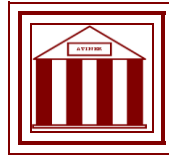


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**Speed/Walking: From the Flâneur to
the Ferrari: How the Acceleration of the
Modern City has Resulted in a Shift in
Urban Perception**

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PhD Student
Carleton University
Canada**

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Speed/Walking: From the Flâneur to the Ferrari: How the Acceleration of the Modern City has Resulted in a Shift in Urban Perception

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Abstract

The pace of modern urbanity is increasing at ‘breakneck’ speeds, as we move exponentially faster physically, technologically and virtually than ever before. Yet with all of the achievements that have come from this speed of modernity, and the pace at which it is moving, there has been a necessary trade-off. This has come in the form of a certain loss of our urban awareness, for how can we possibly perceive the nuances of the city when we are moving at rates that blur our ability to both see and fully comprehend our urban landscapes?

In order to understand how we have arrived at a place and pace of automatic urban movement, it is important to first understand the changing nature of the speed of the city and its impact on our perception of it. With the Parisian, urban walking practice of the Flâneur, as characterized in Louis Aragon’s *Paris Peasant* and Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project*, an appreciation for slowness gives way to social surveying and the ability to uncover the beauty and mystery in the seemingly mundane existence of the everyday.

Yet with Haussmann’s renovations of Paris, the arcades – home to the professional stroller – were to be largely demolished, paving the way for the grand boulevards and eventually the automobile. This break, from the arcade to the street, and from the pedestrian to the car, can be understood as a signifier of the modern city, and with it the loss of slowness in favour of rapidity.

This ultimately leads to Claude Lelouch’s 1976 high-speed, car-race short film, *C’était un Rendez-vous*, filmed on the streets of Paris, which explores a modern understanding of speed and its relationship to how we perceive the city. As will be seen, this acceleration of the pace of everyday life, and our movement through the city, has led to a change in our ability to perceive urban subtleties and ultimately the loss of a clear vision of the city.

Keywords: Speed, perception, city, the flâneur, Paris, Louis Aragon, Walter Benjamin, Baron Haussmann, Claude Lelouch, modernity, the everyday, slowness

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Introduction: Urban Wandering/Urban Wondering

“Man has delegated his activity to the machines. He has relinquished in their favour the faculty of thought. And machines certainly think. Indeed, in the evolution of this thought they go beyond the limited function originally envisaged. For example, they have invented the inconceivable effects of speed which so modify anyone experiencing them that it would be difficult, indeed arbitrary, to say that that person is the same as the one who lived in the world of slowness [...] There is an essentially modern tragic symbol: it is a sort of large wheel spinning and which is no longer being steered by a hand.”¹

– Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*

The speed of modern urban life is increasing at unprecedented speeds, whether in terms of current modes of transportation, such as high-speed trains, aircraft and personal vehicles, or the rate at which information is gathered, processed and disseminated. We are moving physically, technologically, and virtually at rates exponentially faster than ever before experienced, yet with all of the achievements that come from this technology, and the pace at which it is moving, there has been a necessary trade-off. This has come in the form of our own ability to perceive the city, as we are often no longer readily aware or acutely conscious of our surroundings, as we circulate through the city at a pace dictated by the machine. But in order to understand how we have arrived at a place and pace of seemingly automatic movements through our urban environments, it is important for us to first understand the changing nature of the speed of the modern city and its impact on our perception of it.

With the Parisian, urban walking practice of the Flâneur, “the figure of the solitary stroller who both records and comes to symbolize the emergence of the modern city,”² so characterized by Louis Aragon, Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, an appreciation for slowness gives way to social surveying and the ability to uncover the beauty and mystery in the seemingly mundane existence of the everyday.

Yet the character of the Flâneur was to be short lived, for with the renovation of Paris at the hands of Napoleon III and Baron Haussmann, the arcades – home to the professional stroller – were to be largely demolished or changed, paving the way for the grand Boulevards of the Second Empire, and eventually the automobile. This break, from the arcade to the street, and from the pedestrian to the car, can thus be seen as a signifier of the epoch of the modern city, and with it, the loss of the explicitly conscious stroll in favour of the machine. As such, this paper will detail the flâneur’s embodiment of speed, or rather its counterpoint of slowness, through a study of Aragon’s novel *Paris Peasant* and Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project*, as records of the threshold between that of the 19th Century and the modern city, and the human pace of walking verses that of the speed of the machine.

¹Louis Aragon. *Paris Peasant* (London: Ebenezer Baylis & Son Ltd., 1971), 132-133.

²Merlin Coverly. *Psychogeography* (Harpenden, Herts: Pocket Essentials, 2010), 19.

This will then lead to an analysis of Claude Lelouch's 1976 high-speed, car-race short film, *C'était un Rendez-vous*, which frames an understanding of speed and its relationship to how we perceive the built environment at varying rates, with the city of Paris being the common point of comparison for these opposing methodologies of movement, pace and perception of the city.

Ultimately, as Aragon will explain, it is because of this rapidly increasing speed of society, we have lost the ability to think, and that our thought processes have become out of control, as we no longer dictate how or what we think or see.¹ As will be concluded, this acceleration of the pace of everyday life, and to an even greater degree our movement through the city, has led to a slippage in our perception and loss of vision in regards to the city.

The Tortoise and the Flâneur

“And so away he goes, hurrying, searching. But searching for what? Be very sure that this man, such as I have depicted him – this solitary, gifted with an active imagination, ceaselessly journeying across the great human desert – has an aim loftier than that of a mere flâneur, an aim more general, something other than the fugitive pleasure of circumstance. He is looking for that quality which you must allow me to call ‘modernity’”²

– Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*

Having been originally characterized by Charles Baudelaire in his essay “The Painter of Modern Life,”³ the Flâneur has come to be defined as a predominately male figure⁴ who leisurely strolled through the crowds and arcades of Paris, collecting memories and notations of the lives, scenes, and events he observed. However, the Flâneur's role in literary and cultural theory is much more involved. According to Harry Francis Mallgrave, “Modernity for Baudelaire was in part represented by the flâneur, the urban stroller or idler who takes in the sensations and active imagery of the streaming metropolis with both a sense of thrill and dread over the accelerating pace of life.”⁵ For it was the pace of the Flâneur which most often defined him, with the slowness of the stroll being the tool which allowed him to be able to absorb all the subtleties of society and the city. It was even noted by Walter Benjamin that it was not uncommon to see a tortoise being taken for a walk in the 1830s and

¹Aragon, 133.

²Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life* (New York: Phaidon Press Limited, 1986), 12.

³Coverley, 20.

⁴Historically the term and character of the ‘Flâneur’ was only attributed to male characters, and for sake of clarity and consistency will be referred to with the male pronoun throughout.

⁵Harry Francis Mallgrave, *Architectural Theory: Volume I: An Anthology from Vitruvius to 1870* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2006), 516-517.

that, “this gives us an idea of the tempo of Flânerie in the arcades.”¹ Likewise, Aragon wrote, “How easy is it, amid this enviable pace, to start daydreaming.”²

For the purpose of this slowed pace of movement and imagination was to allow for one to perceive both the visible and invisible qualities of the everyday, transforming the mundane into the fantastical. André Breton best described this ability while recalling one of his many (psychogeographical) walks with Aragon, a flâneur himself. Breton states:

“I still recall the extraordinary role the Aragon played in our daily strolls through Paris. The localities that we passed through in his company, even the most colourless ones, were positively transformed by a spellbinding romantic inventiveness that never faltered and that needed only a street turning or a shop-window to inspire a fresh outpouring... no one else could have been carried away by such intoxicating reveries about a sort of secret life of the city...”³

Yet the demise of the Flâneur was ironically fast approaching, with Aragon’s *Paris Peasant*, written after the Haussmannization of Paris, acting as a “document of a city disappearing before his eyes.”⁴ Benjamin too noted in his text *The Arcades Project* that the city, most notably Paris, was becoming hostile to the Flâneur who was becoming “increasingly hedged in and barred from the streets.”⁵ This threat to the Flâneur, according to Baudelaire, was a direct result of Baron Haussmann’s reconfiguration of Paris, which sought to regulate the city’s previously medieval street layout, expropriating and removing many of the arcades as a result.⁶ However, while there were many historical, political and social reasons for Haussmann’s redevelopment of Paris, from military operations and nationalism, to sanitation and safety, whether directly or indirectly, Haussmann’s plan would in many ways bring about the death of the flâneur, and perhaps unknowingly at the time, eventually allow for the automatic automobile to move through the city. It is thus the ‘death’ of the flâneur which can be seen as the symbolic threshold between the conscious observer of the city, at the human pace of the foot, to the car, as it would come to triumph and parade down the wide and streamlined boulevards of Haussmann’s Paris. And it was with this shift from the stroller to the driver that a shift in the perception of the city occurred.

According to Merlin Coverley, the Flâneur was always to be a nostalgic figure, who, “in proclaiming the wonders of urban life, also acknowledges the

¹Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 422 [M3,8].

²Aragon, 94.

³Ibid, 9-10, Introduction by André Breton.

⁴Coverley, 75.

⁵Ibid, 65.

⁶Ibid, 61.

changes that threaten to make the idle pedestrian redundant,”¹ only being saved by the Surrealists. Among them, Aragon and Breton gave new life to this wandering character who was now “alive to the potential transformation of the city and engaged in [...] subversive and playful practices [...] facing] up to the destruction of his city.”² Thus it is only through the act of the flâneur being revived as a seemingly political figure, and the counter symbol to the rapidly changing and accelerating modern city, that he can continue to walk the passages of Paris, even if only as a ghost.

The Haussmannization of Paris and the Demise of the Stroller

“A great crisis is brewing, an immense disquiet taking shape as it approaches. Beautiful, good, right, true, real... so many other abstract words are crumbling into dust at this very moment.”³

– Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*

With the widening of the streets of Paris came the downfall of the flâneur, as modernity sped up society and perception attempted to keep pace. This can be seen in Mallgrave’s remark that, “Being ‘modern’ now takes on a certain polemical edge, and its translation into architectural terms is equally evident in the transformation and expansion of the city of Paris (through the creation of several new boulevards).”⁴ As previously discussed, Haussmann’s superimposition of a new master plan for Paris onto the existing urban fabric, constructed from the 1850s to 1870s, resulted in the expropriation, destruction and uniform reconstruction of much of the previously medieval city. While this historic urban event has been much analyzed and debated in terms of its affect on Paris and the movement towards modernity, it was the change to the circulation of the city that most greatly affected one’s perception of it. For while the new, and now iconic, architectural language it fashioned was aesthetically the most dramatic change to the morphology of Paris, it was the new routes and modes of circulation that allowed for these forms, in addition to the remaining portions of the city, to be perceived in a new way, from a new angle, and at a new speed – that of the car.

Benjamin also detailed how the renovation of Paris had an etymological affect on the perception of the city, as seen with the change from the use of the term ‘way’ to that of ‘street’. This was due to the fact that the term ‘way’ alludes to memories of wanderings, where as the word ‘street’ evokes no sense of passivity, for one who submitted themselves to the monotonous street was submitting themselves the banality of an endless stream of asphalt.⁵ In addition, Benjamin remarked on the change that these roadways had on the

¹Coverley, 58.

²Ibid, 58, 77.

³Aragon, 123.

⁴Mallgrave, 516-517.

⁵Benjamin, 519 [P2,1].

most common of things, that being conversation, noting that, “with the steady increase in traffic on the streets, it was only the macadamization of the roadways that made it possible in the end to have a conversation on the terrace,” without needing to shout.¹ Yet the effects of these new roadways would be even more far reaching, physically affecting the flâneur, as “the sidewalk, which is reserved for the pedestrian, runs along the roadway. Thus, the city dweller in the course of his most ordinary affairs, if he is on foot, has constantly before his eyes the image of the competitor who overtakes him in a vehicle.”² It would thus be the modern city that would bring about the car, and the car which would both figuratively and literally overrun the flâneur.

Aragon’s reflections on Haussmann’s Paris, however, were even more ominous, with his preoccupation with the changes to the city being a major subtext in *Paris Peasant*. This can be seen in his remark that the arcades had, “A glaucous gleam, seemingly filtered through deep water...” yet “the great American passion for city planning, imported into Paris [...] and now being applied to the task of redrawing the map of our capital in straight lines, will soon spell the doom of these human aquariums.”³ Aragon continues stating, “Paris is quite unpredictable. It seems possible, though, that a good part of the human river which carries incredible floods of dreamers and dawdlers [...] may divert itself through this new channel, and thus modify the ways of thought of a whole district, perhaps of a whole world.”⁴ Aragon often made the correlation between wandering and wondering, and strolling and surveying, and was acutely aware of the change in sensitivity that these renovations would bring to collective Parisian society. Modernity, and the accelerating speed of life which it brought with it, would forever affect the consciousness of Parisians, according to Aragon, who seemed to believe that it would not be possible to remain fully aware of one’s surroundings at the new speeds at which the city’s dwellers would eventually move through it along these new boulevards. The river of human circulation was flowing at ever-increasing speeds, and in new, wider streams, rendering all who got caught in its current helpless and eventually unperceptive.

For Aragon, the Second Empire represented “an unthinking municipality which [seemed] more concerned with widening the streets of its city than with preserving and encouraging a rare urbanity and gifts of courtesy that are rapidly vanishing from public places in Paris.”⁵ As such, Aragon chose to situate his account of the flâneur in an arcade set for demolition, perhaps as a way to freeze a moment in Paris’ history where the speed of society more closely matched the pace at which one could actually perceive the world around them. Thus, if we can surmise that for Aragon the speed of society was directly related to that of the street, with Haussmann’s renovations both were only to move faster.

¹Ibid, 420 [M2,6].

²Ibid, 433 [M14a,1].

³Aragon, 28.

⁴Ibid, 29.

⁵Aragon, 93.

A Rendez-Vous with a Ferrari

“Wandering through the countryside, I see nothing but abandoned chapels, overturned calvaries. The human pilgrimage has forsaken these stations, for they demanded a far more leisurely pace than the one now adopted. The folds of these Virgins’ robes presupposed a process of acceleration governing movement from one point to another [...] Here are great red gods, great yellow gods, great green gods planned at the edges of the speculative tracks along which the mind speeds from one feeling to another, from one idea to its consequence in its race for fulfillment.”¹

– Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*

With this new speed of modern Parisian society, the car was to become an ever-present object in the field of its urbanity. Through the use of his surrealist text, Aragon begins to signal this coming age of the automobile as he depicts the modern gas station as, “metallic phantoms [...] incapable of conforming to a living tradition like that which traced the cruciform shapes of churches [...] possessing just one long, supple arm, a luminous faceless head, a single foot and a numbered wheel in the belly.”² Yet half a century after Aragon’s *Paris Peasant*, the car would cement its relationship with Paris through Claude Lelouch’s 1976 short film *C’était un Rendez-vous*. Filmed illegally through the use of a camera attached low on the body of an alleged Ferrari,³ and driven at speeds well over the speed limit of central Paris, *Rendez-vous* provides insight into how one perceives the city at the speed of the modern machine. Driving from Porte Dauphine to Sacre Coeur in Montmartre, often through red lights and the wrong way down one-way streets, Lelouch’s film turns the city of Paris into a blur of colours and forms most focused along the periphery, as a typically twenty-five minute journey is undertaken in approximately eight.⁴ And it is this cinematic exploration of the effects of speed on our perception of the city that allows for a comparison to be made between the film and the character of the flâneur.

Such an assessment is made in Paul Krumholz’s essay on the film, entitled *Orienting Design, Discourse and Perception in ‘C’était un Rendez-vous,’* where he quotes Walter Benjamin as saying, “Couldn’t an exciting film be made from the map of Paris? [...] From the compression of a century-long movement of streets, boulevards, arcades, and squares into the space of half an hour?”⁵ For it was this task that Lelouch, whether knowingly or not, set out to

¹Ibid, 131.

²Ibid, 132.

³It has since been revealed that it was actually Lelouch’s person Mercedes which was driven in the film, with the sounds of a Ferrari’s engine dubbed over the footage.

⁴Paul Krumholz, “Orienting Design, Discourse and Perception in *C’était un Rendez-Vous*” (*Forum: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts*, Issue 10: Space/s).

Accessed April 20, 2013 <<http://www.forumjournal.org/site/issue/10/paul-krumholz>>

⁵Krumholz, quote by Walter Benjamin.

complete through his footage of Paris captured from the hood of his car. Yet, while this film is often cited as the first of its kind for street racing, the underlying themes of perception and speed in relation to the city, as observed through the moving images of the camera, allow this film to become a part of the discourse on modernity's affect on Paris and how we perceive it while moving through it.

Krumholz observes that through optical distortion, such as the low position of the wide-angled lens and its ability to frame the image, *Rendez-vous* creates the illusion that streets such as Haussmann's Avenue des Champs-Élysées are actually much wider than they are in reality, and seemingly adds to Haussmann's use of symmetry, repetition and visual unity.¹ However, *Rendez-vous* also works to disorient the viewer through blurred foregrounds, and a constant sense of movement and speed, "[depicting] the city as a wash of continually superimposing forms, simultaneously present as objects and palimpsests. In this way, the viewing body and architectural bodies assume multipresence, defying the principles of total order invoked by Haussmann's urban design."²

Yet while Aragon seemed to predict that the arrival of the car would be the telltale sign of the full emergence of the modern city, and with it an accelerated speed of society resulting in a loss in perceptive consciousness, Krumholz seemingly finds greater similarities than differences between the act of the flâneur and the experience of the automobile. Describing the flâneur as the "bourgeois walker who consciously and subconsciously engages the text of the city by strolling through it," and flânerie as, "passive but perceptive,"³ Krumholz seems to believe that both the film and the act of walking are as such champions of "the subjective urban experience,"⁴ noting that both *Rendez-vous* and the flâneur focus on the notion of the journey of moving through the city as a sensory experience without explicit direction. This is due in part to the fact that the driver in *Rendez-vous* does not take a direct route to his destination but rather follows a course that includes many of Paris' urban and architectural icons; an indication that Lelouch's film fully embraces the street life of Paris – "the flâneur's primary attraction."⁵

Yet this analysis may be more fully analyzed through a comparison of the film to Aragon's *Paris Peasant*, for as the full title (translated into English as "It was a Date") and the premise of the film (a man telling his girlfriend to meet him within ten minutes at a specific destination) suggest, the sense of this being a leisurely journey meant to explore the city consciously, seems improbable. This is also true of the fact that the driver would have had to have been so concentrated on operating the vehicle at such extreme speeds, especially within an urban area, that there would have been little chance to observe much of one's surroundings. It is only the viewer, with the opportunity

¹Krumholz.

²Ibid.

³Krumholz.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

to review the footage multiple times, rewinding, slowing down, and friezing frames, who can begin to experience, however remotely, a second-hand account of Paris. And it is this warped, distorted, and disorienting filmic view of the city that most strikingly indicates the almost incomprehensible reading of an urban landscape that one can obtain from the speed of the car, and symbolically, the machine of the modern city. Aragon personally wondered how anything could be interpreted at such rates of travel remarking, ‘At this hour, and at the speed our car was travelling, it would have been difficult to ascertain how many more opticians than usual were to be encountered in the Rue Secrétan between the Rue Bolivar and the Rue Manin,’”¹ suggesting one’s inability to truly see or perceive when under the effects of such velocity.

This can further be made clear through the highly detailed prose of Aragon, as already remarked upon, in comparison to the flattened images of *Rendez-vous*, where one can only see forward, and where no side street is made visible – the very place of the lesser known urban moments so beloved by the flâneur. In addition, while *Rendez-vous* would not likely have even been possible to perform in pre-Haussmannian Paris, it in fact makes full use of its effects, including maximizing the framed sightlines down seemingly endless boulevards through the steady gaze of the camera. However, the film also shows the great loss of detail that is unavoidable at such visual speeds, and removes any sort of tactile experience of the city, leaving only traces of flattened architectural forms and urban massings in an almost figure-ground relationship. Yet while both Aragon and *Rendez-vous* may be seen to be extremes of both slowness and speed, it is the pace of the human foot versus the rapidity of the machined wheel that is at the root of this comparison, with layers of the city only being made legible at the speed of the pedestrian and level of observation of the surveyor.

Conclusions: A Slippage

Surrealism had “the hope of transforming our experience of everyday life and replacing our mundane existence with an appreciation of the marvelous. In short, surrealism’s domain was the street and the stroller was a crucial practice in its attempt to subvert and challenge our perceptions. It is through this stated aim of reconciling the contradictory roles of everyday reality and unconscious desire that the [figure of the *flâneur* becomes...] a figure whose journey through the streets is both directed and transformed by the dictates of these unconscious drives.”²

– Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography*

¹Aragon, 150-151.

²Coverley, 73.

The significance of the work of Aragon cannot be understated in the understanding of the slippage that occurred in the collective consciousness of the city of Paris at the turn of the century, for “it was *Paris Peasant* that first drew Benjamin’s attention to the significance of the arcades and to the role of walking as a cultural act.”¹ Yet while Aragon’s flâneur, and Aragon himself, walked passively, they walked consciously, aware of the minute details of daily life, for according to Aragon, “however closely we approach the everyday it can never be close enough.”² It is this most basic notion, of raising our levels of perception and consciousness in order to increase our understanding of the daily occurrences and surroundings that makeup our urban existences, that is perhaps most riveting in the work of Aragon, with a challenge to change the way we ‘see’ the city and our interactions with it, and revealing in equal part the absurdity and intrigue that co-exist in our world. This need to look consciously at the city was ultimately true for Aragon who stated, “The world enters my consciousness gradually and intermittently. Which is not to say that it is given to me. *I have given it to myself* through a point of departure that I have chosen for it [...] tangible experience, then, appears to me as the mechanism of consciousness.”³

Through this paper, and the analytical comparison of Aragon’s *Paris Peasant* and Lelouch’s *Rendez-vous*, in addition to Benjamin’s observations on speed, modernity, and the city, it is clear that we are at great risk of losing an appreciation for, or ability to see, the nuances of our built environments or moments of urban interest, texture, and detail. The art of slowness has been run over by the rush of modernity, but it is most important to note that this has not only happened at the societal level of human circulation and interaction, but most significant at the physical level of the urban planning and material reconstruction of Paris during time of Haussmann. As such, if it can be concluded that our ability to perceive the city is precisely related to the speed at which we move through it, and that urban planning and design can directly influence the rate and ways in which we circulate within our cities, and the contemporary discourse around urbanism must take these matters into account. For we must ultimately decide if the modern city is truly one to be built for the machine or for the person, the speed of the sports car or the pace of perception. But how can we slow the “large wheel spinning” if it is, “no longer steered by a hand”?⁴ As the wheel of modernity continues to spin faster and faster, we have no choice but to open our eyes and look where we are going, and to design and build our cities accordingly.

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¹Ibid, 75.

²Aragon, 166-167.

³Aragon, 137-138.

⁴Ibid, 132-133.

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