



Experience of the city: A Transformation of the Nineteenth Century Spectator

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Abstract

This paper investigates the city images during the nineteenth century through a historical survey of the nineteenth century spectator, *the flâneur*, and optical device, *the panorama*. The flâneur and panorama are considered two different approaches to the representation of a city. On the one hand the panorama offered a synoptic and totalizing apprehension of the city as a unified entity. On the other hand, the flâneur disclosed a field occupied by an observer within a city that is knowable only as the accumulation of multiple and diverse point of view. While the flâneur experienced the city as an open field of images and fragments, the panorama offered a view of the city as a unified entity yet represented an act of enclosure in its form.

Through the two approaches, the paper will attempt to review aesthetic conventions representing the images of the cities by inquiring into the role they offered the spectator, how they had influenced the strategies and tactics of architecture and city planning.

The paper will go through the rise and fall of the nineteenth century spectator of city life, the *flâneur*, to find the abstract and universal expressions of *flânerie* as a concept, a perception unique to the period as well as its reflection in the transformation of the city. Through a story of the flâneur and through an investigation of the panorama, the paper will address two different kinds of experience of the city to find a possible meaning in the relationship between the viewer and the viewed as well as the changing experience of the city during the nineteenth century.





294 หน้าจั่ว: ว่าด้วยสถาปัตยกรรม การออกแบบ และสภาพแวดล้อม
วารสารวิชาการ คณะสถาปัตยกรรมศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยศิลปากร

Through a story of the flâneur and through an investigation of the panorama, the paper will address two different kinds of experience of the city during the nineteenth century: *first* the city as an open field of series and fragments of images through the eyes of the flâneur, and *second*, the city as a unified entity through an enclosed form of the panorama. The paper will attempt to find a possible meaning in the relationship between the viewer and the viewed as well as the changing experience of the city during the nineteenth century.

The Great City of the Nineteenth Century

The nineteenth century view of *the city as a work of art* was an attempt to fulfill cultural and aesthetic needs shaken by the turmoil of progress, political evolution and pestilence that the period unleashed. A desire arose for pleasure and fantasy in the realm of aesthetics stands alongside yet apart from the realm of labor, work, politics. The spectacle of public spaces had begun to recompose certain parts of the city into scenic arrangement. But as the nineteenth century closed, the new experience of moving through the city tended to erase the traditional sense of pictorial enclosure as the cityscape was transformed.

In 1863, Charles Baudelaire published his famous essay, "*The Painter of Modern Life*." The theme of the essay, a perception unique to the metropolis of Paris at the time was an idea of modern life in the city. The artistic genius of Constantin Guys, a painter Baudelaire depicted, was his particular talent to capture the modern in everyday affairs, to extract the poetic from the fashionable, to arrest the eternal in the transitory and to present the "*presentness*" of the metropolis. His subjects were not academic ideas espousing deeds or events of the past, but contemporary themes drawn from the bustle of the city life. Baudelaire's painter was the flâneur, a spectator in the great city.

The great city itself was not a creation of the nineteenth century, but with its accelerating pace of life, its streets, shops, arcades and its tense standoff between bourgeois and proletariat values, the nineteenth century metropolis came to fulfill a promise if industrialization that had no parallel in history. For Baudelaire, life in the great city, full of stark contrasts between commercial excess and poverty, decorum and venality, possessed disorienting novelty and devilish glamour. The great city was electrifying and abounding in imagery, harboring secrets both sinister and sublime.





But as the nineteenth century closed, the allure of the great city became less seductive. Georg Simmel, in his essay of 1902 *“The Metropolis and Mental Life,”* painted quite a different picture from Baudelaire’s. For Simmel, the big city with its *“intensification of nervous stimulation”* resulting from *“the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli,”* posed for the individual the difficult problem of preserving his humanity. With its economy based on money and functional specialization, it objectified the individual’s role in society and made each person dependent on others. Punctuality and exactness became dominant behavioral attributes to the urban individual; private existence was reduced to impersonal matter of fact.

Another generation later, Walter Benjamin offered a survey of the metropolis from an advanced point in the process of alienation. In his essay *“Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,”* Baudelaire’s flâneur strolls the streets and arcades both aware of his modernity and deferential to his reification, humbly taking his part in a vast, surreal comedy. His hope and wish has been put on display in the marketplace; art has become almost totally absorbed by mechanization and divested of its roots in nature and craft. For Benjamin, by the end of the nineteenth century, architecture and the city has seen its ideology permanently altered. (Fig. 1.)



Fig. 1: Paris’s arcade of the 19th Century, as portrayed in Baudelaire’s *The Painter of Modern Life* and Benjamin’s *The Arcade Project*.





Open Field of the City: The Flâneur

Flânerie, the activity of strolling and looking which is carried out by the flâneur, is a recurring motif in literature, sociology and art of urban existence.¹ Originally, the figure of the flâneur was tied to a specific time and place; *Paris, the capital of the nineteenth century*. But the flâneur has wandered beyond the streets and arcades of the nineteenth century Paris. The figure appears regularly in the essays of social and cultural commentators in attempt to understand the nature and implications of the conditions of modernity in the nineteenth century.² On the one hand, the flâneur seems to be a figure specific to a Parisian time and place. On the other hand, it is a figure to illuminate issues of city life irrespective of place and time.

As the first half of the nineteenth century witnesses the rise of the flâneur, so the second half beholds the decline. By the time the Academie francais gave its official approbation to the term in 1879, the flâneur started to lose his distinction. The ideal city for the flâneur is a place of excitement that serves as a public space for communication and daily human contact. In the nineteenth century metropolis, the relationship between city dweller and the streets was translated into three dimensional built form. As the streets became the three dimensional phenomenon, both spatiality and physicality of the streets and its architecture became important. The treatment of the street at the face of the building alone would not create successful effect. As flânerie is related to the three dimensional phenomenon of the street, the life of the flâneur, from his prime to his retirement, can be seen as a reflection of the change in the physiognomy of the city, namely its planning and its architecture. The relationship between the change in the course of the flâneur's life and the transformation of metropolitan architecture cannot be considered in terms of cause and effect; one did not cause the change in the other. Rather, their existence developed through the course of time and the change in the society. They reflect upon each other, one could be seen as a representation of the other. And if the flâneur dies in the twentieth century, the question is what brought him to live in the nineteenth century.

The flâneur receives his famous eulogy in the prose and poetry of Baudelaire. By calling forth the poetic vision of the public spaces of the city, Baudelaire depicted his painter as a man for whom metropolitan spaces are the landscape of art and existence. His painter is a man who is driven out of the private and into the public by his own search for meaning. It reveals the tense and fluctuating relationship between





the painter and his participation in the public life of the city. The painter knows that he is a face in the crowd but that knowing sets him apart though he might appear to be a man like any other. In fact, if he does appear to be like everyone else, so much the better.

Walter Benjamin offered a survey of alienation in the metropolis in his essay *Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century*. Benjamin saw that the transformation of the flâneur's social place and social space in the arcade and street, with the development of the department store and Haussmann's grand boulevards, marked the decline of flânerie.³ When the streets became the grand boulevards more oriented towards the circulation of traffic rather than the pedestrians, the flâneur lost his city location, he moved indoors. The department store became the last hangout for the flâneur. Benjamin wrote:

If the arcade is the essential form of the *intérieur*, which is how the flâneur sees the street, the department store is the form the *intérieur's* decay. The bazaar is the last hangout of the flâneur. If in the beginning the street had become an *intérieur* for him, now his *intérieur* turned into a street, and he roamed through the labyrinth of merchandise as he had once roamed through the labyrinth of the city.⁴

The space of commodification created by the department store radically modifies the individual's relationship to the city and to society, a space that abolishes the lines of demarcation distinguishing observer from observed and allowing the flâneur his distinctive status.

As the century progressed, the flâneur straddled the two world. The situation at the turn of the century was altered. Approaching the twentieth century, the electrifying modern life was gradually reduced to an impersonal matter of fact. Benjamin's argument is that the rationality of capitalism and, especially, commodification and circulation of commodities, itself defined the meaning of existence in the city so that there remained no space of mystery for the flâneur to observe. Capital imposed its own order on the metropolis. The hollowness of the commodity form and the hollowness of the egoistic individuals of capitalism were reflected in the flâneur. Flânerie is predicated on the possibility that there might be secrets to be imputed to things. Administrative rationality destroys that possibility. In other words, with rationalization of space in the city, all mystery is removed. The meaning and the order of things were established in advance which makes flânerie less possible.



Cities and Enclosures: The Panoramas

While on the one hand, the flâneur experienced the city as an open field full of series of images sometimes fragmented and chaotic, on the other hand, there was also an invention of the nineteenth century that offered a view of the city as unified entity yet enclosed, the *panorama*.

Stephan Oettermann stated in his historical survey of the panorama that the one-hundred-year history of the panorama coincides almost exactly with the nineteenth century.⁵ Robert Barker received a patent for his invention of the panorama on June 17, 1787. The panorama could only have been invented at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, and the only country in which it could have been developed into a practical reality was England, the country where the Industrial Revolution had progressed furthest.

It also appears as the embodiment in art of one peculiarly English phenomenon, namely “*enclosures*” The enclosure of public land contributed to the growth of urban masses on which the panorama depended, and the panorama re-created the phenomenon in its form. In Eric Hobsbawm’s description, “*Enclosures meant the re-arrangement of formerly common or open fields into self-contained private land-units, or the division of formerly common but uncultivated land into private property.*”⁶

As a result of these changes, not only were large tracts of farmland turned into pasture, but also many small farmers whose holdings were not directly affected found themselves unable to compete with their much larger competitors. They were forced to sell their land and migrated to the cities.

After land reform, one might even see a parallel between the displaced farmer and the panorama visitor: the one was separated from the land by a fence, the other from a painted landscape by the “*false terrain*” and a railing. The construction of the panorama - which presented the landscape and the cityscape surrounding the observer as untouched because it was untouchable - represented the act of enclosure and idealized it at the same time. The experience of such enclosure was that, “*You have the whole before you, so fine and so near that you want to reach out before and touch it, but must refrain.*”





The first person to make the panorama a popular public attraction was Robert Barker, an Irishman and a painter. Barker went for a walk one day on Calton hill near Edinburgh, from which there is a splendid view of the city and its surrounding. Here the idea occurred to him to re-create this expansive view in a picture that would have a much wider angle of vision than the usual forty six degrees.⁷ His plan was to divide the horizon into equal sectors and sketch each stretch of landscape on a separate sheet of paper; the final sketch for the painting itself would then be obtained by placing all the single sheets together. In order to guarantee that the perspective and topography of the different sketches would match exactly, Barker envisioned a stand with a rectangular frame that would revolve above a fixed point. After one sketch was finished, the frame could be turned until the new stretch of landscape exactly adjacent to the first appeared. The procedure would be repeated until the sketches covered the full circle of the horizon; then the single sheets would be pasted together to form a cylinder, giving a viewer standing in the center the illusion of a landscape extending in all directions.

One of the popular themes was the cities. It offered a view of the cities such as London, Paris and Rome as panoramas. The visual appropriation of nature is the basic principle of panorama, and no art form of the time demonstrates it as clearly. After access to nature has been bought up by the propertied classes, the property-less are permitted visual appropriation in return of a small fee.

Eidometropolis

The Panorama of London

Thomas Girtin's great panorama of London was named *Eidometropolis*. In the *Eidometropolis*, Girtin was intrigued by the full range of atmospheric affects that could exist at one time.⁸ Girtin seems to have been concerned with a kind of visual truth. Despite the inclusion of factories and industrial smoke stacks - or perhaps because of them - the city is treated as a landscape. The panorama must have created a considerable illusion of reality, although this was probably less the artist's main goal than a concession to the public's expectation. (Fig.2, 3)



300 หน้าจั่ว: ว่าด้วยสถาปัตยกรรม การออกแบบ และสภาพแวดล้อม
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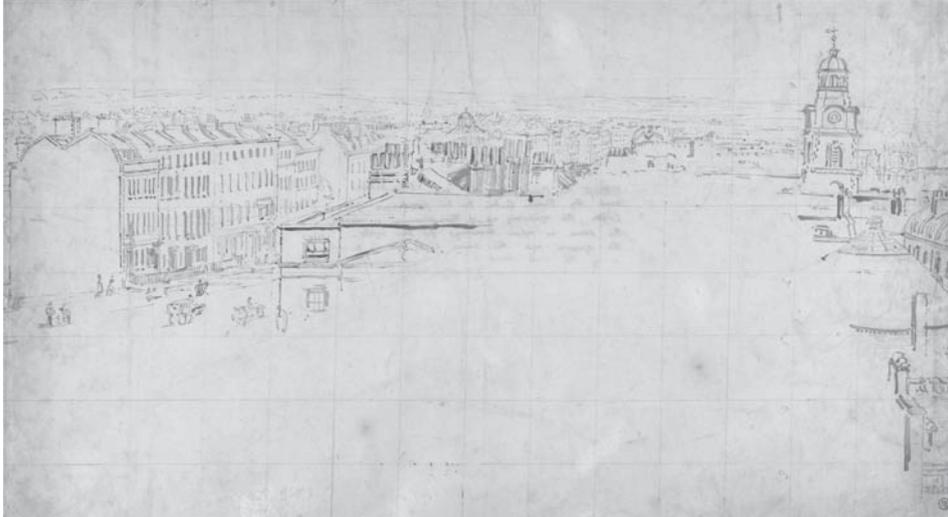


Fig. 2: Thomas Girtin's sketch for the Panorama of London

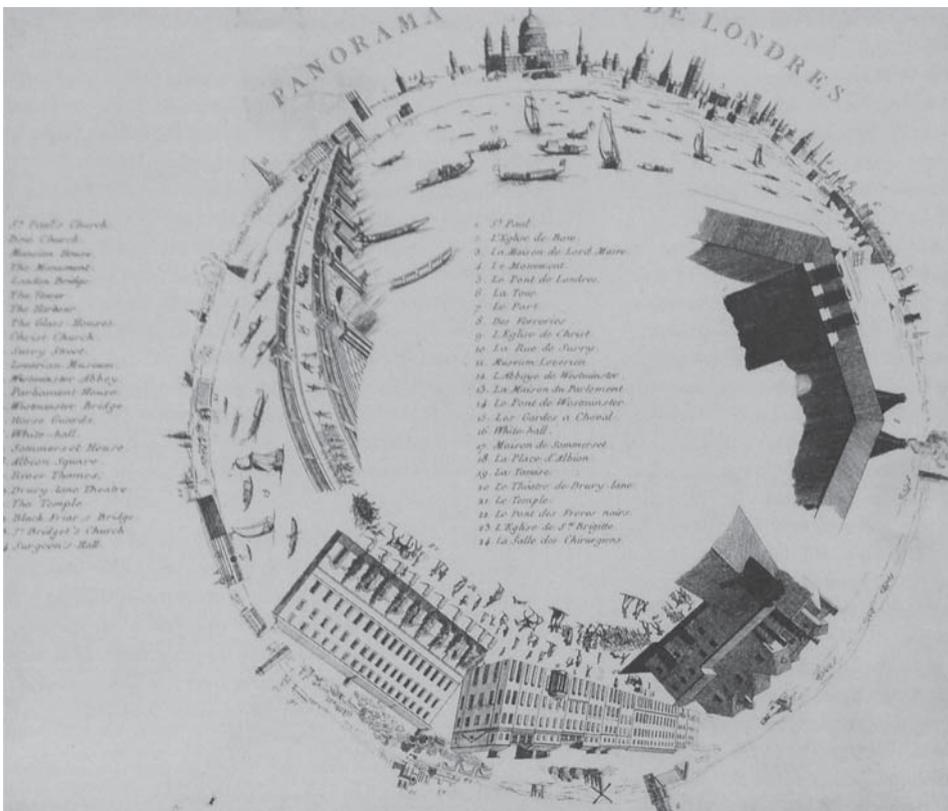


Fig. 3: Layout for Girtin's Panorama of London



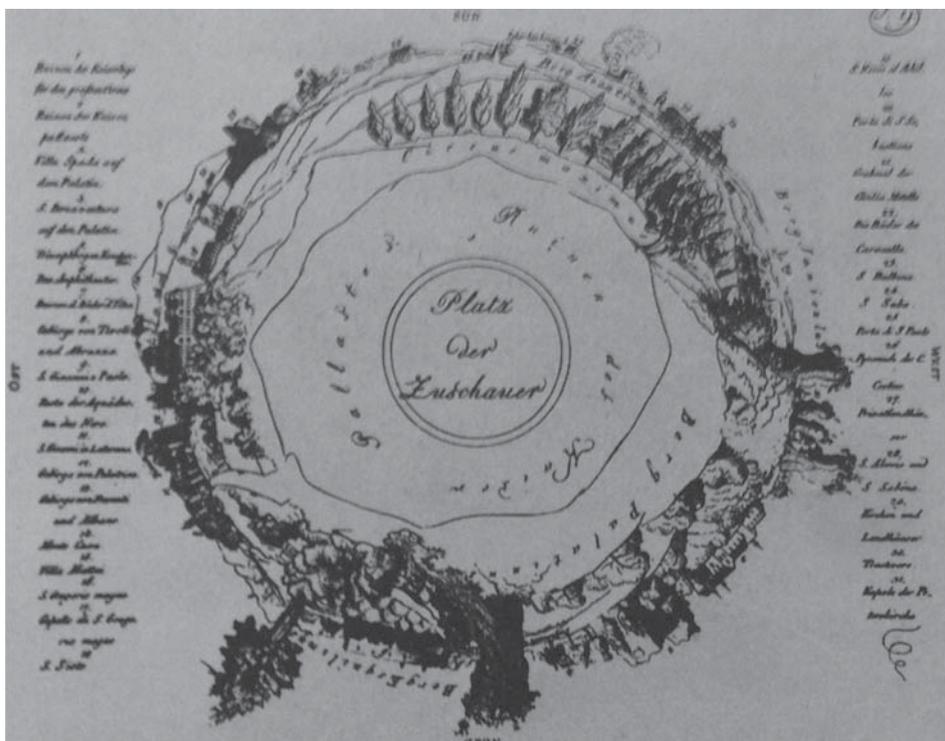


Fig. 4: Layout for the Panorama of Rome

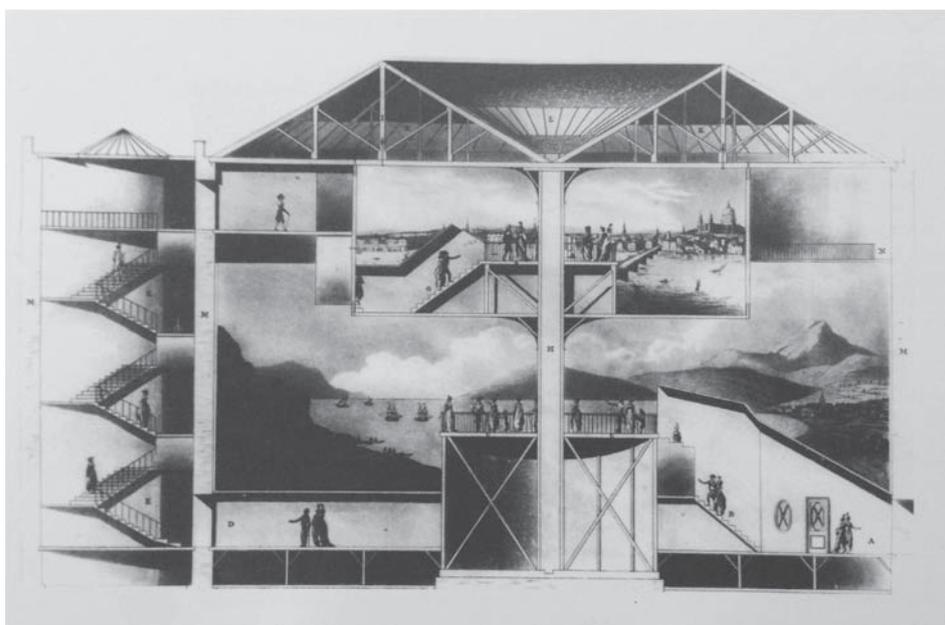


Fig. 5: Section for the Panorama of Rome





The Panorama of Rome

The First panorama seen in Berlin showed the city of Rome. Through a collaboration of Johann Adam Breysig, Johann Friedrich Tielker and Carl Ludwig Kaaz, a panorama of Rome was created. While Kaaz would paint the landscape, Breysig would be responsible for the architecture and calculate perspective. Kaaz had suggested a Swiss landscape, but Breysig soon persuaded them to use his sketches of Rome instead. The strict topographical accuracy of these sketches was a strong point in their favor. They decided to use watercolors and began work on April 10, 1800. The painting was completed by May 7, 1800 and covered an area of 2,350 square feet. In the meantime, Tielker had overseen the construction of a wooden rotunda in Berlin based on Breysig's design.⁹ Hence, the panorama of Rome was exhibited as a first panorama in Berlin. (Fig. 4, 5)

The basic aim of a panorama was to reproduce the real world so skillfully that spectators could believe what they were seeing was genuine. To achieve a perfect illusion, new techniques of painting were required, but above all a new environment in which paintings could be displayed. The painting had to surround observers and envelope them completely, so as to exclude any glimpse of their real whereabouts. An entire pictorial environment was created for visitors to pass through.

The panorama is the art form of the Industrial Revolution. It was the masses crowding into the new urban factories at the end of the eighteenth century who enabled the panorama to develop from an experimental art form into a mass medium. For the first time art and artists found a patron in the masses of the city. And panorama, in turn, was the first art form to attempt to fulfill the visual needs and desires of anonymous city dwellers, in both the themes that it portrayed and the manner in which it presented them.

Like the panopticon, the panorama was never ahead of its time; in their own way both phenomena perfectly reflect the economic situation and most progressive liberal thinking of their time. From this circumstance arises the paradox that the panorama became obsolete with its first appearance. It concealed its anachronism by reproducing itself in countless and seemingly new variations. In this way it continued for a century to meet the needs of a mass audience that had played no small role in its creation.





Notes

- ¹ Keith Tester. **The Flâneur**. New York: Routledge, 1994, p.10.
- ² **Ibid.**, p.1.
- ³ David Frisby. “*The flâneur in social theory.*” In **Tester**. Ed., p. 87.
- ⁴ Walter Benjamin. **Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism**, London: New Left Books, 1973, p.54.
- ⁵ Stephan Oettermann. **The Panorama: History of Mass Medium**, New York: MIT Press, 1997.
- ⁶ Eric John Hobsbawn, **Industry and Empire: The making of modern English society**, New York: Pantheon, 1968, p.80.
- ⁷ Oettermann, p. 99.
- ⁸ **Ibid**, p. 56.
- ⁹ **Ibid**, p. 196.

