackson Mathews, New York: New Directions, 1989.
- ⁶ Baudelaire, “The Crowds,” Line 17 in *The Flowers of Evil*.
- ⁷ Chris Jenks, “Watching Your Step” in *Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), 146.
- ⁸ Jenks, “Watching Your Step,” 155.
- ⁹ Simmel, “The Stranger,” 144.
- ¹⁰ Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” 325.
- ¹¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire” in *Charles Baudelaire, A Lyricist Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, translated from the German by Harry Zohn (London : NLB, 1973), 48.
- ¹² Simmel, “The Stranger,” 146.
- ¹³ Simmel, “The Stranger,” 146.
- ¹⁴ Graeme Gilloch, *Myth and Metropolis : Walter Benjamin and the city* (Cambridge, U.K.: Polity Press, in association with Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 145.
- ¹⁵ Simmel, “The Stranger,” 147.
- ¹⁶ Benjamin, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” 48.
- ¹⁷ Benjamin, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” 48.
- ¹⁸ Benjamin, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” 48.
- ¹⁹ Baudelaire, “The Swan”, Line 7-8 in *The Flowers of Evil*.
- ²⁰ Baudelaire, “Loss of a Halo”, Line 4 in *The Flowers of Evil*.
- ²¹ Baudelaire, “To a Passer-by”, Line 14 *The Flowers of Evil*.
- ²² Simmel, “The Stranger,” 145.
- ²³ Simmel, “The Stranger,” 144.
- ²⁴ Simmel, “The Stranger,” 145.
- ²⁵ Benjamin, “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” 55.
- ²⁶ Baudelaire, “Crowds”, Line 2 in *The Flowers of Evil*.
- ²⁷ Jenks, “Watching Your Steps,” 150.
- ²⁸ Baudelaire, “To-a Passer-by,” Line 5 in *The Flowers of Evil*.
- ²⁹ Baudelaire, “The Eyes of the Poor,” Line 29 in *The Flowers of Evil*.
- ³⁰ Baudelaire, “The Eyes of the Poor,” Line 31-4 in *The Flowers of Evil*.

- ³¹ Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," 330.
- ³² Simmel, "The Stranger," 145.
- ³³ Jenks, "Watching Your Step," 153
- ³⁴ Benjamin, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," 53.
- ³⁵ Jenks, "Watching Your Step," 148.
- ³⁶ Baudelaire, "The Swan," Line 3 in *The Flowers of Evil*
- ³⁷ Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental life," 320.
- ³⁸ Simmel, "The Stranger," 145.
- ³⁹ Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," 332.
- ⁴⁰ Benjamin, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," 41.
- ⁴¹ Richard Lehan, "The Inward Turn" in *The City in Literature* (Berkeley & LA: University of California Press, 1998), 78.
- ⁴² Lehan, "Inward Turn," 79-80.
- ⁴³ Marshall Berman, *All that is solid melts into air: the experience of modernity*, (London: Verso, 1983) 139.
- ⁴⁴ Benjamin, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," 41.
- ⁴⁵ Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, 13.
- ⁴⁶ Baudelaire, "The Swan," Line 17 in *The Flowers of Evil*.
- ⁴⁷ Baudelaire, "The Swan", Line 21 in *The Flowers of Evil*.
- ⁴⁸ Baudelaire, "The Swan", Line 22 in *The Flowers of Evil*.
- ⁴⁹ Baudelaire, "The Swan", Line 28 in *The Flowers of Evil*.
- ⁵⁰ Simmel, "The Stranger," 143.
- ⁵¹ Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity—An Incomplete Project' in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983), 8.

Acknowledgement

I acknowledge **Dr. Esther Mee-kwan Cheung**, an esteemed scholar as well as my beloved teacher of the Comparative Literature Course "City as the Cultural Text" offered by the University of Hong Kong (HKU), for interestingly bringing the notion of the flaneur into the context of the City, stimulating me to write this essay. I am sorry that she passed away in February 2015, and this piece of writing is dedicated to her as a memorial recognition of her excellence in teaching in HKU. (<http://arts.hku.hk/news/remembering-esther-cheung>)

Copyright of Interdisciplinary Humanities is the property of Humanities Education & Research Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.