

Paris and the Ethnography of the Contemporary World

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In a number of essays published over the past few years I have focused on my walks through Paris, attempting to produce a kind of 'ethno-analysis' that could also be understood as a self-analysis. In a way, I was asking myself questions I had previously been asking others, mainly in Africa; I was testing those questions, to see whether they really made sense for the only native at hand (myself, as it happened) and for others who shared the same environment.

Surprisingly, it turned out that I always answered these sociological questions in 'spatial' terms. Without actually intending it, I described a number of Parisian scenes, such as the open space of a garden (the Luxembourg) which my narrator traversed, paying attention to both personal concerns (his memories and fears, his health, his work) and the more or less aggressive incidents that took place around him.¹ Another 'space' was that of the Paris Métro, an underground and occasionally above-ground space, where the most private memories combine with those of a more general history, that is, history as it had been experienced by the more elderly passengers in the carriage (the German occupation, the Liberation, May '68), or history as commemorated by the names of the stations, which faithfully echo the streets and monuments above (Solférino, Opéra, Bastille).² Finally, I examined a partly imaginary space (a space, at least, always reinvented and recreated) of a photographer, Mounicq, who, in *Paris retrouvé* went through the looking-glass to show us the courtyards and gardens that facades and gateways usually steal from view, favouring the uncommon, uncanny, unreal aspect of objects or places that, at first sight, would not seem arresting to a lazy or pressed passer-by: a public clock, a fountain, a street-corner, a wet pavement.³

That intimate Paris is not entirely subjective; nor has it totally vanished from view. It still exists. It should not be reduced to the more or less distorted arrangements of imagination, memory and nostalgia. One can

still sense, in the various districts of Paris, a local patriotism that imparts to the word 'Parisian' a kind of metonymic quality. The 'true' Parisian belongs to a particular neighbourhood. Such a kinship is more or less ancient; it may be fostered by more or less artificial references to literature, or even be related to a class or status snobbery, but it does exist. You cannot feel and call yourself a Parisian if you do not feel, first, that you belong to Montparnasse, to the 13th or 16th arrondissements. Let me tell you a little secret, which, I grant, is no proof at all: a child of the 5th arrondissement from my early years, I have always considered my later years in the 15th as a kind of exile – a feeling I have never experienced elsewhere, even in Africa. Léo Malet might have been of some comfort if I had had to live in the 14th, and I cannot but think of Proust whenever I walk by the gardens that stretch from the Concorde to the Rond-Point des Champs-Élysées.

This 'village' quality can probably be found elsewhere, but it is particularly marked in Paris, and I am pretty sure that some of my American friends living in Paris, and faithful to the 6th arrondissement, would find an exile on the right bank as painful as I would. Its village quality makes Paris a *place*, or rather an agglomeration of places. I call a 'place' a space where individual and collective identities, as well as the relationship between people and the history they share, are so perceptible that anyone could read or decipher them. The ideal place, for an ethnologist, is naturally an island, or at least a village where tradition is so deeply rooted that each and every individual plays his or her own part; such is the ideal place for an ethnologist, who may think he will analyse culture from space and society from culture. Needless to say, this supposed coherence between space, culture and society is quite illusory, even if one thinks of the remotest groups on earth. In other terms, it would be too vague and generalized a statement, psychologically as well as sociologically, to speak of the *typical* Parisian or the *typical* Londoner. Yet an ethnologist is like every other man, he has and keeps his fantasies, even if it be consciously. He knows they exist at least as fantasies, and that, as such, they have a kind of reality. Those very same fantasies require that many Europeans (not only French) buy country houses (the richest of them buy 'historic' mansions) in French provinces where they were not born (such as the Dordogne or Brittany), but which they haunt long and lovingly enough to establish a mock-kinship with them.⁴

Yet the Parisian (including the Parisian ethnologist) does not live exclusively in his neighbourhood, with his memories and the illusion of village life. On the contrary, he is confronted day after day with the most

spectacular aspects of modernity. Parisian modernity could be defined as that active coexistence of various temporalities which Baudelaire described in a number of his *Tableaux Parisiens*.⁵ Nineteenth-century Paris combined smoke-stacks and old steeples; the Carrousel was (already!) a large building site, and Haussmann's rebuilding programme painfully worked its way through a city that wanted to secure both its past and its future. The glass and stone architecture of the Paris arcades seemed to Walter Benjamin a foretaste of the century to come; Jules Verne expressed a very similar view in *Paris in the XXth Century*.⁶

The ideal of modernity is still at work in Paris, by virtue of the same strategy, namely the introduction of a new element, at the core of an ancient pattern, which forces one to re-read and redefine the new whole thus assembled. The Louvre Pyramid seems to me, in this respect, quite modern, as was the Centre Pompidou in its day. The idea that different aesthetics can be brought together without annihilating one another, and that such a juxtaposition will create a new place, is in complicity with the ideal of modernity – which remains a social ideal. In the modern place people of various ages and origins meet and find a kind of aesthetic alibi for their presence together in the clash or juxtaposition of styles. In that respect, modernity is the contrary of segregation: in spatial terms, we might say both that it does not preclude the combination of genres and that it allows for every possible itinerary (including walking, as an expression of the freedom of wanderers and of what Michel de Certeau called 'pedestrian rhetorics'). However, I shall make two complementary remarks concerning this point. The combination of genres is not a patchwork, for it reasserts the historicity of each and every element it brings together, as well as implying the establishment of a meaning that transcends this connection. The modern place is still a social, distinctive and historical place; it is not a post-modern space. As for the circuits and the freedom of improvisation so beautifully expressed by the *flâneur*, in the modern place they mesh perfectly with both technique and technology. On the other hand, the *dissociation* between the means of transportation and the ways of communication (highways on the one hand, pedestrian streets on the other) brings about a new aesthetics and another logic, which are not those of modernity.

Let me say a word about the definitions I suggested in my book *Non-lieux* (Non-places) for the terms 'supermodernity' and 'non-place'.⁷ Supermodernity is characterized by the acceleration or enhancement of the determining constituents of modernity, and by a triple excess (of information, images and individuality), which, in the technologically

most advanced areas of modernity, creates the practical conditions for immediacy and ubiquity mentioned by Paul Virilio. Non-places are the contemporary spaces where supermodernity can be found, in conflict with identity, relationship and history. They are the spaces of circulation, communication and consumption, where solitudes coexist without creating any social bond or even a social emotion: one simply cannot analyse a waiting lounge in Roissy–Charles de Gaulle airport in Durkheimian terms.

Paris of course, like any other city, is affected by supermodernity – which can be of some interest for the sociologist, but may well alarm the *flâneur* and Parisian in him. First, Paris tends to stretch out in every direction, and in those remote suburbs (usually called the Parisian ‘region’) you will find supermarkets and shopping malls surrounded by highways. This space can also be defined by the style of its dwelling places (large apartment blocks on the one hand; detached houses on the other). More and more, we hear about the suburban districts and their problems, about ‘suburban youths’ and immigrants; here the social language and the spatial language seem to match perfectly, as they both tell of what looks like an exclusion or a segregation. Suburban districts are not non-places for those who live there, especially for the youths who claim they belong there because it is a place they cannot escape from, fostering playful and aggressive relationships with other districts, and more aggressive than playful ones with the police. Yet it is also in these zones, so poorly structured from an architectural point of view, that cheap hotels (such as ‘Formule 1’) will rise, next to huge warehouses or shopping malls, with no staff on the premises, where travelling salesmen or star-crossed lovers, provided they own a credit card, will find a functional and anonymous shelter.

Highways lead from the *Périphérique* to large airports, and at Roissy airport the RER (suburban railway), the TGV (high-speed train) and long-haul planes meet every day, while Paris becomes a mere destination or starting-point of a journey. Every morning, highways A1 and A6 are packed with cars, traffic comes to a standstill, bringing together, for minutes on end, people who have nothing to share: there, you will see profiles side by side, strained faces, eyes hypnotized by the more or less dazzling lights of the facing car. In this respect, the Défense area is an ambiguous place. On the one hand, circled as it is by highways running among the offices, shops and pedestrians streets, it is typically a ‘non-place’. On the other hand, the Arch of Brotherhood reveals and extends the ‘axis’ which, from the Louvre to the Etoile and beyond, crosses the

history of France and the space of Paris: it asserts itself right away as a significant place, as the expression of a myth.

The non-place is not only a space: it is virtually present in the gaze, which, too accustomed as it is to images, cannot see reality any more. The whole world is nowadays transformed into images and shows. This is particularly true in big cities: renovated housefronts, floodlit monuments, protected areas inexorably turn the city into a life-size stage set. Every night thousands of tourists, most of them foreigners, embark on huge steamers that, ironically enough, are called ‘bateaux-mouches’ (fly-boats); they cast a white light on the banks of the Seine, irradiating them with a somewhat obscene glare. Notre-Dame, the Ile Saint-Louis, the Louvre, the Zouave under the Alma bridge, and the smaller statue of Liberty are offered for a while, bit by bit, to the curiosity of onlookers. Paris coincides with its stereotype. We come full circle.

With a little optimism, we might consider it quite normal that the big cities of today should look like the rest of the world; their rapid spread also allows us to think that the world looks like a large city. And yet neither the city nor the world can be reduced to their most supermodern or stereotypical aspects; the city is, *par excellence*, a place of sociological diversity. Metonymic Paris (for instance, Saint-Germain des Prés, Montmartre or Pigalle) was always easily translated into images and songs; modern Paris allows for the most common commentaries (‘What do you think of the Pei Pyramid?’). Supermodern Paris might well frighten, tire, or even annoy us. Yet all of them manage to keep the particular magic of a word, of a name. I love Paris.

- 17 See Francisco Varela, who makes the distinction in *Autonomie et connaissance* (Paris, 1988).
- 18 Virilio links information and biotechnologies to Fascism and Nazi experimentation. It is translated by Julie Rose as *The Art of the Motor* (Minneapolis, 1995).
- 19 For Virilio, the Nazis urged for recourse to image and voice in order to manipulate and produce affect, not unlike what advertizing does today. A similar hypothesis of the fascism of the film industry – and of which we are a part – is developed by Deleuze in his writings on film.
- 20 This is what Jacques Derrida, among others, has shown in much of his work. See Anthony Wilden's *System and Structure* (London, 1970 and 1982) and, more recently, Christopher Johnson, *System and Writing in the Philosophy of Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge, 1992). Both justly point to the increased importance of writing and to the massive transformation of our societies from linguistic to scriptural.
- 21 See Kelly, *op. cit.*
- 22 This is where we could insert Certeau's analysis of the Indians in 'Politics of Silence', mentioned above.
- 23 A good case in point is Derrida. In North America he remains the *prosopopœia* of Deconstruction, whereas, in the writings from GREPH to *Du droit à la littérature*, including *Spectres de Marx*, the philosophy has a clear political edge and an implicit ecology. A nascent political dimension of the work, latent in *Positions*, seems increasingly resonant and, it might be added, no less pertinent to the issues discussed above.
- 24 As was manifest in the post-War resistance to the cultural quotas of the Marshall Plan and, more recently, to American film. This resistance underlies much of the New Wave cinema from Godard to Duras and extends to German cinema, such as the work of Wim Wenders.
- 10 *Marc Augé: Paris and the Ethnography of the Contemporary World*
- 1 See *La Traversée du Luxembourg: ethno-roman d'une journée française* (Paris, 1985).
- 2 See *Un Ethnologue dans le métro* (Paris, 1986).
- 3 See *Paris retrouvé* (Paris, 1992).
- 4 See *Domaines et Châteaux* (Paris, 1989).
- 5 'Tableaux parisiens' (Parisian tableaux) in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1861).
- 6 *Paris au vingtième siècle* is a novel by Verne that came to light recently and was published for the first time in 1992.
- 7 See *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London, 1995). For a discussion of my work on the ethnology of the modern world see Michael Sheringham, 'Marc Augé and the Ethno-analysis of Contemporary Life', *Paragraph*, 18, no. 2 (July 1995), pp. 210–22.