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From the Kaleidoscope to the X-Ray: Urban Spectatorship, Poe, Benjamin, and *Traffic in Souls* (1913)

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for Yuri Tsivian

I. Modern City Scenes: Beyond the *Flâneur*

What men call love is a very small, restricted, feeble thing compared with this ineffable orgy, this divine prostitution of the soul giving itself entire, all its poetry and all its charity, to the unexpected as it comes along, to the stranger as he passes.

Charles Baudelaire "Crowds," *Paris Spleen*

Theorists of the representation of the modern city from Walter Benjamin to Dana Brand have used Edgar Poe's 1845 short story, "The Man of the Crowd," to describe the changing relation between the modern metropolis and the practice of urban spectatorship. In its complex treatment of the urban modes of visual observation, I believe Poe's story also offers us models for the archeology of the film spectator, modes of viewing that seem to have first been rehearsed within the urban environment. With only the bare bones of a plot, Poe's story circulates between three different spectator positions and modes of visual engagement with the city. The first comes as the story's narrator settles himself before a window of a London coffeehouse and observes the passing [End Page 25] crowd. He notes various urban types as they pass his window, as well as the change in the character of the crowd as evening comes on. Eventually, however, his detached observation ceases as the narrator is drawn into the street by a glimpse of a strange figure. The contradictory qualities of this figure's countenance, its inability to conform to any established typology, infect the narrator with "a craving desire

to keep the man in view--to know more of him." ¹ The narrator leaves his armchair and plunges into the now "dark yet splendid" atmosphere of a city night threatening rain, "resolved to follow the stranger whithersoever he should go." ²

The stranger he pursues, the eponymous "man of the crowd," pushes the narrator's detached and thoughtful observation of the passing city crowd into another register as the mysterious figure traverses the main streets and byways of London all night long in search of the energy and vitality of urban bustle. The old man's search, which provides the motive and trajectory of the final part of the story, has a pronounced air of desperation, as his own vitality seems dependent upon the proximity of others and of scenes of city life, his energy flagging as the crowds disperse, gaining life and elasticity as new locales of urban nightlife are encountered. As if a projected shadow of this figure, the narrator's immobile contemplation from his window vantage gives way to a furtive pursuit, transforming the image of the city into diverse locales, as the stranger leads him from the city center to outlying slum alleyways and then back again.

Brand has persuasively made a correlation between the three modes of urban spectatorship which appear in this story (detached observation; desperate search for sensation; and shadowy pursuit) and three urban types as described by Walter Benjamin: the *flâneur*, the *badaud* (or gawker) and the detective. ³ These three ideal types may shade into each other within the course of a narrative (as the narrator of the story moves from his reverie of detached *flânerie* to his detective-like shadowing of the old man), but they can also be morphologically distinguished. Within Poe's story the operative oppositions distinguish a detached act of observation (mediated by the large window), an actual pursuit motivated by curiosity and suspicion, and a complete submission to urban sights, a gaping wonder which is fueled by a voracious appetite for stimulation. For the narrator the city first appears as a surface that can be **[End Page 26]** watched, as well as read, from a single vantage point. As he observes from his window, the narrator fits the members of the crowd (according to details he observes of physiognomy or dress) into a variety of social classes and behavioral types. For the mysterious stranger the city exists as a locale to be endlessly and repetitively crisscrossed in search of excitement. As the narrator is drawn from his point of observation into a more elusive attempt to decode city types, the urban landscape becomes a site of mystery that must be penetrated to be deciphered. The unclassifiable figure impels the narrator into a detective-like act of shadowing. Following the stranger, he tries to remain unnoticed ("Luckily I wore a pair of caoutchouc overshoes and could move about in perfect silence. At no moment did he see that I watched him." ⁴), while anxiously keeping his quarry in clear view.

In recent writing about urban spaces and the cinema the *flâneur*, and his ambiguous female counterexample the *flâneuse*, have been used with great insight to explore the relation between the spectator in the city and in the cinema. ⁵ A more neglected figure, the *badaud* or gawker, may provide additional insights. Poe's story seems to chronicle a recognition that in the modern metropolis the detachment of the *flâneur* was giving way to a related but more powerful form of fascination. It is the gawking and desperate stranger that disturbs the *flâneur*-narrator's sense of the city landscape and impels him to adopt a detective-like mode of observation. The trichotomy of urban spectators allows us

to notice how unstable Benjamin's characterization of the *flâneur* in fact is. Although it has become synonymous with urban spectatorship (and indeed was so understood by Baudelaire and his Parisian contemporaries), for Benjamin the *flâneur* marked a transitional phase of modern urban geography, like the arcades in which he strolled, disappearing as Paris fully entered into modernity. While Susan Buck-Morss and others have convincingly argued that the *flâneur* persists as the *ur-form* of modern consumer society whose characteristics now thoroughly permeate our experience of urban spectatorship, ⁶ I think it is worth stressing the way the *flâneur* gave way to other avatars of urban experience, however much they may maintain a strong relation to their original archetype. **[End Page 27]**

Some key identifying marks of the classic *flâneur* disappeared with the acceleration of modernity. The *flâneur* flaunted a characteristic detachment which depended on the leisurely pace of the stroll and the stroller's possession of a fund of knowledge about the city and its inhabitants. As an observer *par excellence*, the *flâneur* attempted to assert both independence from and insight into the urban scenes he witnessed. Benjamin's famous example of *flâneurs* walking turtles on leashes stands as an emblem of the figure's unhurried pace, a practice which in a later world of increased urban traffic became, as Buck-Morss felicitously phrases it, "enormously dangerous for turtles and only somewhat less so for *flâneurs*." ⁷ Further, the *flâneur* classified the sights before him into more or less stable (even if ironic) categories. The early nineteenth century Parisian fashion for creating physiognomies and physiologies of urban types was for Benjamin the literary equivalent of the *flâneur*. However, as Benjamin stresses, this was a *petit bourgeois* genre offering limited insight, a literature of reassurance which sifted the shifting and potentially chaotic urban population into superficial stereotypes. ⁸ Poe's convalescent at his plate glass window exemplifies both the leisurely observation and the epistemological confidence of the classic *flâneur*. He displays, as Brand puts it, the *flâneur* "as domesticator of reality, aspiring to reduce it to a comfortable transparency." ⁹ The appearance of the man of the crowd disturbs the topology of the classic *flâneur*, however, by exceeding the *flâneur's* store of physiognomic and physiological types, pushing him into a state of "epistemological anxiety." ¹⁰ The man of the crowd stands as a new type, a modern figure upsetting the *flâneur's* urban topology and character typology.

Unfortunately, Benjamin never theorized the *badaud* as thoroughly as the *flâneur*. Its major characteristics are strictly opposed to those anti-modern aspects of the *flâneur* just noted. Benjamin relies on Victor Fournel to supply the essential contrast between types:

The simple *flâneur* is always in possession of his individuality, whereas the individuality of the *badaud* disappears. It is absorbed by the outside world [...] which intoxicates him to the point where he forgets himself. Under the influence of the spectacle which presents itself to him, the *badaud* becomes an impersonal creature; he is no longer a human being, he is part of the public, part of the crowd. ¹¹ **[End Page 28]**

The "gawker," then, has lost the *flâneur's* detachment. Like Poe's eponymous character,

he merges with the crowd rather than observing it from outside. He possesses no special knowledge which lifts him above those he observes. He has given up the elbow room so essential for the *flâneur*, ¹² and allows himself to be jostled and absorbed by the crowd, a part of it rather than its observing decipherer. Richard D. E. Burton (who associates the *badaud* precisely with the "*hommes de foules*" of the Second Empire, following Baudelaire's adoption of Poe's term) quotes Auguste Lacroix:

The *badaud* does not think, he perceives only the exteriors of things. There is no communication between his brain and his senses. For him things exist only superficially and simply; the human heart is a monolith whose hieroglyphics hold no interest for him. ¹³

But this lack of intellectual mastery combined with his intoxicated identification with the crowd also delivers the gawker from the nonparticipating lassitude of the *flâneur*. As Benjamin indicates about Poe's man of the crowd (disagreeing with Baudelaire's identification of this figure with the *flâneur*):

In him composure has given way to manic behavior. Here he exemplifies, rather what was to become of the *flâneur* once he was deprived of the milieu to which he belonged. ¹⁴

Therefore, transformations in milieu brought on by the accelerated pace of modernity seemed to resolve the urban spectator into two figures clearly opposed in their relation to viewing and knowledge: the *badaud* and the detective. Benjamin plotted this bifurcation in terms of activity and passivity:

In the *flâneur*, the joy of watching is triumphant. It can concentrate on observation; the result is the amateur detective. Or it can stagnate in the gaper. Then the *flâneur* has turned into a *badaud*. ¹⁵ [End Page 29]

II. The *Badaud* and the Kaleidoscope of Urban Attractions

From morning to evening and far into the dreaming night that street was a channel for a constant stream of traffic which, seen from above, looked like an inextricable confusion, forever newly improvised, of foreshortened human figures and the roofs of all kinds of vehicles, sending into the upper air another confusion, more riotous and complicated, of noises, dust and smells, all of it enveloped and penetrated by a flood of light which the multitudinous objects in the street scattered, carried off and again busily brought back, with the effect as palpable to the dazzled eye as if a glass roof stretched over the street were being violently smashed into fragments at every moment.

Franz Kafka, *America*

While the sharply observing detective who keeps the crowd under surveillance and the manic sensation-seeking gawker who loses himself within the mob have little in common, the *flâneur* partakes of elements of both. All three were solicited by the modernizing city

as spectators in an environment which increasingly tied visual stimulation to commodity culture. This modern urban spectatorship was fostered by new entertainment industries purveying technologically achieved visual delights which culminated in the cinema at the end of the century. At the story's opening Poe's narrator assembles a number of elements of spectatorship in a manner that seems prescient of the cinema: the seated observer, the large frame of the window and the gaslights, "feeble at first in their struggle with the dying day," [16](#) but triumphant as night comes on. As theater historian Michael R. Booth has shown, in the first half of the nineteenth century these same elements transformed the visual experience of London, and were typical of both entertainment forms and the devices of urban commerce: **[End Page 30]**

...in combination with plate glass, gaslight afforded greatly enhanced opportunities for the display of goods in shop windows... Peering through a brilliantly lit rectangle of glass into a wonderland of attractive goods for sale was like looking into a peepshow or at a stage flooded with light behind a proscenium. [17](#)

Poe was well aware that the visual forms of commodities drew the crowds to the streets and kept these spectators thronging there long after dark. Among other places, the narrator pursues the mysterious stranger to a large and busy bazaar: "He entered shop after shop, priced nothing, spoke no word, and looked at all objects with a wild and vacant stare." [18](#) In Benjamin's commentary on this story he refers, with a conscious anachronism, to this bazaar as a "department store." [19](#) But Poe's comment that the stranger asked no prices places the bazaar as earlier than the department store's innovation of fixed and prominently displayed prices. [20](#) The stranger's nonverbal, entirely visual, behavior sets him apart in an era when bargaining and verbal interaction between customers and salespersons still dominated even the act of browsing. Benjamin's deliberate misidentification is canny, since the stranger's visual act of consumption is prophetic. Once it endorsed the act of "just looking," the department store became a primal form of the urban spectacle. Describing this transformation of consumer experience in the first department stores in France, Rosalind Williams has said:

...department stores were, and still are, places where consumers are an audience to be entertained by commodities, where selling is mingled with amusement, where arousal of free-floating desire is as important as immediate purchase of particular items. [21](#)

It was no accident that Dufayel, Paris's most elaborate department store at the turn of the century, included a "Cinematographic Hall" seating over a thousand spectators. [22](#) For Benjamin the department store is both the "last hang-out of the *flâneur*" and "the figuration of his end":

If the arcade is the classical form of the *interieur* which is how the *flâneur* sees the street, the department store is the form of the *interieur's* decay... If in the beginning the street had become an *interieur* for him, now this *interieur* turned into a street, and he roamed through the labyrinth of merchandise as he had

once roamed through the labyrinth of the city. [23](#) [End Page 31]

Although Benjamin does not state it here, it would seem that it was in the department store that the *flâneur* transformed into the *badaud* "with a wild and vacant stare," unless, of course, he was employed as a store detective like Zola's Inspector Jouve on patrol in the *grand magasin* of *Le Bonheur des Dames*, stationed in the vestibule, "grave, attentive, eyeing each woman as she passed." [24](#)

Decades before the cinema, urban experience and an emerging commodity culture had already carved out a visual receptivity into which the film experience crept like a hermit crab. As part of the modern emphasis on the act of consumption, this world of visual stimulus was designed to convert passersby into gawkers, and gawkers into purchasers, as the link between visual pleasure and a commodity culture was forged. As Booth phrases it, in nineteenth century cities:

...the elements of a rectangular frame of vision, a bright light, a viewer, and the varied objects of his view were common to daily life and entertainment...

[25](#)

One can find a model for this purely visual delight in a constantly changing spectacle irrelevant to the knowing gaze of the classical *flâneur* in David Brewster's philosophical toy, the kaleidoscope, patented in 1817. Through a simple arrangement of mirrors the kaleidoscope could produce a nearly infinite array of shifting symmetrical visual patterns, quite unrelated to any attempt at representation or any claim of typicality. Unlike other visual devices of the nineteenth century which claimed to supplement visual representation through illusions of realistic movement or three dimensionally (such as the phenakistiscope or stereoscope), the kaleidoscope provided a purely visual spectacle, the mechanical complement to the gawker or *badaud*. Brewster praised his invention as a labor saving art-making machine which would: "create in an hour, what a thousand artists could not invent in the course of a year." [26](#) The kaleidoscope's aesthetics were striking: it combined order and transformation by creating an aleatory and unpredictable movement within a highly structured visual composition and consistent frame. Further, it employed in concert what William Leach has proclaimed the heart of the emerging commercial aesthetic of the late nineteenth century, the mainstays of the shop window, "the visual materials of desire--color, glass and light." [27](#) [End Page 32]

In the nineteenth century the comparison of the ever changing urban spectacle to a kaleidoscope quickly became a commonplace. Baudelaire had in fact described the urban spectator as:

a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life. [28](#)

Decades later Conan Doyle described an urban stroll taken by Dr. Watson and Sherlock Holmes with this image: "For three hours we strolled about together, watching the ever-changing kaleidoscope of life as it ebbs and flows through Fleet Street and the Strand."

[29](#) The devices of commercial culture dedicated to attracting and dazzling passersby were frequently described as kaleidoscopic, as in a description of Manhattan department store windows in a 1892 guide to the city:

[They] present a perfect kaleidoscope of silks and velvet, laces and jewels, rich books and music, painting and statuary, rifles and racquets, confections and amber-like bottles, cloisonné and cut glass, everything imaginable for use or luxury massed in perfect affluence and displayed in the most attractive way possible. [30](#)

The city as spectacle displayed the same shifting patterns of color and composition as the kaleidoscope, a form of visual display needing only to be captured and commodified to become an actual commercial entertainment.

Thus, the first film shows fit smoothly into established patterns of big city visual entertainments. The success of the Lumière *Cinematographe* in Paris, London and New York, and a host of imitators in these and other cities, should cause no surprise given the previous popularity of a succession of visual entertainments from the panorama to the kinoscope. But what is somewhat surprising is the popularity, initially at least, of city street scenes in these first exhibitions. Nearly all early film shows presented a *mise en abyme* of audiences filling vaudeville theaters from busy city streets in order to see projected on the screen--busy city streets. Nor is exoticism the explanation of this fascination. While scenes of distant cities were popular (Moscow streets in Paris, Parisian boulevards in Moscow), early exhibitors' policy of projecting local scenes **[End Page 33]** was equally successful, with crowds merrily applauding moving images of familiar places.

The traditional explanation that early audiences would watch anything that moved doesn't explain this fascination. While early filmmakers, and the Lumière company in particular, did cover an encyclopedic range of subjects, they were carefully chosen based on a knowledge of popular genres or early reactions to the new apparatus. As Jacques and Marie Andre have pointed out, Louis Lumière considered the films with the *effect de foules* the proof of the unique visual quality of his new invention. Lumière announced with pride that with the *Cinematographe*,

the depth to which one can perceive objects in motion is not limited; thus we can represent the animation of the streets and public squares with a truly astonishing accuracy. [31](#)

This depth contrasted sharply with the rival Edison films shot for the kinoscope against the shallow dark walls of the Black Maria. Belgian film historian Livio Belloi has pointed out the way the Lumière cameraman takes on the role of the Baudelarian *flâneur*, staking out the movement of the crowd as its privileged theme:

Micro-movements of humanity, flux and reflux, postures and faces of anonymous passersby, fashions and finery of attractive women, children's pranks--such fugitive and transitory phenomenon provide the field for the

cameraman's gaze. [32](#)

As Belloi indicates, the Lumière city "views" fulfilled both aspects of the Baudelarian *flâneur*, functioning as a mirror reflecting the crowd's image as well as a kaleidoscope capturing the city's "abstract, moving and changing form." [33](#)

Film brought other technological transformations to the portrayal of the city than the accurate representation of the depth and movement of the street. Its very nature as a moving photograph meant that the random events of city life could be captured for all time. While this may appear as more of a concern for later historians and archivists, the act of fixing the motion of an urban scene so that it could be repeatedly reviewed was already vaunted as an attraction of **[End Page 34]** the new invention in an 1896 advertising prospectus for the Jenkins Phantoscope (one of the earliest American projectors) describing the fascination of their "Street Scenes":

Who has not watched the shifting, changing panorama of the streets? The hurrying to and from, the bustling crowd? And who has not said, "I would like to see this scene again, I would like to study its many interesting phases?" [34](#)

This bit of publicity is worth lingering over. It locates the fascination of the street scene in constant kaleidoscopic movement, and implicitly at least, in its random and unpredictable nature. The motion picture intervenes on this scene, not by organizing it, but by capturing it in a form which allows endless repetition, opening the way for a studied apperception. Instead of an evanescent and immediate experience, the transfer to film allowed the city street to become another sort of spectacle, one mediated by an apparatus.

The mode of reception invoked here unites two early visions of motion photography. The desire to "study its many interesting phases" recalls cinema's pre-history in the motion analyses of Marey and Muybridge. However, the images produced by these analysts of physical motion are notable for their abstraction, the elimination of the play of contingent background. In fact the black background of these early chronophotographs may have inspired the dark walls against which Edison shot his first films. But the street scenes embody another way of seeing the phenomenon of motion pictures. Instead of abstracting from a varied reality, street scenes gloried in the reproduction of a various and recognizable surge of life. By taking the motion picture camera out into the streets, Lumière (and presumably Jenkins) moved from scientifically controlled recording to aesthetic contingency. The study that Jenkins' Street Scenes invites seems to seesaw between the delight in kaleidoscopic movement of the gawker and at least some vestige of the *flâneur's* attempt to master the visual array through technologically aided observation, here relating more to the discourse of the science of motion analysis than the sociology of the physiognomies of the nineteenth century.

Even today one becomes mesmerized, like a nineteenth century *badaud*, by the interaction between the contingent events of the street and the precise **[End Page 35]** borders of the screen's rectangle. The lack of dramatic hierarchy in these early street scenes invites a different sort of gaze than the one we have learned from classical narrative cinema (but in some ways similar to perceptual skills called for by certain avant-

garde films). One must scan the surface of the image for various centers of interest using what Noël Burch has called a topographical reading. ³⁵ Once focused, however, the pleasure one finds in a face, a gesture, an odd mode of transport, a bit of architecture, gives no guarantee of being sustained. Further, these points of pleasure are simultaneous with other possible points of interest; one is peripherally aware of all one is missing. New centers of interest bob into the frame unexpectedly, while others depart beyond reclamation. The receptive spectator approaches these images with a global curiosity about its "many interesting phases," a curiosity that is being endlessly incited and never completely satiated. The street is filled with endless attractions.

However, the classically constructed spectator, confronted by films such as this, more than likely becomes bored. Staying with such an image demands too much energy and its pay offs seem too small. Attractions are not stories which organize and use up space and duration. Patterns of prediction and anticipation are irrelevant here. But I will avoid the ritualistic castigation of the classical spectator and his supposed passivity. As much as I love early cinema, I find moralizing approaches to film history too often to be professions of bad faith. The narrative processing of the film image provides its own adventures, along with its perils. I think it is important to valorize absolutely neither the *badaud's* capacity for amazement, nor the detective's searching out of enigmas and clues as models of an ideal spectatorship. Each has ideologically complicit aspects as well as utopian possibilities.

Clearly, however, the move toward a fully narrativized cinema could take the detective as one model for a classically conceived spectator, attentively observing the unfolding images for narrative enigmas, testing them with anticipatory schemata, predicting narrative outcomes and processing the image for its relevant narrative information and cues. The detective, unlike the gawker, is involved in reading and interpreting all he observes. Both the detective and the classical spectator of narrative cinema are trying to make sense of what they see, and both believe that this project is possible. **[End Page 36]**

III. Detective as Spectator: Mysteries of the Great City

Fourmillante cité, cité pleine de rêves,
Ou le spectre, en plein jour, raccroche le passant!
Les mystères, partout coulent comme des sèves
Dans les canaux étroits du colosse puissant

Charles Baudelaire, "Les Sept vieillards"

For Benjamin the transformation of the *flâneur* into a detective involves not only mastery of observation but also a penetration of deceptive appearances:

If the *flâneur* is thus turned into an unwilling detective, it does him a lot of good socially, for it accredits his idleness. He only seems to be indolent, for behind his indolence there is the watchfulness of an observer who does not take his eyes off a miscreant. ³⁶

Thus the detective dwells in a space in which the relation between signifier and signified is not immediate, but must be sorted out and uncovered, separated from misleading appearances, while he himself benefits from his own false appearance of idleness. Significance detours through enigmatic and deceptive guises and disguises.

This split between actuality and appearance appears both in the detective's apparent idleness cloaking an actual vigilance and in the miscreant he watches, alert for the moment in which he or she might betray themselves. Whereas the *flâneur* claimed ability to read the interior of character from the exterior of physiognomy, the detective has discovered the effects of disguise, both as a tool of his own surveillance and as the *modus operandi* of criminal behavior which must be seen through. As Brand puts it:

Living however in a generally malevolent and opaque urban environment the detective must develop different interpretive techniques than those of the **[End Page 37]** *flâneur*. It will no longer do to read histories of long years in a single glance.... In order to assemble his reading of the city the detective chooses as his text those elements of urban experience which appear as gaps in the reading of the *flâneur*. [37](#)

The hieroglyphics of the human heart which were of no account to the gawker must be deciphered by the detective through a labor which can not rely on set physical correspondences or stable social categories, but must, like Poe's narrator, exchange a secure vantage point of observation for a tiring pursuit through many locales in a dark and unfriendly night.

The detective's penetration of appearances draws on a long Western tradition of metaphysics and speculation about the relation between appearance and reality, from Alcibiades' comparison of Socrates to the figures of Silenus whose grotesque exteriors conceal images of Gods within, through to Kant's declaration of the inaccessibility of things in themselves. But in a narrower and more historically focused domain of investigation, the detective reflects recurring nineteenth century imagery of the city. Alan Trachtenberg discusses the oscillation in American writing in the late nineteenth century between an image of the city as mysterious and dangerous and the celebration of the city as an edifying spectacle. [38](#) John F. Kasson has put this duality in visual terms with his contrast between what he calls the "bird's eye view" and the "mole eye's view." [39](#) The bird's eye view was typified by the many illustrations of the city from an elevated panoramic point of view, "a cold distant grasp of the eye," [40](#) which produced a holistic and ordered sense of urban space. The "mole's eye view," on the other hand, "traced the dark and hidden tunnels of urban life," [41](#) primarily in the form of dangerous voyages, often nocturnal, into the slums and lower depths of the metropolis.

This oscillation in viewpoint recalls the contrasting positions of detective and *flâneur*. The image of the mysterious city infected pulp literature from Eugene Sue and George Lippard through the numerous other nineteenth century authors of "Mysteries of the City" sensation novels in France and the US, shaping the emerging detective genre. [42](#) This dark urban image had many sources, ranging from a conservative suspicion of urban

sites to more modern anxieties about alien populations crowded into new locations without shared **[End Page 38]** communal values. The city seen as an enigmatic labyrinth also took on new resonances as urban construction divided itself between a spectacle of exterior appearance and effective but enigmatic internal structures.

In the second half of the nineteenth century this hidden dimension of urban space became most visible (or most invisible) in the creation of a substratum beneath the city surface which supported the circulation of energy, communication and transportation, a subterranean network of "sewers, water mains, steam pipes, subways, telephone lines, electrical cables." ⁴³ This underground technological subcity excited curiosity (such as the tours of Parisian sewers) and flights of imagination (such as the underground literary fantasies Rosalind Williams has chronicled ⁴⁴). It also served as a metaphor for the subterranean world of urban underclasses, the city of dreadful delights which likewise excited the voyeurism of urban spectatorship in the form of explorations of the new city's "other half" by journalists and social reformers. In these explorations of the underside the city was conceived less as a kaleidoscopic spectacle than an enigmatic labyrinth which required knowledge, perspicacity, and cunning in order to be threaded by the detective-like investigator. ⁴⁵ The detective's gaze could no longer rest on exterior display but needed the penetrating power of the x-ray to bring to light the hidden meaning of the city. But as Trachtenberg demonstrates, the oscillation between spectacle and mystery also reflected the organization of the institutions of urban modernity, such as the department store, orchestrating a relation between technical underpinnings and public appearance which (like a theatrical spectacle) concealed the stage machinery behind a visible illusion:

The form itself of the early stores betrayed the calculation within the spectacle, a complex machinery of accounting and coordination, of stock keeping and purchase order, of hierarchy and control that lay behind the glittering facade, the ceremonial entrances, the bright interiors, all suggesting a kind of magical appearance of goods as if from nowhere. The front deployed available technology to further its illusions: electric lights, telephone lines between departments, pneumatic tubes, passenger elevators. Such devices provided a technical underpinning, the overt manifestations of a backstage system holding the entire structure of separate departments in place. ⁴⁶

The spectacle arranged to dazzle the gawker was partly designed to cloak **[End Page 39]** actual conditions of production and power. Although the detective more frequently served as the agent of property and legitimized power, a structure of mystery--or mystification--worthy of a great sleuth nestled at the core of commodity culture. The mystery that Marx located in the alienated form of commodities could call forth a detective-like investigation, a dialectical awakening from the *badaud's* absorption in the world of commodity spectacle.

The attempt to see through the facades of appearance to uncover an illegal traffic in commodities forms the center of one of the earliest and most powerful feature films which solicits a detective-like spectator for its suspenseful urban thriller plot, George Loane Tucker's 1913 film dealing with White Slavery, *Traffic in Souls*. Before we turn to this

masterpiece of early narrative cinema, I will return once more to Poe's story and the moment in which the narrator's *flâneur* stance gives way to the detective's furtive pursuit and penetrating observation. It is the illegibility of the stranger's features that prompts the narrator to leave his spectator's seat, but it is the hermeneutic challenge of penetrating to his not immediately apparent significance that propels the pursuit. As he ventures into the street, the narrator loses his visual mastery of the scene, and is confronted by an uncertainty of vision in which details are contradictory and surface belies depth:

...as he came, now and then, within the strong glare of a lamp, I perceived that his linen, although dirty, was of beautiful texture; and my vision deceived me, or through a rent in a closely buttoned and evidently second-handed *roquelaire* which enveloped him, I caught a glimpse of both a diamond and a dagger. [47](#)

Far from discouraging the narrator, this visual uncertainty piques his curiosity. We are in the realm of the detective whose gaze is aroused by the resistances it meets. **[End Page 40]**

IV. Big City Traffic: The "Occult Paths" of Prostitution

A travers les lueurs que tourmente le vent
La Prostitution s'allume dans les rues;
Comme une fourmillière elle ouvre ses issues;
Partout elle se fraye en occulte chemin,
Ainsi que l'ennemi qui tente un coup de main

Charles Baudelaire, "Le Crepuscule du soir"

George Loane Tucker's 1913 feature film *Traffic in Souls* holds a key place in American film history both for its role as one of the first successful feature films (six reels in the year when D. W. Griffith infuriated the front office at Biograph for having the temerity to shoot *Judith of Bethulia* in four reels), and for instigating one of the first widespread film controversies by setting off a series of films dealing with the controversial and scandalous subject matter of White Slavery (women forced into prostitution). But it also deserves to be recognized as one of the first American urban thrillers, a film whose editing and shooting style laid down modes of portrayal of the city still operative in cinema today. As such, *Traffic in Souls* provides a clear illustration of the film viewer/narrator as detective, as images of the city are scrutinized for their dark revelations. Ultimately the view of the city that emerges from this film brings us to the final aporia of the urban spectator, unable to trust or evaluate all she sees. [48](#)

In Tucker's film we soon learn the difficulties of reading the surface of the street. Instead of a constantly varied, kaleidoscopic spectacle, urban space has folded in on itself. This doubling of urban space involves more than a separation between the public space of spectacle and the private space of psychological drama. The commodity which is trafficked in here is unimaged and repressed, referred to only indirectly even in the film's title, "souls" providing a spiritual euphemism for carnal sex and the exploitation of

women. This traffic shuns the streets and circulates through alleyways and corridors, under the cover of deceptive appearances. Inspired by recent New York City investigations into White Slavery (the purported decoying of women into a coerced career of prostitution), Tucker's film seized upon one of the most complex images of big city deception. The image of women held unwillingly in the toils **[End Page 41]** of prostitution had obsessed the imagination of reformers and the public alike, nourished, as Edward J. Bristow puts it: "...on traditional American fears of the corrupt city, of well-organized conspiracies, ...and on anxieties about the liberation of women." ⁴⁹ The city appeared honeycombed with traps which unwary women could enter (the recently appearing nickelodeon among them) and find themselves prisoners of a world of violence and violation.

The open visible surface of the street and urban space stumbles here over the differentiation of gender seen through the lens of commerce, as the ambulatory masculine figure of the *flâneur* encounters an even more ambiguous counterpart. Recent feminist works on the *flâneur* have noted that the equivalent female term, "streetwalker," carries very different connotations from the male idler who possesses the freedom to roam the city streets. As Janet Wolff's pioneering essay pointed out, the *flâneur* was a masculine figure. A *flâneuse* did not exist, given that, "women could not stroll alone in the city." ⁵⁰ Beyond social strictures and possible dangers, a woman strolling alone risked being identified as a prostitute. As Susan Buck-Morss puts it:

I mean this: the *flâneur* was simply the name of a man who loitered; but all women who loitered risked being seen as whores, as the term street-walker, or "tramp" applied to women makes clear. ⁵¹

However, Anne Friedberg has argued that the *flâneuse* could be identified with the rise of female middle class shopping which appeared with the great department stores:

The department store that, like the arcade before it made use of *flânerie* itself in order to sell goods, constructed fantasy worlds for itinerant lookers. But unlike the arcade, the department store offered a protected site for the empowered gaze of the *flâneuse*. Endowed with purchase power, she was the target of consumer address. New desires were created for her by advertising and consumer culture, desires elaborated in a system of selling and consumption which depended on the relation between looking and buying, and the indirect desire to possess and incorporate through the eye. The department store may have been, as Benjamin puts it, the *flâneur's* last coup, but it was the *flâneuse's* first. ⁵²

How does the urban figure of the *flâneuse* correspond, then, to Benjamin's figures, **[End Page 42]** is she a streetwalker, a "working girl," or a middle class shopper?

Benjamin's dissolution of the *flâneur* of the early nineteenth century into the *badaud* and the detective provides further parallels. The desire of the *flâneuse* as shopper to incorporate what she sees seems more closely related to the *badaud* who merges with what he observes than the detached *flâneur*. And the streetwalker shares with the

detective an appearance of idleness which conceals a labor of waiting and sidelong glances. Yet as a commodity herself, the "good" circulated through the traffic portrayed in Tucker's film, she stands objectified, a spectacle rather than a perceiving subject, the site where issues of urban vision meet the darkness of the female body constructed as a commodity for male desire.

It is dangerous to reduce the possibilities of female urban spectatorship simply to shopping and whoring, restricting women either to the pursuit of commodities or to the offering of oneself as a commodity. In recent work focusing on London, Judith R. Walkowitz and Deborah Epstein Nord have traced the ambiguous position of the female urban stroller in the late nineteenth century. Walkowitz finds a number of figures besides the prostitute and the lady shopper taking to the streets, including the "hallelujah girls" of the Salvation Army, female entertainers, striking matchworkers, charity workers and social investigators. ⁵³ Nord emphasizes the attraction that the figure of the *flâneur* had for women writers in the nineteenth century, but also its contradictions, as the cultural construction of a woman as "to-be looked-at" conflicted with her role as spectator.

For women observers of the urban scene... femaleness itself constitutes an object of curiosity and subverts her ability to act either as the all-seeing eye or the investigator of public life. To see without being seen, or to be seen without becoming a spectacle is rendered impossible. ⁵⁴

As Nord indicates, disguises of different sorts are frequently employed by female strollers of the nineteenth century, from the cross-dressing costumes of George Sand and Flora Tristan, to the class masquerades of some social investigators. ⁵⁵ The *flâneuse*, therefore, participates in an extremely complex manner in the play of revelation and concealment that constitutes the visual terrain of the modern city. **[End Page 43]**

If we turn to the early twentieth century and the United States, further realms of public space were appropriated, but the city remained a contested terrain in which the woman's role as urban stroller was fraught with peril and ambiguity. Ben Singer's research into the rise of the American New Woman at the turn of the century reveals a broad attempt to claim a public sphere for women, including a new female version of the detective, the woman journalist. ⁵⁶ As Walkowitz states, "An ability to get around and self-confidence in public places became the hallmarks of the modern woman." ⁵⁷ Likewise, Miriam Hansen's description of the emerging cinema as a public sphere for women links women's new negotiation of the city streets with the growing exploration of leisure time by a new class of working women as well as the middle-class shopper. ⁵⁸ I believe that the sorts of urban female spectators described by Kathy Peiss who filled the nickelodeons, dance halls, and amusement parks of the turn of the century ⁵⁹ probably exhibit a range of characteristics, many of which diverge from the classical *flâneur*, and which may allow us to explore the sensation seeking *badaud* in a more positive light.

But it must be granted that a repressive patriarchal system offered diminished options for active public roles for women and that the images offered of female *flânerie* in press, literature, and film were more often tailored to male fantasies than reflective of reality.

City streets were often threatening to women who ventured onto them as shoppers, laborers, or even brave New Women. But the dangers of the street were also narrativized as cautionary tales, projecting masculine anxieties about women emerging in public spaces into scenarios of women who suffer for their public temerity, particularly the stories of White Slavery which claimed that unwary women walking along city streets might find themselves forced to walk them professionally.

The figure of the prostitute provided what Benjamin has called a "dialectical image" of the modern city, not only because, as he indicates, she is seller and commodity in one, ⁶⁰ but because she embodies and problematizes the oppositions **[End Page 44]** of revolt and enslavement, spectacle and observer, idleness and labor, desire and degradation. The sidelong glance of the streetwalker, her searching the streets at night for possible customers, recalls most vividly the behavior of Poe's man of the crowd. Indeed the uncanny quality of his behavior would be all too explainable if the gender were switched.

As Shelly Stamp Lindsey has shown in her penetrating research on the White Slavery film, the white slave panic and the narratives of capture and rescue which fueled it, served partly to castigate women for their increased presence in public places of both work and amusement, and--especially--to obscure the actual economic facts of prostitution. In its adoption of the detective genre, both the political and fictional discourse of White Slavery used mystification to obscure prostitution's actual social causes of poverty, underemployment, and sexist practices. As Lindsey puts it, "Dramatic rescues from cruel kidnappers are proposed, instead of the comprehensive social and economic reforms necessary." ⁶¹ Rather than truly serving as social x-rays, these narratives of the city's perils for young women provided distractions from the need for social reform.

In these narratives of urban dangers the open bustling squares of early street films, filled with constant and aleatory motion, have become the labyrinthine byways of an unfamiliar metropolis. The woman's failure as urban stroller is dramatized both in terms of her lack of the *flâneur's* intimate knowledge of the city and her constant and unavoidable visibility, providing an unconscious spectacle for sinister onlookers. In *Traffic in Souls* the cadets of the underworld prey on women who cannot find their way around the city. The entranceways to the city, the train stations and ports of New York, are patrolled by gangsters on the watch for unwary immigrant girls or women arrived from the country clutching addresses they can not interpret. Through misleading directions or bogus promises of employment, these victims are led into cul de sacs of crime, rooms with locked doors, and corridors guarded by tough guy pimps. Tucker's location shooting in New York converts the city into an unyielding backdrop to dramas of deception.

But the city has transformed rather than discarded its visual aspect. In Tucker's film the metropolis becomes a site of constant surveillance, especially **[End Page 45]** for women. As in the latter part of Poe's story, this spectatorship has become furtive, an act of concealed voyeurism, mediated by disguise and caution (e.g. the *caoutchouc* overshoes of Poe's narrator). The first street scene in *Traffic in Souls* shows the heroine, Mary, meeting her beau, police officer Burke, as he calls into headquarters from a street side callbox. He tries to kiss her, but she resists, pointing out a nearby African American

window washer. The officer calls to the worker, who good-naturedly turns his head, as the pair kiss. Although basically a comic scene, this incident sets up an axiom of the film: in the city all actions are exposed to possible observers situated somewhere off-screen.



This omnipresent surveillance, and its particular focus on vulnerable women, finds its most complex instance in a sequence outside Pennsylvania Station as an arriving country woman's bewilderment at her new environment is closely observed by the slavers. As one of the gangsters approaches the woman, he, too, is watched by a New York City policeman, who chases him away. This **[End Page 46]** rather creepy-looking pimp then alerts "Respectable" Smith, a silver haired, well-dressed tool of the slavers to follow the woman, gain her confidence and lead her to the slaver's den. Similarly, two Swedish sisters arriving from Ellis Island come under the baleful regard of a pimp disguised as a recent immigrant, who offers to navigate them through the city. They end up, of course, at the bordello, which deceptively welcomes them with a sign reading: "Swedish Employment Agency." For these women victims the city becomes a network of glances, this visual surveillance interacting with a strategy of disguise and deceptive appearances. Dazzled by the kaleidoscopic display of urban sights, these women lack the *savoir faire* of the *flâneur* or the detective's penetrating x-ray-like gaze needed to alert them to their growing entrapment.

In the detective story that emerges with the growth of the modern city (and Poe, of course, is central to its development), a large measure of the detective's talent lies in his ability to see through disguise. The clue constitutes a rent in the fabric of deception which provides the detective with a glimpse of a different scene (like the dagger and diamond glimpsed through the stranger's overcoat). As Carlo Ginsburg puts it, "Reality is opaque, but there are certain points--clues, symptoms--which allow us to decipher it." ⁶² In *Traffic*, patrolman Burke first discovers the bordello when the "Swedish Employment Agency" sign makes an unwarranted appearance on his beat. Following a directive from headquarters to "make a complete investigation of all suspicious houses," he ventures in and uncovers the women held hostage (hitting, in the process, a pimp over the head with the phony sign).

Particularly during the turn of the century, the detective story frequently revolved around the surveillance and counter surveillance of police and criminals, with skillful disguise providing a major weapon (the eternal conflict of Juve and Fantomas, brought to the screen the same year as *Traffic in Souls*, provides a classic example, as does Lang's later duels between Mabuse and Von Wenk). But the technology of crime and detection, particularly in the

US, soon exceeded the theatricality of make-up. As Benjamin points out, the detective story fed upon anxiety about the difficulty of identifying known criminals in the new urban environments, an insight he derives partly from Poe's detective story "The Mystery of Marie Roget." Cities conjured up the **[End Page 47]** specter of an urban wilderness in which malefactors might be untraceable (and, in the accounts of White Slavery, where innocent victims could vanish as well--the opening title of *Traffic in Souls* claimed "50,000 Girls disappear yearly"). Facing the seemingly uncategorizable urban masses (as well, Ginsburg points out, as the "faceless" masses of colonized India), agents of law

and order devised a series of technologies to allow surveillance and identification, ranging from the Bertillon method of analyzing criminal mug shots to the classification of fingerprints. [63](#)



Technology also determines the final topography of the city in *Traffic in Souls*. Alongside its labyrinth of deception, up-to-date technology regulates the prostitution racket and assures protection from detection through a concealed means of communication. The king pin of the slave traffic, the mysterious "man higher up" never seen by the criminals who extort his profits from the prostitutes, is William Trubus, an apparently upstanding member of society **[End Page 48]** (who in fact heads an organization for the suppression of vice). He maintains his respectable facade not only by employing a go-between to conduct his business, but through a series of devices that allow him to keep tabs on his operation without being in direct physical contact. The go-between's office, where money is delivered by pimps and madams and orders are dispatched, is equipped with a Dictaphone microphone. Trubus sits in his private office on a floor above and listens to the day's transactions over headphones. The figures of income and expenditure are communicated to him through a primitive sort of Fax machine: anything the go-between writes in his office appears magically on a sheet of paper on Trubus's desk. Thus Trubus remains invisible, shielded by the sort of concealed conduits of communication that constituted the circulatory substratum of the new technological city or the daily business of the department store.

In turn, the police break through Trubus's system of deception by employing a similar technology of surveillance. Hired by Trubus as a receptionist, Mary accidentally discovers the Dictaphone hookup and realizes the real nature of his enterprise. She and Officer Burke prepare to get the goods on Trubus through an invention her father has perfected which amplifies sound and allows it to be recorded on cylinders. The mediated and secretive nature of Trubus's contacts with the underworld allows his system to be tapped without his knowledge. His technological network, which snakes its way through the city, falls prey to a counter system, similarly technical and clandestine.

Perhaps the most emblematic image of this technological urban topology comes when Mary discovers the Dictaphone headphones and overhears the flesh trade being conducted over it. Locating the Dictaphone wire and following it out the window, she descends the fire escape and traces it to the go-between's office. This act connecting those elements Trubus had tried to keep separate also marks the relatively primitive nature of this technology. The listening device still leaves a physical path that can be traced to reveal the actual relations of power and profit which technology strives to conceal. Within decades, of course, such tangible physical traces would be eliminated as the space of technology begins to abolish the need for urban proximity. Mary displays the detective's x-ray-like powers of observation, finding the **[End Page 49]** traces of what the miscreants have tried to conceal, while apparently engaged in doing something else. As a powerful image of female agency, [64](#) it is interesting to note that Mary conceals her powers of observation under the cover of work, rather than idleness, and that she gains access to the male world of the city as one of the new class of female clerical workers, rather than as a middle-class shopper (in fact, Trubus's wife is portrayed as a middle class shopper, spending the money her husband gains from his exploitation of

streetwalkers).

But in the turn-of-the-century metropolis, abstract relations were already replacing the more immediate ones of physical and visual contact. As George Simmel observed in his classic 1903 study of urban psychology, "The Metro- polis and Mental Life," urban life is ruled by such nontangible factors as money and time. ⁶⁵ Trubus's mediated relation to the slavery racket not only protects him from detection, it insulates him from the suffering women whom he turns into profits. After reading the figures transferred to his office, he tells the go-between, "Five hundred dollars was too much to pay for girl 364." Technology not only provides means of communication but aids the process of **[End Page 50]** abstraction and dehumanization, yielding in this instance the ultimate objectification of woman in the film, abstracted even from her role as visual spectacle, existing only as an integer within a scheme of profit and exchange value.



Simmel declared, "If all the watches in Berlin suddenly went wrong in different ways even only as much as an hour, its entire economic and commercial life would be derailed for sometime."

⁶⁶ In *Traffic in Souls* exact regulation of space and time marks both the methods of criminal exploitation and the devices of the film's editing and narration. The police raid on the slavers' den which provides *Traffic's* dramatic climax demands elaborate coordination of activities. Police cover every area surrounding the bordello before the raid, alleyways, doorways and roof tops, establishing complete mastery of space. Before the raid, Tucker shows the officers carefully synchronizing their watches. The instant of the raid is signaled by a sharp alarm on a police whistle. The police triumph over the criminals only through a technologically- aided and fully-planned control of space and time. Likewise Tucker's editing of this sequence shows masterful control of the unambiguous interrelation of shots, converging on a single action. **[End Page 51]**

The most powerfully omniscient co-ordination of space and time in *Traffic* occurs, therefore, on a filmic rather than a diegetic level. Tucker's editing style mimics the systematic surveillance practiced by both criminal and detective. Refining a technique Griffith developed in his late Biograph films, Tucker cuts freely through space, interconnecting a number of story lines. The film's portrayal of an urban topography comes less from its very effective location shooting than from the simultaneity of interacting and contrasting incidents within an interconnected space that Tucker's crosscutting reveals. For instance, early in the film Tucker intercuts the entrapping of the Swedish girls and the country women along with the interaction between the go-between and Trubus. As in Griffith, such crosscutting creates effects of suspense, as well as irony (e.g. cutting from the go-between collecting the day's receipts to Trubus at home arranging his daughter's betrothal). The cutting also undermines Trubus's separation from his business, by constantly connecting him with the go-between, his agents on the streets and life in the bordello. Linking event to cause, tracing patterns of control and their results, the editing sketches an urban entity that is more a system than a spectacle, imitating Mary's detective-like tracing of connections with its editing style.

This system cannot be seen, would not be visible, from any one vantage, but is plotted by the co-ordination of many viewpoints, a vast network, like the city itself. The urban

experience no longer dwells in the *flâneur's* observation of the spectacle of streets and squares, but is structured by the invisible paths of power and deceit. It is only when Mary plugs into this system, as she listens through her father's invention to Trubus's conversations and records them, that we feel that this system is in the control of any of the film's characters. For the most part the film's editing traces a sardonic figure of systematic entrapment, and infects the viewer with a constant paranoia. The position from which the truth of the city can be seen and organized is no longer that of human vision. It is a purely technological position which a human can occupy only by becoming subject to an all-seeing, all-hearing technology. And what this technology records is evidence of crime. **[End Page 52]**

Benjamin called "The Man of the Crowd," "the x-ray picture of a detective story." [67](#) The description is apt. The narrator's pursuit of the stranger goes on for nearly twenty-four exhausting hours. No crime is uncovered, no mystery solved. All that is established is the stranger's obsessive need of urban crowds, as he rushes through London searching for pockets of hustle and bustle. As he abandons his pursuit, the narrator at last classifies the stranger.

This old man, I said at length, is the type and genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. He is the man of the crowd. [68](#)

The stranger's crime is allegorized, rather than solved; the man of the crowd remains, in Poe's words, a "book which does not permit itself to be read." The man is not only Crime personified, but Enigma--enigma with no end to its unraveling, save exhaustion.

A more classical text, *Traffic in Souls* ends with Trubus's exposure and the destruction of his standing in society. The final image of Trubus' downfall, in fact, is an impersonal urban scene, bereft even of a human presence, a garbage can from which a newspaper telling of his disgrace protrudes. But the lingering sense of the film is less the victory of law and order than the establishment of impersonal systems of entrapment, both legal and illegal, a traffic which pulses beneath the city's surface, determining direction and circulation beyond our will or even our knowledge, a system which has its origin in the contradictory relation of the figure of the prostitute to the categories of visibility and urban space. We are left with this image cleared of people, focused on urban refuse. The city seems emptied out, only the residue of its drama and traffic remain. **[End Page 53]**

V. Epilogue: Invisible Cities

How far away the city! One would think that in its turn it no longer existed, had been dissolved, drowned in the rain which submerged everything...

Georges Rodenbach, *Bruges la Morte*

In space or behind it there is no unknown substance, no mystery. And yet this transparency is deceptive, and everything is concealed: space is illusory and the secret of the illusion lies in the transparency itself.

Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*

The visual presentation of the modern city remains paradoxical. On the one hand it exists as a festival of visuality, a spectacle of display, a delight to the all-eyes gawker. But as darkness descends, it unfolds its mysteries and visual understanding becomes elusive. The surface becomes a shield, an envelope which conceals a deeper and more sinister system beneath it. The kaleidoscopic display gives way to phenomenon that demands a gaze that is both more penetrating and less certain, the x-ray vision of the detective, based no longer on the *badaud's* simple visual consumption or even on the *flâneur's* repertoire of social types, but on a perspective alert for clues, anomalies, and singularities, signs that allow one to track down subterranean systems and pierce through the disguises and pasteboard masks of the city.

But the metaphor of the x-ray supplies a paradox for urban vision. While this penetrating vision may see to the core, it does so by rendering some things invisible, seeing *through* the cloaking tissue and flesh to more substantial structures beneath. This mode of vision contains a disintegrating violence. What if the city, stripped of revelers, the nighttime labyrinth of noiseless deserted streets that so terrified the man of the crowd, were all this vision could register? Is there an aspect to the modern city, with its subterranean system, that works against visual comprehension towards a more abstract mode of knowledge?
[End Page 54]

It is well known that the first draft of Benjamin's essay on Baudelaire (the draft in fact which deals most thoroughly with Poe's story and which I have most frequently quoted in this essay) was subjected to a detailed critique by Theodore Adorno which led Benjamin to rewrite his essay thoroughly. In his initial letter, Adorno's only comment on Benjamin's treatment of the Poe story consists of calling his attention to a Guy de Maupassant story "La Nuit" which he describes as "the dialectical capstone to Poe's 'Man of the Crowd' as cornerstone." ⁶⁹ Although Benjamin did not seem to respond to the suggestion, Adorno's reference provides another gloss on our central fable. His architectural metaphor becomes chilling when one reads Maupassant's tale as a modern culmination of the visual observation of the city, cloaked now in night and stillness, a city of architecture and streets rather than mesmerizing, energizing crowds.

Subtitled, "A Nightmare," Maupassant's story appears very much as a reworking of Poe's tale, but with a reduced cast of characters. ⁷⁰ It describes the nocturnal wanderings of its narrator who describes himself as "passionately fond of the night." He experiences nightfall as vitalizing, as the shades of night descend on the city "like some impenetrable intangible wave, concealing, removing, destroying all colors and shapes enfolding people, houses, great buildings in their imperceptible embrace." ⁷¹ Eventually, however, the wanderer loses track of time and finds the city increasingly deserted and unexplainably dark. The last people he sees are those emblematic figures of urban (especially Parisian) modernity, a streetwalker who propositions him and a ragpicker whom he asks the time. Anxiety giving way to panic, he calls for help, rings doorbells, and gets no response. Groping his way like a blind man, he reaches Les Halles, but finds to his astonishment even the central market of Paris, the site of nighttime unloading and deliveries, is deserted: "The place was empty, petrified, abandoned, dead!" ⁷² Terrified

by a dead world in which time seems to have come to a stop, the narrator descends to the Seine which is also almost dead, frozen, dried up. He ends foreseeing his own death there on the bank of the river unable to mount again to the surface of the city.

If this is the "dialectical capstone," not simply of Poe's story, but of the anti-nomy between the modern city and the alignment of sight and knowledge, it **[End Page 55]** must be because it takes the view of the city to its ultimate aporia, the dark, deserted metropolis, the necropolis. It conjures up the vision of the emptied-out city that Benjamin found so uncanny in the photographs of Atget:

Remarkably, however, almost all these pictures are empty. Empty the Porte d'Arceuil by the Fortifications, empty the triumphal steps, empty the courtyards, empty as it should be the Place du Tertre. They are not lonely, merely without mood; the city in these pictures looks cleared out, like a lodging that has not yet found a new tenant. [73](#)

Like Poe's story this emptiness provides a sort of x-ray of a crime story. As Benjamin said, "Not for nothing have Atget's photographs been likened to those of the scene of a crime. But is not every square inch of our cities the scene of a crime?" [74](#) The city which leads its own life without inhabitants provides the ultimate image of structures that, although man-made, have not only enforced dominance over him, but seem indifferent to his presence. The city as structure, as abstract ordered space comes into focus here, like the *momento mori* of the skeletal structure appearing on the x-ray plate. In this nightmare vision the detective sees too deeply--down to the structures that constitute the true criminal, like Trubus's systems of exploitation which are sure to outlast his own personal demise.

Soon after *Traffic in Souls* the cinema would discover the visual mystery of the empty city, with perhaps its earliest manifestation, as Yuri Tsivian taught me, in Eugeny Bauer's *Day Dreams* from 1915 (an adaptation of Rodenbach's *Bruges la Morte*, the ultimate symbolist invocation of the dead city), but becoming as well a signature scene in the city symphonies of the twenties (the opening sequence of Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera*, or the empty alleyways of Kirsanov's *Menilmontant*, for instance), and haunting such urban film noir as *The Naked City* and *He Walked by Night*.

But Poe's story also closes with a paradox of visuality. Just before he abandons the stranger, the narrator, who has been careful throughout not to attract the stranger's attention, suddenly confronts him and gazes at him "steadfastly in the face. He noticed me not but resumed his solemn walk..." [75](#) The man who has wished to appear invisible now seems to have literally achieved that state. **[End Page 56]** He can observe steadfastly and frontally, but he can receive no sign of recognition, no response to his existence.

Like the voyeuristic spectator of classical cinema, the narrator possesses perceptual mastery of the scene, but is impotent to affect it. This combination of apparent knowledge and actual impotence creates the classic scenario of paranoia, and of the cinematic thriller. The scene may be studied, but it can not be influenced. The urban

thrillers that begin with *Traffic in Souls* (and extend through the work of Feuillade, Lang, Hitchcock, and, of course, film noir) will tend to retrace this geography, inscribing within it a paranoid position for the film spectator, a gawker spellbound and merging with the spectacle he sees, a detective actively following the enigmas, the narrative traces, and, perhaps, potentially still a *flâneur* observing with both pleasure and detachment. But the representation of the city also undergoes a transformation from a visual festival to the ambiguous riddled grid, casting its shadow in the liminal zone between what can be seen and what eludes sight.

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Notes

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[1.](#) Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man of the Crowd" in *Poe: Poetry and Tales*, ed. Patrick F. Quinn (New York: Library of America, 1984), 392.

[2.](#) Poe, 393.

[3.](#) Two different versions of Brand's treatment of the Poe story have been published. The earlier is "From the Flâneur to the Detective: Interpreting the City in Poe," in *Popular Fiction. Technology, Ideology, Production, Reading*, ed. Tony Bennett (London: Routledge, 1990), 220-37. The second version forms part of a chapter of Brand's book *The Spectator and The City in Nineteenth Century America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 79-105. John F. Kasson treats Poe's story in a similar manner in *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 82-85.

[4.](#) Poe, 394.

[5.](#) The key works in this redefinition are Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map:*

Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), and Anne Friedberg. *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[6.](#) Susan Buck-Morss, "The Flâneur, The Sandwichman and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering," *New German Critique* no. 39 (Fall 1986): 104-05.

[7.](#) Buck-Morss, 102.

[8.](#) Walter Benjamin, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," in *Charles Baudelaire. A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1983), 35-36.

[9.](#) Brand, in Bennett, 225.

[10.](#) Brand, in Bennett, p. 224.

[11.](#) Benjamin, "Paris," 69. Benjamin quotes Fournel from *Ce qu'on voit dans les rues de Paris* from 1858.

[12.](#) Benjamin, "Paris," 54.

[13.](#) Richard D. E. Burton, "The Unseen Seer, or Proteus in the City: Aspects of a Nineteenth-Century Parisian Myth," *French Studies* XLII no. 1 (Jan. 1988): 59. Lacroix is quoted from *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* a work Benjamin mentions as an example of panoramic literature (see "Paris," 35).

[14.](#) Benjamin, "Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Age of High Capitalism*, 128. However, Benjamin's discussion of the mysterious figure in Poe's tale in the earlier draft ("The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire") of this essay seems to agree with Baudelaire's identification of the "homme de foules" and the flâneur, see p. 48.

[15.](#) Benjamin, "Paris," 69.

[16.](#) Poe, 392.

[17.](#) Michael Booth, *Victorian Spectacular Theatre 1850-1910* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 4.

[18.](#) Poe, 394.

[19.](#) Benjamin, "Paris," 54.

[20.](#) Rosalind H. Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteen Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 66- 67.

[21.](#) Williams, 67.

- [22.](#) Williams, 94.
- [23.](#) Benjamin, "Paris," 54.
- [24.](#) Emile Zola, *The Ladies' Paradise* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 215
- [25.](#) Booth, 4.
- [26.](#) Brewster is quoted by Jonathan Crary in *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 116. The closely-related comparison of city spectacles to an optical device would be to the phantasmagoria, a reference to Robertson's elaborate magic lantern spectacle of the late eighteenth century. See Richard Maxwell, *The Mysteries of Paris and London* (Charlottesville: 1992, University of Virginia Press), 16-17.
- [27.](#) William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 9.
- [28.](#) Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (New York: Phaidon, 1970), 9.
- [29.](#) A. Conan Doyle, "The Resident Patient," in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, n.d.), 424.
- [30.](#) Quoted from *Moses King's Handbook of New York City*, 1892 in Elaine S. Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 71.
- [31.](#) Jacques and Marie Andre, *Une saison Lumière a Montpellier* (Perpignan: Institute Jean Vigo, 1987). An extremely insightful treatment of the urban views of the Lumière Company can be found in a paper delivered at the Congres Internationale Lumière in Lyons, 1995, "Regard en ville. L'intervention Lumière dans la construction du paysage urbain," by Marco Bertozzi.
- [32.](#) Livio Belloi, "Lumière et la vue" paper delivered at the Congres Internationale Lumière in Lyons, 1995, p. 2 of typescript. I thank the author for making the paper available to me.
- [33.](#) Ibid.
- [34.](#) From the publicity catalogue for the Jenkins Phantascope, 1896.
- [35.](#) See, for instance, *Life to those Shadows* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 152-53.
- [36.](#) Benjamin, "Paris," 41.
- [37.](#) Brand, in Bennett, 233.

[38.](#) Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 101-39.

[39.](#) Kasson, 72-80.

[40.](#) Ibid., 73.

[41.](#) Ibid., 74.

[42.](#) On this genre see both Kasson, 74-76 and Maxwell.

[43.](#) Rosalind Williams, *Notes on the Underground: An Essay on Technology, Society, and the Imagination* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 52.

[44.](#) Ibid.

[45.](#) For an incisive account of the "urban spectator" exploring the world of the lower class in nineteenth century London, see in addition to Kasson, Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight. Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992,) esp. 14-40; for urban explorations in relation to documentary photography, especially Jacob Riis, see Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America 1890-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), esp. 1-46.

[46.](#) Trachtenberg, 133.

[47.](#) Poe, 393.

[48.](#) Although still not a film known to all, the literature on *Traffic in Souls* has become voluminous, particularly in recent years. A pioneer account can be found in Robert Allen, "Traffic in Souls," *Sight and Sound* 44, no. 1 (1975): 50-52. Treatment of its relation to the silent social problem film are found in Kevin Brownlow, *Behind the Mask of Innocence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990) and Kay Sloan, *The Loud Silents: Origins of the Social Problem Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Ben Brewster, "Traffic in Souls: An Experiment in Feature Length Narrative Construction," *Cinema Journal* 31:1 (Spring 1991): 37-56, provides a thorough and insightful analysis of Tucker's style in the evolution of early feature filmmaking. Two books, Janet Staiger, *Bad Women: Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995) and Shelley Stamp Lindsey, *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture After the Nickelodeon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming) place the film in relation to the White Slavery controversy and bring contemporary issues of women's historiography to bear in their analyses. Most recently Sabine Henke's "Urban Space and the Drama of Ethnicity: The Immigrant Scene in Fiction, Theater, and the Cinema, 1890-1915" has interesting insights about *Traffic* in terms of representations of urban space (forthcoming in *Cinema Journal*). Kino Video has released the film in an excellent videotape version which unfortunately lacks the final shots found in the National Film Archive, British Film Institute print analyzed here.

- [49.](#) Edward J. Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice: The Jewish Fight Against White Slavery, 1870-1939* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), 175.
- [50.](#) Janet Wolff, "The Invisible *Flâneuse* : Women and the Literature of Modernity," in *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1989), 148.
- [51.](#) Buck-Morss, 119.
- [52.](#) Friedberg, 37.
- [53.](#) Walkowitz, 45-80.
- [54.](#) Deborah Epstein Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets: Women, Representation, and the City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 240.
- [55.](#) Nord, 240-41.
- [56.](#) Ben Singer, "Female Power in the Serial Queen Melodrama: An Etiology of an Anomaly," in *Silent Film*, ed. Richard Abel (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 163-93.
- [57.](#) Walkowitz, 68.
- [58.](#) Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), esp. 60-125. Staiger also deals with the transformation of the woman's sphere in this period, as does Lindsey. Lauren Rabinovitz's forthcoming work on women, early cinema, and public space will also deal with this topic.
- [59.](#) Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).
- [60.](#) Benjamin, "Paris--the Capital of the Nineteenth Century," in *Charles Baudelaire*, 171.
- [61.](#) Shelley Stamp Lindsey, "Wages and Sin: *Traffic in Souls* and the White Slavery Scare," *Persistence of Vision* no. 9 (1991): 92. Staiger also reviews the contemporary debate on White Slavery in *Bad Women*, 120-28.
- [62.](#) Carlo Ginsburg, "Clues: Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes," in *The Sign of the Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce*, ed. Eco and Sebeok (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 109.
- [63.](#) Benjamin, 47, 48; Ginsburg, 108.
- [64.](#) Janet Staiger also stresses Mary's role as a powerful female character and role model for the New Woman, *Bad Girls*, 140.
- [65.](#) Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *On Individuality and Social*

Forms, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

[66](#). Simmel, 328.

[67](#). Benjamin, "Paris of the Second Empire," *Charles Baudelaire*, 48.

[68](#). Poe, 396.

[69](#). Theodore Adorno, "Letters to Walter Benjamin," in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 1977), 119.

[70](#). Guy de Maupassant, "A Night in Paris," in *The Dark Side*, ed. and trans. Arnold Kellert (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1989), 192-96.

[71](#). Ibid., 192

[72](#). Ibid., 196.

[73](#). Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1979), 251.

[74](#). Ibid., 256.

[75](#). Poe, 396.

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