

ISSN:0976-8165



The Criterion

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

VOL. 15 ISSUE-2 APRIL 2024

15 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Urban Space and Traveller as Modern Flâneur: A Case Study of City Films

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11105907>

Article History: Submitted-01/04/2024, Revised-16/04/2024, Accepted-18/04/2024, Published-30/04/2024.

Abstract:

Before the concept of topography emerged, people used to think of space as a natural and unchanging phenomenon in which people lived and moved around. However, space is created by individuals in accordance with their needs and constraints, serving as a dynamic "matrix" for human behaviours such as engendering, citizenship, mnemonics, and nomadics. Henri Lefebvre, in his best-known work, *The Production of Space*, argues that "every society—and hence every mode of production—produces a space, its own space" (31). At the end of the twentieth century, a 'spatial turn' took place in the field of humanities as a protest against the age-long negligence of space in studying history. As a result of this revolution, researchers worldwide started linking space and place in their works from diverse disciplines such as literature, film studies, cultural studies, urban studies, geography, and history. The present study intends to explore urban spaces as portrayed in city films from the perspective of a flâneur. Flâneur is a vagabond who walks through the city streets as an observer of modern urban society. It was French poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire who established the concept of flâneur in the nineteenth century as a literary figure in his essay "The Painter of Modern Life." Unlike the tourist, the flâneur does not look for the famous sites of the city; instead, they search for something offbeat and strive to capture the "real" life of the city. This article attempts to locate the presence of flâneur and flânerie in contemporary society through the characters of the selected films. The paper also provides us with the scope to analyse the cinematic representations of cities in their particular regional, urban, diasporic, transnational, and postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: Urban space, Cityscape, Flâneur, Flânerie.

Introduction

The growth of cinema is intimately associated with the growth of cities around the world. With the advent of art and technology, there has been a transition in the craft of filmmaking. The urban street, the skyline, the bar—all these things were significant attractions in the early cinema. In the films of the 21st century, the moving train was emblematic of the shift in the perception of time and space in modernity. Charles Baudelaire came up with the concept of flaneur, i.e., a nomad known as a “flaneur” who is an observer of contemporary urban society as he strolls around the streets of the metropolis. In contrast to a tourist, a flâneur searches for unusual sights and attempts to document the “real” life of the place. Because of their propensity for objective but artistically aware observation, street photographers are known as flâneurs, a term that has emerged in the literature on photography. There is evidence of numerous films and events made as a result of the practice of city walking; the flâneur still exists in today’s society. The “street” in a contemporary city, which includes both the skywalk and the subterranean, is obviously different from what it was in a 19th-century city. The ephemeral nature of our globalised culture is arguably most evident in today's airports and train stations when flâneurs immerse themselves in the crowd. The city can occasionally appear to be the same everywhere due to how interconnected everything is, but flâneurs and flâneuses are instinctively drawn to what makes each place unique. He or she unearths less popular locations that city dwellers ordinarily ignore, take for granted, or never visit. Flâneurs develop a deeper awareness of their own space and time by investigating commonplace settings and modern society.

Review of Literature

There are many literary writings and research works done on the topic of ‘Urban Literary Studies’. Barbara Mannel in her book entitled *Cities and Cinema* portrays different genres of City films and its association with big cities like Paris, Berlin, Hong Kong, Los Angeles, etc. The book talks about the significant changes happened in the process of city film making and its on-screen representation by linking urbanism and cinema. It also shows how the role of city has moved from an iconic figure in national cinema to an important site for regular cinematic practices in transnational cinema. In his research article “The Communist Flâneur, or Joyce’s Boredom”, Patrick McGee describes the role of flâneur and its representation in movies. He also tries to find

out the image of flâneur in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. Enda Duffy and Maurizia Boscagli in their book, *Joyce, Benjamin and Magical Urbanism*, vividly portrays the works of James Joyce and Walter Benjamin's side by side and makes a comparative analysis between them. Both Benjamin and Joyce's works provide the experiences of urban modernity. In their work "Urban Space and Representation in Literary Study", Long Shi and Qingwei discussed the relationship between city and literary texts. This work talks about how the cities are represented in literary texts. From the above reviews, it is clear that no author or researcher wrote any book or thesis paper, particularly about exploring urban space in city films from the perspective of a traveller or flâneur. There are still many questions posed in urban literary studies which need to be answered through an analysis of city films. Some researchers talked about urban space and its representation in literary texts in general. However, no one had touched it from a traveller's or flâneur's point of view.

Theoretical Paradigm

Charles Baudrillard, a devotee of aestheticism in the nineteenth century, was given the concept of flâneur, which basically means to stroll aimlessly through the streets of a city and observe modern city life. The concept of flâneur has been theorized by Walter Benjamin as a modern adventurer who first appeared in nineteenth-century Paris and then in the early twentieth century. If we consider the lifestyles of writers like Henry Miller, Marcel Proust, and James Joyce, we can see that these people were flâneurs. They were wandering around the city and gathering inspiration for their writing. There is something about walking around and being lost in a city or urban setting. The experience of wandering around a city sharpens the gaze of a writer.

Both Joyce and Benjamin spent some years of their lives in Paris. Their love for the city and urban milieu can be seen in their works. The magic urbanism of Joyce and Benjamin is quite interesting. Joyce belonged to a middle-class Catholic family. His father was associated with a lot of different jobs. But he could never sustain his family smoothly. He was a drunkard and gradually became impoverished, as he had so many children to feed. Since childhood, Joyce has been greatly influenced by Catholicism. But Joyce found a rejection of religion too early in his life. Though Benjamin belonged to the Jewish bourgeois of Berlin, he too faced disdain from the dominant class. Joyce did not want to get hegemonized by Irish nationalism and his familial devotion toward Catholicism. But his rebellion was not only against the society, culture, and politics of his country

but also against his cancer-ravaged, dying mother. Soon after his mother's death, Joyce and his wife went into a self-imposed exile. The courage that they showed by rejecting their nation and national identities made them transfer all of their energies into observing urbanity from a multi-layered subaltern perspective. But unfortunately, they both failed to become 'flâneurs'. In his work, "The Return of the Flâneur," Benjamin talked about the return of flâneur in 1920s Berlin. He stated that Flâneur is a product of modernity. Benjamin's relationship with the city was quite ambivalent, and he applied the same condition to the figure of Flâneur. He used the word "phantasmagoria" in describing the relationship of the crowd with that of the 'flâneur'.

Midnight in Paris

Woody Allen's 2011 masterpiece *Midnight in Paris* portrays a Paris that has been represented in different lights through the eyes of flâneurs and vagabonds all over the world. Allen continues a long line of directors who have incorporated Paris as a quasi-principal character in their works, a recurring love interest with whom the audience engages in an implied and tumultuous love affair that lasts the entire duration of the film and possibly beyond. In Allen's film, Paris only lives in the phenomenology of the observer's experience, which is usually polluted and rendered fickle by an escapist impulse to run from the present in order to seek solace in a glorified, ideal past. In actuality, there is no real Paris that can be shared by everybody. Self-described flâneur Allen creates characters who are only dimly aware of their cultural limits and romanticizes foreign settings when traveling through a foreign country. Here we see the protagonist's journey from space to time. Gil travels to Paris, his favourite destination, for a vacation. He is a screenwriter who, since he is unsatisfied with the present, is mostly focused on nostalgia. He is engaged to Inez, but she entirely piques his emotions, especially about the literature that Gil is interested in. He is unsure whether to finish his debut book, which has nostalgia as its main theme, or to pursue a successful screenplay career. A friend of Inez's named pedantic Paul describes the man's condition as "golden age thinking," or the conviction that the past is superior to the present.

This film was primarily shot in Paris, portraying both the city's historic and contemporary aspects. The gorgeous Parisian landscapes are captured in the opening segment, setting the perfect visual tone for the entire film. Paris appears to be rather alluring in this scenario, which depicts it in warmer tones and in all its grandeur. A montage of lavish Parisian buildings on the sides of the

streets and lush vegetation at the confluence of the streets makes up the opening scene. On the central boulevards, cherry blossoms are in full bloom, adding to the city's characteristic backdrop of avenues and bustling traffic. A glimpse of Woody Allen's personal Paris is offered in *Midnight in Paris*, a film that uses music—the well-known, dulcet tones of the classic French chanson—instead of words to describe famous buildings and quaint cafés, damp streets and sparkling lights, and expansive views. In fact, the opening scenes of the film, which feature Paris as the beautiful and Paris as the silent object, nearly hypnotize our focus because they don't even employ words to explain the significance of the visual.

The opening montage of stunning photographs of Paris has been compared to the opening of Woody Allen's *Manhattan*, but without the director's voice adding his exaggerated and funny love for the city to those earlier pictures. Allen uses Cole Porter's music in this scene, presumably as a gesture to acknowledge his own muteness towards Paris and his failure to engage with the locals. In fact, notable historical and literary luminaries from the 1920s, notably Americans, are all around Gil in his night-time world. As the film opens with a sequence of scenes from Paris, it becomes clear that the colors have been altered to orange and green tones in an effort to represent the romantic idea that is associated with Paris. In films, most locations have a particular color associated with them, such as the neutral tones of America, the red colors of Mexico and India, the blue colors of Germany and Scandinavia, etc. Fascinatingly, the remainder of France is colored in shades of blue and white. The song “Si Tu Vois Ma Mère” is playing in the background, which is related to romantic ideas. The soprano saxophone is the primary musical instrument in this song.

The orange glow of the Seine and the on-going lights in the background take viewers to a lovely scene. The city's nickname, “La Ville-Lumière (The City of Lights),” derives from how monotonous the fine railings lining the streets became in the dimly lit city at night. Additionally, the radiant Eiffel Tower is in the background, with the car's cheers on onlookers. The opening montage of stunning photographs of Paris has been compared to the opening of Woody Allen's *Manhattan*, but without the director's voice adding his exaggerated and funny love for the city to those earlier pictures. Allen uses Cole Porter's music in this scene, presumably as a gesture to acknowledge his own muteness towards Paris and his failure to engage with the locals. In fact, notable historical and literary luminaries from the 1920s, notably Americans, are all around Gil in his night-time world. The Seine River, which connects the two sides of the city, is portrayed as the

city's center during the first few minutes, and cruise ships can be seen sailing past below as they pass beneath the Pont d'Iéna bridge. In the distance, several recognizable buildings flank the Eiffel Tower as it soars into the sky. The flats are covered in wide, protecting gable roofs, and the streets are cobblestoned and marvellously interwoven. In *Midnight in Paris*, there are a few places that offer vistas of the real Paris, making them standout locations. An important component of the love play program is the architecture. It has a distinguishable personality. The Notre-Dame de Paris Cathedral, the finest example of French Gothic architecture, the Louvre Pyramid, and the flamboyant Parisian flair on exhibit on the streets are just a few examples of the spectacular architecture seen in the film.

While strolling through the streets of Paris at midnight, our protagonist, Gil, encounters the strangest occurrence: an antique Peugeot car rolls down the street, and Gil enters the past in a very genuine way. He is transported back to the 1920s, when he grows to love the city even more and starts to realize his true potential. He travels back in time to Paris in the 1920s through a stunning chain of occurrences. It's as if he had to make his made-up nostalgia store a reality. Gil travels this route every night, passing renowned authors from the 1920s. The subsequent events—having a drink with Hemingway and whatever Salvador Dali is drinking—appear to be the author's weird dream. Gil travels this route every night, passing renowned authors from the 1920s. The subsequent events—having a drink with Hemingway and whatever Salvador Dali is drinking—appear to be the author's weird dream.

Someone else's distant past is another person's nostalgia. When he realizes this, Gil and Adriana have already travelled through time to the 1890s. Gil does not find the Belle Ideal interesting, much as Inez does not find the 1920s alluring, despite Adriana's assertion that they were the "golden age." It appears that golden age thinking is temporal agonistic and has endured because humanity has advanced to a point of critical thinking and has found the present to be unsatisfactory. Gil gets to know about his wife's relationship with Paul, which forces him to move on with his own life. Inez is a materialistic person who never cared for Gil's longings and love for the past or his sensitivities towards the lost generation of writers and artists. Gil gets rid of his illusion, understands that it is not possible to live in the past, and decides that he'll live in Paris and chase his dreams here. He takes a ride by the Seine River at midnight (which again makes him a "flâneur" figure) and meets the young French woman, Gabrielle, whom he had met earlier but

couldn't really get along with until this point. While walking by the river, both Gil and Gabrielle discover their love for the city of Paris, and they continue walking the streets in the rain.

Before Sunset

Before Sunset is the sequel to a trilogy titled “Before Trilogy,” directed by Richard Linklater. The films of this trilogy depict three different locations as they go deeper into the story with two main characters: the Peloponnese, Vienna, and Paris. American Jesse and French Céline enjoyed a brief twelve-hour affair in Vienna in the 1995 film *Before Sunrise*. Nine years later, in *Before Sunset*, they rekindle their love affair. Céline is now residing in Paris, while Jesse is in town promoting his most recent novel. *Before Sunset* is a travel guide to the city of Paris. A classic Parisian café atmosphere is there, complete with stacked wicker chairs and cigarette smoke encircling the coffee mugs. Authors like Hemingway and James Joyce once frequented the dismal, dusty bookstore, which is shown in the film.

The film begins in the Shakespeare & Company Bookstore, one of Paris' most well-known and recognizable establishments. Numerous other films have featured it, including *Midnight in Paris* (2011), another significant movie with a Parisian setting. At the bookstore, Jesse is promoting his book “This Time,” which recounts his and Céline's chance meeting in Vienna nine years ago. He is taken aback when Céline finds him and resumes their conversation. It is exactly the same place where they left off. The streets that Jesse and Céline stroll (which can be termed an act of *flânerie*) while reminiscing about the past are shown in the following locations: Directly across from the main street is the Shakespeare & Company Bookshop. Céline and Jesse find out on this street if anyone made it back to Vienna. The couple starts strolling through the streets of Paris when Céline suggests, “So you want to go to a café?” She says, “There is one a little further.” They walk for some time and finally find the cafe called “LEPURE CAFÉ.”

There is also an instance of a boat ride, as they go straight onto the banks of the river from the park. Their stroll through the streets of Paris on Rue Saint-Paul comes to an end with Céline making an eloquent speech about cheap labor and how the world is falling into pieces. She is a highly upbeat individual. The main characters go through a variety of emotions as they wander through the suburbs of Paris and observe the urban landscape in the modern city of love. It should

be emphasized that *Before Sunset* beautifully demonstrates how people's lives and behaviours, as well as the emotional journey of two people in love, may be influenced by their surroundings and a specific urban area. The two people's fresh and unrevealed feelings may have been greatly enabled and even pushed by the location's intricate physical layout and other factors. Since this is the case, it's important to comprehend how contemporary urban planning influences not just the locations in which people live and work but also a significant portion of daily life that either supports or obstructs how people perceive the world.

Paris inspired the two idlers to indulge in the city of love and to engage in this rendezvous after their protracted nine-year absence, during which they each lived their lives in a different nation. Both locals and visitors are encouraged by the urban setting to take walks and explore the city's attractions on a whim. Cities have an impact on how people live and develop because they are more than just places where people live physically. Both as subjects and as objects, a person and a city interact with one another. The sociohistorical background the city provides can have an impact on both an individual's personality and the collective character of society. Cities are the foundation of human existence; hence, it is important to underline the reciprocity of their connection. *Before Sunset* provides a compelling illustration of how one person can influence a society and vice versa.

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