

Vacillation of Metropolitan Individuality: “Flâneur” and “Man of the Crowd”

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I

The “flâneur” and the “man of the crowd” — they are paired figures that epitomize vacillation of metropolitan subjectivity. In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin, as one of pioneers of “the archaeology of the twentieth century”, seems to propose “nineteenth-century roots of twentieth-century culture” (Daly 11) illustrated by these two figures.

However, the figure of the flâneur and that of the man of the crowd, which sometimes overlap and sometimes make a sharp contrast, are highly problematic. Without a survey of the state of mind which confronted with radical change of mode of production in the nineteenth century, and without the knowledge of psychological mechanism urging individuals to differentiate themselves from the others, one could not recognize why the flâneur and the man of the crowd could be similar and opposite at the same time, and why people struggle to maintain their individuality. Thus, to grasp these ambiguous, delusive figures, and to understand how Benjamin finds out cultural source of the twentieth-century subjectivity in them, it would be a great help to learn the preceding study of group psychology. Particularly, Georg Simmel to whom Benjamin partly owes his insights is a profoundly significant figure. In addition, Gustave Le Bon, an investigator of crowd psychology in the fairly early stage, could provide the fundamental knowledge about the crowd in the late nineteenth century. Finally, I will reveal that Benjamin interprets the flâneur’s self-isolation as a universal feature of modern individuals, and that Benjamin sets his last hope on the flâneur’s attempt to be conscious and to resist being absorbed in the crowd in the rise of Fascist movement.

II

“The age of mechanical reproduction”: Walter Benjamin calls the period by this term, when the development of technical reproduction effects bringing a profound change of the attitude to art. In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin explores the progression of technical reproduction, and notes that “[t]he growing proletarianization of modern man and increasing formation of masses are two aspects of the same process” (*Illuminations* 243). In the nineteenth century, indeed, it is likely that the work of art is not what is supposed to be appreciated by a few authority any more, but something accessible to the public in museums, theatres, exhibitions, and the marketplace.¹ For the first time, a large number of people who had had nothing to do with art become potential accepters and viewers of art works.

Furthermore, the rise of new mode of art, which does not force the viewers to concentrate on the work but allows them to see it as a distraction, such as photography and film, seems to accelerate the formation of the masses (*Illuminations* 241). This rapid formation of the masses results in development of this new mode of art, and consequently, these two factors work complementarily.

The masses are not just newly born seers of art works but also a large number of prospective consumers in a capitalist economy. Naturally, the rise of such a great market leads to an attempt to incite people to buy things more and more, and everything is labeled, priced, and displayed, and becomes a purchasable “commodity.” The arcades in the early nineteenth-century and their successor, department stores, in the latter half of the century, become the backdrop of “commodification.”

In the arcades or department stores, however, commodities in the display windows, which are theoretically accessible to anyone, are actually inaccessible behind the transparent glass screen.² Commodities behind the glass are be seen, but not be easily gained. Inaccessibility of commodities effects the formation of the “desiring” crowd who can only look at commodities but cannot touch them, and who can only desire but not possess. What they can do in the arcades and department stores is mainly looking and strolling around, and the flânerie becomes a new mode of participation

in the nineteenth century.

The shift from production to consumption affects the mode of participation in art, since works of art, whose reproductions are easily made and appear on the market, are now in the realm of the commerce. Therefore, in the age after “the decay of the aura” the masses naturally gain the significance as consumers and as viewers of works of art. Benjamin observes as follows:

[T]he desire of contemporary masses to bring things “closer” spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction. (*Illuminations* 225)

On the other hand, these supposed consumers are incessantly encouraged to buy commodities, compelled to be passive accepters, and as unknown men, expected to dismiss their own individuality and to accept the uniformity of a crowd. They are city dwellers, especially the residents of metropolises such as Berlin, London, and Paris, and they are the very figures for whom Benjamin has a passionate concern: “the man of the crowd” and his counterpart, the “flâneur.”

Gustave Le Bon, French social psychologist, analyzing psychological characteristics of the individual forming part of the crowd, namely the man of the crowd, notes that “[psychological crowd] forms a single being, and is subjected to the *law of the mental unity of crowds*” (24). Furthermore, turning his attention to the difference of individuality between those who form a crowd and those who are isolated from it, Le Bon interestingly observes:

In the collective mind the intellectual aptitudes of the individuals, and in consequence their individuality, are weakened. The heterogeneous is swamped by the homogeneous, and the unconscious qualities obtain the upper hand. (29)

In Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project*, there are similar references to fading individuality and uniformity in the crowd: “[The masses] efface all traces of the individual: they are the newest asylum for the reprobate and the pre-script” (qtd. in *Arcades* 446). In this passage there is an indication of anony-

mousness of the crowd, and uniformity of the crowd consequently enables the reprobate and the prescript to be indistinguishable. Additionally, in Hegel's letter from Paris in 1827, there is also a reference to uniformity of the crowd: "As I go through the streets, the people look just the same as in Berlin, everyone dressed the same, about the same faces, the same appearance, yet in a populous mass" (qtd. in *Arcades* 451–52).

Le Bon, examining this uniformity peculiar to crowds, suggests that anonymousness of the crowds makes individual's sentiment of responsibility disappear entirely, and that contagious nature of the crowd encourages individual's readiness to sacrifice his personal interest to the collective interest (30). The collective force is too strong to resist, and "[t]he individualities in the crowd who might possess a personality sufficiently strong to resist the suggestion are too few in number to struggle against the current" (32).

Consequently, if a suggestion based on a certain large-scaled cause is given to the crowd, this strong collective force could be dynamics for a great achievement. As Le Bon argues, each individual's impetuosity to accomplish certain acts can be extremely strengthened by the fact that all the other individuals of the crowd are acting under the influence of the same suggestion (32). Engels' following statement seems to be based on the similar premise and shows another aspect of the crowd's characteristics: "these Londoners have been forced to sacrifice the best qualities of their human nature to bring to pass all the marvels of civilization" (qtd. in *Arcades* 427). Interestingly, there is the view that humanity and individuality might be sacrificed for the achievement of civilization in the modern age. It could happen that for the attainment of this kind of great purpose, individuals are convened, and the crowd is formed. Once individuals are unified as the crowd, their individuality would be substituted by uniformity, and the collective force could easily drive them. At this moment, the figure gazing on the "man of the crowd" appears in the midst of the crowd, namely the "flâneur."

III

Obviously, the flâneur is a city dweller, and habitually strolls the streets

without any specific aim. He (not “she”)³ is “[t]he lover of universal life”, and “enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electric energy”. He is even “a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness” (qtd. in *Arcades* 443). Although he is walking around the city, mingling with the crowd, he is an evidently different being from the crowd, an incisive spectator and observer of the crowd. His observation of the crowd and his *flânerie* give him great pleasure, and the “city is the properly sacred ground of *flânerie*” (qtd. in *Arcades* 421).

However, it seems likely that the *flâneur* is almost indistinguishable from the man of the crowd in reality, and the conception of the *flâneur* is fairly ambiguous and controversial. For instance, on the one hand, the city and streets are supposed to be the sacred ground of the *flânerie*; on the other hand, “streets are the dwelling place of the collective” at the same time (qtd. in *Arcades* 423). The great playground of the *flâneur*, the arcades, is not only for him, but also for the masses, the man of the crowd: “the arcades was the drawing room. More than anywhere else, the street reveals itself in the arcade as the furnished and familiar interior of the masses” (qtd. in *Arcades* 423).

Naturally the question arises how one could distinguish the *flâneur* from the man of the crowd even though they are similarly pacing around streets in the metropolis. What is likely to be clues here is the state of mind of the individuals, since uniformity of the man of the crowd is often mentioned with individuality of the *flâneur*. There are striking parallels between the man of the crowd, who is characterized by his lost individuality and bestowed uniformity, and the *flâneur* who possesses strong identity and successfully maintains his independence:

This seemed to me no crowd of individual beings, each with his own history, his private god, his treasures and his scars, his interior monologue and his fate; rather I made of it — unconsciously, in the depths of my body, in the shaded places of my eyes — a flux of identical particles, equally sucked in by the same nameless void, their deaf headlong current pattering monotonously over the bridge. (qtd. in *Arcades* 453)

What is worth noting in this passage is not only that the writer obviously differentiates himself from the man of the crowd, but also that the writer seems to have a certain feeling of superiority, degrading and even pitying the man of the crowd. Another example showing the same sentiment is found in the passage captioned “[r]emarkable distinction between flâneur and rubberneck”:

Let us not, however, confuse the flâneur with the rubberneck: there is a subtle difference The average flâneur . . . is always in full possession of his individuality, while that of the rubberneck disappears, absorbed by the external world, . . . which moves him to the point of intoxication and ecstasy. Under the influence of the spectacle, the rubberneck becomes an impersonal being. He is no longer a man — he is the public; he is the crowd. (qtd. in *Arcades* 429)

One can draw two points from above passages. The first point is that it gives a clear difference to the flâneur and the man of the crowd whether they possess their individuality or not, and whether they are not just looking around unconsciously but searching for something consciously and independently. In consequence, “noteworthy connection between flânerie and the detective novel” (qtd. in *Arcades* 441) is pointed out, and the flâneur is compared with the detective:

Performed in the figure of the flâneur is that of the detective. The flâneur required a social legitimation of his habitus. It suited him very well to see his indolence presented as a plausible front, behind which, in reality, hides the riveted attention of an observer who will not let the unsuspecting malefactor out of his sight. (qtd. in *Arcades* 442)

The second point is that an intellectual hierarchy surely exists when one says that the flâneur is with “[h]is eyes open, his ear ready, searching for something entirely different from what the crowd gathers to see Most men of genius were great flâneurs” (qtd. in *Arcades* 453). It is certain that there is the same kind of relationship between “the Western viewer” and “commodities and artifacts from around the world” (Daly 87), and that the same desire to render oneself prior to the others effects the institution of a racial hierarchy in the nineteenth-century Europe. However, not only in such an imperialist perspective, but also within the domestic scope, “vi-

sion” to provide the viewer with the object as a spectacle could work. Le Bon explains that psychological characteristics of the crowd render the state of mind of each individual unconscious and instinctive. Naturally, “the crowd is always intellectually inferior to the isolated individual” (Le Bon 33).

Leaving aside whether Le Bon’s analysis is true or not, it is likely that there are similar views on the crowd’s intellectual inferiority in the nineteenth century. Simmel’s following observation might give a hint to explain the sentiment to hold such a view:

The jostling crowdedness and the motley disorder of metropolitan communication would . . . be unbearable without . . . psychological distance. Since contemporary urban culture . . . forces us to be physically close to an enormous number of people, . . . people would sink completely into despair if the objectification of social relationships did not bring with it an inner boundary and reserve. (qtd. in *Arcades* 447–48)

There might be not only uneasiness caused by proximity to others, but also fear of being physically overwhelmed by the jostling crowdedness, and of being psychologically absorbed by the strong current of massification. Thus, the feeling of superiority of the flâneur and his pride in his independence called “solitude,” might be the reverse of fear of unification. In short, in order to ensure one’s individuality it is necessary to differentiate and isolate oneself from others and to feel solitude.

Therefore, it would happen that “hours of solitude and meditation are the only ones in the day when I am completely myself and my own master, with nothing to distract or hinder me, the only ones when I can truly say that I am what nature meant me to be” (qtd. in *Arcades* 453). Paul Valéry states more openly that right after he sees swarms of absent-minded people, the very moment when he feels “solitude, mingled with pride and anguish” comes (qtd. in *Arcades* 453).

In the metropolis, individuals are under the pressure of loss of their own individuality, and invariably menaced, at least on the unconscious level, by the strong force of unification and standardization. Simmel, speculating the modern human experience in the metropolis, states as follows:

The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life. This antagonism represents the most modern form of the conflict which primitive man must carry on with nature for his own bodily existence. (Simmel 324)

In such an oppressive modern society, “spectatorship” of the flâneur might work as one of the methods for “a protection of the inner life against the domination of the metropolis,” (Simmel 326) since the definition of the flâneur enables the individual to differentiate himself from the crowd, helps to “maintain the independence and individuality of his existence”, and makes him feel stability of his own entity. Thus, “[m]axim of the flâneur” is reflective of fear of unification and desire of differentiation: “In our standardized and uniform world, it is right here, deep below the surface, that we must go. Estrangement and surprise, the most thrilling exoticism, are all close by” (qtd. in *Arvades* 444). The figure of a flâneur is proposed by popular demands in the process of constructing new relationships of subjects and objects.

IV

In the twentieth century, accompanied with such psychological conflicts between individuals and the masses and with consequent attempt to discriminate oneself from others, the influence of the masses paradoxically increases more and more. Particularly, in such metropolises as Berlin, London, and Paris where individuals are exposed to incessant new stimulations, they often come to obtain “blasé attitude” as “the consequence of those rapidly shifting stimulations of the nerves” (Simmel 329). Evidently, this mental attitude of city dwellers is similar to the absent-mindedness of the man of the crowd.

The unconscious absent-mindedness of the man of the crowd curiously resembles the idleness of the flâneur. Indeed, the idleness of the flâneur is supposed to be based on his full consciousness and firm individuality. Yet, if he finds great pleasure in flânerie, putting himself into the midst of the

crowd, it must be difficult to make a sharp distinction, inside the same immense stream of people, between his conscious idleness and others' unconscious subjection to the crowd. It seems likely that the difference between the flâneur and the man of the crowd is not as manifest as the flâneur desires.

Moreover, if it happens very often that “an individual immersed for some length of time in a crowd in action soon finds himself . . . in a special state, which much resembles the state of fascination in which the hypnotized individual finds himself in the hands of the hypnotiser” (Le Bon 31), the flâneur will be inevitably threatened by absorption in the hypnotized crowd. Furthermore, dubiousness of the flâneur's identity might even raise the doubt that the entity of the flâneur itself is an illusion constituted by people's fear and anxiety.⁴ Simmel, pointing out the presence of “specifically metropolitan extravagances of self-differentiation, of caprice, of fastidiousness, . . . of being different; of making oneself noticeable”, states that “[f]or many types of persons these are still the only means of saving for oneself, through . . . some sort of self-esteem and the sense of filling a position” (Simmel 336). The self-image as a flâneur could alleviate people's suffering and propose a soothing illusion in the metropolitan life.

Therefore, the “flâneur” is the peculiar psychic mode to the modern age, and represents people's latent fear and anxiety in the populous street of the metropolis. Thus, it is fairly reasonable for Benjamin to assume that Baudelaire's gaze is “the gaze of the flâneur, whose way of life conceals behind a beneficent mirage the anxiety of the future inhabitants of our metropolises” (qtd. in *Arcades* 21). Whereas the masses have been still swarming since the early nineteenth century, and even are taking on another shape of monstrous “Führer cult” in the thirties, it is likely that Benjamin suggests a certain universal feature of people's psychic attitude in the modern age. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin introduces Engels' view of the metropolitan life:

[H]owever much one may be aware that this isolation of the individual, this narrow self-seeking, is the fundamental principle of our society everywhere, it is nowhere so shamelessly barefaced, so self-conscious, as just here in the crowding of the great city. (qtd. in

In the increasing force of unification, the individuals more and more intensely desire to isolate themselves from the crowd. This phenomenon seems to be what is peculiar to the modern life.

If the conception of the *flâneur* that results from this mental attitude has any significance to Benjamin, it seems like its possibility that might be the first step to break the ice in the rise of Fascism. Indeed, the identity of the *flâneur* is rather ambiguous and controversial, and sometimes even assimilates with the masses. However, *flâneur*'s habitual attempt to maintain his consciousness, to speculate things independently, and to be different in the midst of the crowd, are essential so that the individual could resist being absorbed by the crowd. If one wants to be independent of a certain ideology, the first thing to do is to keep being conscious and trying not to be unconsciously drifted toward identification with the mainstream. If one consider the political situation in the thirties, the following observation of the state of mind in the crowd would be particularly suggestive:

[A]n individual may be brought into such a condition that, having entirely lost his conscious personality, he obeys all the suggestions of the operator who has deprived him of it . . . an individual immersed for some length of time in a crowd in action soon finds himself . . . in a special state, which much resembles the state of fascination in which the hypnotized individual finds himself in the hands of the hypnotiser . . . The conscious personality has entirely vanished; will and discernment are lost. All feelings and thoughts are bent in the direction determined by the hypnotizer. (Le Bon 31)

Perhaps, the same mechanism might work in the crowd driven by a specific ideology, especially political one. In this sense, it is likely that Le Bon's observation of the man who forms part of the crowd indicates every typical aspect of the war, the perfection of political things. "[T]he spontaneity, the violence, the ferocity and also the enthusiasm and heroism of primitive beings" of the individuals forming the crowd strongly resemble the characteristics of the individuals who participate in a war. A threat to individuality caused by massification could imply a threat to humanity.

The formation of the masses and the increase of their influence since

the nineteenth century seem to result in preparing the basis of political movements in the early twentieth century. Thus, Benjamin might have specific interest in the nineteenth century as a source of the most crucial phase of metropolitan life in his age, namely totalitarian unification. In the twentieth century, the force of massification gains more and more power, and individuals are exposed to a threat to be deprived of their individuality and to be absorbed in the crowd. Particularly, in the midst of the national attempt to unify the people racially and to mobilise the army, it is extremely difficult for the individual to struggle against the massification.

In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin seems to try to describe every aspect of social, political, and cultural life characterised by the strong current of massification in the nineteenth century, and this seems to be because Benjamin finds out the roots of unification by Fascism in his age. In particular, the figure of the flâneur might be meaningful to Benjamin since the flâneur represents the general state of mind in the commodity life, namely “[e]mpathy with the commodity”:

Empathy with the commodity is fundamentally empathy with exchange value itself. The flâneur is the virtuoso of this empathy. He takes the concept of marketability itself for a stroll. Just as his final ambit is the department store, his last incarnations the sandwich-man. (qtd. in *Arcades* 448)

Thus, his flânerie itself reflects “the decay of the aura” and the increase of significance of exchange value in the age of mechanical reproduction. In such a society, works of art do not possess cult value any more, and then, “[a]s flâneur, the literary man ventures into the marketplace to sell himself” (qtd. in *Arcades* 446). The flâneur who “work[s] for profit” (*Illumination* 21) is the incarnation of the change of mode in production.

In addition, the conception of the flâneur indicates vacillation of people’s mind at the same time. Whereas people accept new mode of production by taking part in consumption as a flâneur, they dread loss of their individuality in a swarm of unconsciously hypnotized people. The figure of a flâneur could appeal to Benjamin as convergence of every reaction to the modern age.

After the emergence of the flâneur in the nineteenth century, the current of unification goes further, and it becomes much harder to be conscious and to sustain one's own individuality and independence by differentiating oneself from the crowd. This is not only the result of overwhelming domination of the metropolis to disable residents from reacting to new stimulations, but utilization of an established swarm of people, who get used to identify themselves with the crowd without their individuality and consciousness, and who are mobilised for the large-scale national event like war. As Benjamin states, the war "only can set a goal for mass movements on the largest scale". In the rise of Fascism, the conception of the flâneur assumes all the origins of human experience in the modern life after the change of the mode of production. In the chaos of "a rebellion of technology" (*Illumination* 244), individuals are incessantly exposed to the fear of massification and uniformity. They keep vacillating between a struggle to be different and strong temptation of reconciliation. Mallarme's despair sounds as if it surmised despondency of the individuals in the modern age:

He had crossed the Place and the Pont de l'Europe almost every day . . . gripped by the temptation to throw himself from the heights of the bridge onto the iron rails, under the trains, so as finally to escape this mediocrity of which he was prisoner. (qtd. in *Arcades* 444)

Notes

1 For instance, see George W. Stocking, Jr., ed., *Objects and Others: Essays on Museums and Material Culture, History of Anthropology*, 4 vols. (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), III; and Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851–1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

2 For the cultural dynamics of glass plates, see Andrew H. Miller, "Introduction", in *Novels behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 1–13.

3 For the matter of gender of the "flâneur", see 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), pp. 141–156.

4 Simmel's references to "intellectual individuation of mental qualities to which

the city gives rise” and “the difficulty of giving one’s own personality a certain status within the framework of metropolitan life” seem to be fairly incisive. See Simmel, p. 336.

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