

## The City on Display: Urban Aesthetics in the Digital Age

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Walter Benjamin—who considered himself as living in an information age as early as the 1930s<sup>1</sup>—delineates changes in aesthetic and poetic forms under the conditions of industrialized big city life. In his essay from 1939 “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”, he explicitly refers to technology as one of the main factors that influence this modification in perception, namely traffic, electric lights, advertising, and pedestrian crowds due to rapid urban growth. He states, “[T]echnology has subjected the human sensorium to a complex kind of training.”<sup>2</sup> In reference to Georg Simmel’s “The Metropolis and Mental Life”, Benjamin postulates a “protective eye”<sup>3</sup> that city-dwellers cultivate to shield themselves from excessive stimuli. The resulting tunnel vision and a blasé attitude renders impossible the kind of lyrical and leisurely poetic mode still possible in the countryside, and robs the urban poet-flaneur of his dreamy, distant gaze, forcing him to focus on the mundane task of navigating the city.<sup>4</sup> According to Benjamin, the novel is a genre that can be considered in itself an aesthetic response to processes of modernization, especially to the increasing epistemological importance of information.<sup>5</sup> By contrast to literature of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, 21<sup>st</sup> century novels are less about the effect of city traffic on our sensorium, but they reflect more on newer technological developments in digital technology such as Web 2.0. In the proposed project in comparative literature and philosophy of the city, I will focus on contemporary novels (from 2000 onwards) in languages accessible to me in the original: English, German and Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian.

I am not only interested in the perception of cities in the digital age, but also in the manner in which digital technologies are deemed as promising to realize less alienating, more participatory and sustainable cities of the future in today’s urban design. While the term “smart cities” is most widely used in this context, especially in the corporate context, I am primarily interested in discourses on “responsive cities” (a term used by architects and urbanists at ETH Singapore’s Future Cities Laboratory) and “senseable cities” (as introduced by the MIT Senseable City Lab). At least in their ideal form, these express a bottom-up notion of city planning in which researchers are interested in collecting data on citizens’ responses to urban landscapes in order to design cities that can in turn sense and adapt to these responses. This data is gathered from e.g. social media feeds or eye-tracking studies performed on pedestrians in order to design

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<sup>1</sup> Pericles Lewis, “Walter Benjamin in the Information Age?” p. 221.

<sup>2</sup> P. 328.

<sup>3</sup> P. 341.

<sup>4</sup> Pp. 340-1.

<sup>5</sup> “The Storyteller”, p. 99.

neighborhoods that respond to citizens' real needs and streets more conducive to a stress-free flow of urban crowds. In order to accomplish these goals, digital technologies offer unprecedented possibilities for analyzing and managing enormous data volumes ("big data") and enabling customized solutions in city planning. However, it is questionable whether such digitally optimized future cities would again afford the lyrical poet-flaneur's stress-free leisurely strolls, or whether they would be technologically determined to such an extent that it would be impossible to navigate them without the equivalent of today's smart phones.

The proposed project complements urbanists' and architects' empirical data-driven and statistical investigations with the study of literature. Of course, novels do not comply with standards of statistical significance, since the perceptions of cities they describe are usually those of fictional characters. Their epistemological potential is of a different kind. Art works, as Alva Noë has argued, are capable of "putting on display".<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Dirk Baecker has interpreted Walter Benjamin's critical work as centered primarily on art and perception: art is involved in complex processes of a "communicational addressing of perception [...]", namely "Art 'addresses' perception by stimulating all the senses—sight, sound, taste, smell, touch, and sense of space—and it communicates this address."<sup>7</sup> A work of art is not only itself exhibited, or displayed, but it also exhibits and displays hitherto elusive perceptions. It is an aesthetic object, but it also has *aisthesis* (ancient Greek: perception) itself as its object. Therefore, an artwork affords the scrutiny and public communicability of the hitherto unspoken, private sensations. For instance, a novel can be a tool—indeed, in Noë's terms a "strange tool"<sup>8</sup>, usually devoid of instrumental teleological entanglements—for a better perceptibility of today's urban life-forms and responses to the city. For instance, Zadie Smith's 2016 novel *Swing Time* displays the big city with regard to how current technologies modify and influence urban experience.

In the novel, there is an apparent binary between the mode of being in the countryside of a third world country—and the correlated reliance on interpersonal experience and exchange of intelligence—and the mode of being in a metropolis, with the latest technology at one's fingertips and the thus granted nearly omniscient, disembodied access to the events and venues in the city.<sup>9</sup> The plot of *Swing Time*, true to the novel's title, veers between London, New York and a small West African village. Major themes are differing space perceptions and modes of information gathering appropriate to vastly disparate terrains: globalized 21<sup>st</sup> century cities like London and New York versus the rural landscapes of West Africa. The nameless narrator has grown up in the

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<sup>6</sup> *Strange Tools*, p. 205.

<sup>7</sup> "The Unique Appearance of Distance", p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. his *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature*.

<sup>9</sup> This binary is relativized by the numerous internet cafés that crop up throughout the more touristic places along the West African rural coast.

former world: she is a Londoner who spends most her time in New York due to her work, and who caustically considers enabling the airplane mode setting on her phone for several days one of “the great examples of personal stoicism and moral endurance of our times”.<sup>10</sup> When she is afforded the opportunity to travel to West Africa on a dubious developmental aid project, she is shocked by the poverty around her, and rushes to the village school headmaster’s office (with the only available power socket) to google the country’s GDP and compare it to her boss’s net worth. This takes over an hour due to the excruciatingly slow internet connection.

By contrast, another character, a Brazilian economist nicknamed Fern, is part of the New Yorker team’s mission to reduce poverty in West Africa, and lends the whole endeavor a shred of legitimacy. Unlike the narrator and due to his extensive fieldwork, he is well acclimatized to the conditions in rural West Africa and has the necessary patience to gather intelligence the old fashioned way: by carefully listening and withholding assumptions and judgment. There, person-to-person communication and the ability to navigate relationships as well as local family and village structures and hierarchies is key. The narrator observes Fern’s behavior:

Whenever I spotted him in my reluctant daily walk around the village [...] Fern would be locked in intense discussion with men and women of every age and circumstance, crouching by them as they ate, jogging next to donkey-drawn carts, sitting drinking *ataya* with the old men by the market stalls, and always listening, learning, asking for more detail, assuming nothing, until he was told it.<sup>11</sup>

As much as she admires Fern, the blasé narrator is irritated by his ways, so alien to her. She describes the optimism in his face while solving one particular puzzle the village posed them—six seemingly unrelated children suddenly not showing up at school—and feels the urge “to crush it”.<sup>12</sup>

Back in New York and state-of-the-art technology, the narrator has an almost instantaneous access to all the information she needs. Merely by surfing the social media she can reconstruct “140 characters at a time, image by image, blog post by blog post” the experience of having been at a show in the city,<sup>13</sup> and recounts: “I kept refreshing and refreshing, waiting for new countries to wake up and see the images and form their own opinions or feed off opinions already voiced.”<sup>14</sup> Digital technology is an integral part of her experience of her surroundings, and this disembodied access to information is her second nature, part and parcel of the way she navigates places. The novel reflects on the role technology plays in spatial experience that has become so ingrained in today’s everyday life that it has become almost unnoticeable. This is not

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<sup>10</sup> Pp. 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> Pp. 248-9.

<sup>12</sup> P. 251.

<sup>13</sup> P. 369.

<sup>14</sup> P. 370.

in itself objectionable, but it calls for deliberation on the use of technology in its exciting new potentials for urban design that integrates an awareness of how digital technology itself modifies perceptions of cities.

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