

Coexistent Perspectives (ADAA7000)

Dylan Jones

How does the figure of Robinson in Patrick Keillers London (1994) embody and subvert the traditional concept of the flâneur within the context of late 20th and early 21st-century Britain?

A Man of the Crowd, the Stranger in the dark, the motif of the metropolis, the bridge between Romanticism and Modernism, the ghost of the past. The flâneur has in various guises and timeframes portrayed all these symbols, but do we really understand who or what he is? In this essay, I will aim to discuss his evolution from 18th Century London, the Paris Arcades of Charles Baudelaire via Walter Benjamin and then place him within the context of Patrick Keiller's Film Essay London (1992) and the main character Robinson. How does Robinson embody the notion of the flâneur? I will then look at how the film subverts the concept of the flâneur and moves the elusive figure to the modern world, a world of temporal spaces, spatial awareness, Politics, Capitalism, surveillance, and place.

The flâneur is a difficult figure to pinpoint his origins, but it's safe to assume that any piece of literature that focuses on the traveller or wanderer of the city would include one of the would be flâneur's many guises.



Daniel Defoe's imaginative mental travelling of being marooned on a desert island in Robinson Crusoe to a topographical study of London 1665 in Journal of a Plague Year showcase elements of the would-be traveller/wanderer. Defoe uses a 'a blend of fiction and biography of local history and personal reminiscence, is bound together to form an imaginative re-working of the city'. (Coverley, 2018, p. 39) The Writer and poet William Blake understood the DNA of London as he walked the city and understood that to build his Jerusalem the city must first be destroyed (more on this later). Moving from the prose of

Blake, Thomas de Quincey developed a passion for pedestrianism and wrote 'to myself especially, that I am never thoroughly in health unless when having a pedestrian exercise to the extent of 15 miles at most and 8 to 10 miles at the least'. (Quincy, 2003) De Quincey in his book *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* gives a detailed account of addiction, but also his experiences under the influence of the drug, where he creates a dreamlike portrait of London circa 1820's and further develops the characteristic of walking and sense of place. His wandering allows for his imagination to direct his perception of his environment and results in the city being portrayed as a maze, a labyrinth, unexplored streets, and alleyways. It was an act of 'mental discovery, a means of imposing his imagination on the city' (Coverley, 2018, p. 48) and the very reasons that Guy Debord and The Situationists in 1950's Paris sought to recapture with the *dérive*, an aimless drift around the city. Phil Baker states that 'Classic urban psychogeography could almost be said to begin- retrospectively, and from a Situationist influenced perspective- with Thomas De Quincey'. (Baker, 2003) What these 3 writers share, in particular De Quincey is a strong sense of Space and place and help bridge the gap to Poe and Baudelaire and the development of the *flâneur*.

Written in 1840 and set in the streets of London, *The Man in the Crowd* written by Edgar Allan Poe features people watching, the excitement of the street, café societies, being present in modernity, and ultimately becoming fixated on the pursuit of an unknown. A man with no apparent aim, a walker who notices nothing, both estranged and isolated with unclear motives 'This Old Man, I said at length 'is the type and the genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. He is the man of the Crowd'. (Poe, 1986, p. 188) It was this notion that developed Baudelaire's urban wanderer, a mythical figure in a mythical City. A city where you needed skill to negotiate the environs. "The crowd is his domain, just as the air is the bird's, and water that of the fish. His passion and his profession is to merge with the crowd. (Baudelaire, 1995, p. 9) In this regards he becomes as the spectator and 'depicter of modern life, most specifically in relation to contemporary art and the sights of the city'. (Baudelaire, 1995) The pedestrian whose wanderings enabled novel understandings of the evolving metropolis. Is Baudelaire himself the *flâneur*? 'Life, Baudelaire thought, is not so much a work of art but can nevertheless be usefully construed as an artistic creation. For Baudelaire if modern art was to be worthwhile it had to locate a 'grand' and 'heroic' subject matter; this was modernity itself or, at least, aspects of modernity.'. (Jenks, 1995, p. 147) Baudelaire presents the *flâneur* as the Painter of Modern life and as such during the mid- Nineteenth Century becomes a product of his environment, 'Observer, philosopher, *flâneur* – call him what you will', he is the painter of the passing moment and of all the suggestions of eternity that it contains'. (Tester, 2015, p. 100)

Charles Baudelaire gives the *flâneur* a clear distinction and presents the *flâneur* as a link between Romanticism and Modernism and gives a clear indication of what develops into the notion of urban spectators which was to become Psychogeography in the 1950's. Walter Benjamin develops the character further through his writings and interpretations and gives a greater understanding of him 'the *flâneur*, or stroller, as a detective of street life.'. (Tester, 2015, p. 121) Benjamin returns the stroller to Paris in 1800's, happiest amongst the crowds and the street 'the *flâneur* possesses a power, it walks at will, freely and seemingly without purpose, but simultaneously with an inquisitive wonder and an infinite capacity to

absorb the activities of the collective—often formulated as ‘the crowd’.'. (Jenks, 1995, p. 146) His writings on the Parisian Arcades suggest a certain way of life and being which the flâneur would be most comfortable in though ‘as the flâneur navigates the streets through the reconstruction of Paris, the disappearance of the Arcades, the hostility towards the wanderer and pace of modernity it becomes apparent that the flâneur is ‘not so much a man of his time, as a man out of time, a symbol of a bygone age’. (Coverley, 2018, p. 72)

Filmed in 1992 and released in 1994, *London* the first feature directed by Patrick Keiller is an idiosyncratic look at 90's London. Filmed over the period of a year, part documentary, part fiction the film is a series of static shots of London scenes. It follows 2 characters (never seen), the narrator and his friend Robinson as they wander around London attempting to solve the problem of London, what this problem is never fully explained and follows the notion of flâneur as wanderer, who has no clear motive. The film can be best described as one part travelogue in the manner of Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*; and one-part Situationist *dérive*, that is, a freely associative journey that attempts to subjectively remap social space. They have a purpose but for who. What is important to note here is the significance of the lineage in the Characters name through the numerous references the film makes which link directly to the main protagonist.

Apart from the obvious reference to Crusoe, ‘Robinson’ appears in *Poetry by Rimbaud, Journey into the end of the Night* (1932) a novel by Céline, which incidentally opens the film ‘It was a journey into the end of the world’ (Keiller, 2020) and Franz Kafka's *Amerika* (1927) who turns out to be a drifter similar to that in Céline's novel. The character was further developed by Weldon Keys through a series of Poems and finally filmmaker, author Chris Petits novel *Robinson* (1993) where he is portrayed as a deranged figure who is losing his grasp on reality. As Merlin Coverley states ‘Robinson is a totemic figure mapping out his own journey from text to text and on to film, establishing a parallel history of urban wandering as he moves from London to Paris and around the globe’. (Coverley, 2018, p. 89)

The basis for the next part of the Essay, is how the film embodies him as a Flâneur whilst ‘living in the way they said to live in the Soviet Union’ (Keiller, 2020, p. 9). We are introduced to him (off screen) an auto didact, who is well read and works at the University.



Our narrator refers to him as a flâneur, visiting his European friends where his social life is transformed, happiest in the company of others especially away from 'dirty old blighty' (Keiller, 2020, p. 7), he is nostalgic for labels on imported goods which reminds him of journeys he can no longer make, but of late he seldom leaves his house. Robinson asks the narrator to accompany him on a series of expeditions, to aid in his report on the 'problems of England'.

Three expeditions take place in the film, each linked to the past, 1st English Romanticism, A pilgrimage to Edgar Allen Poe's birthplace, each steeped in history and in the tradition of the flâneur. Through Voice over, we learn his habits, his likes, dislikes, rhetoric, and elocutes his opinions. There are numerous points of reference in the film to support this. Robinson embodies and displays characteristics of the flâneur as created by Baudelaire and developed by Benjamin. Robinson returns to the crowds, the noises, his personality changes when amongst people. He is happy, the closest he can get to this is through the shopping centre, where the poets belong.



The Camera travels on the escalator, it moves, the whole film apart from this is a series of static shots with no movement. Is he the flâneur with a Camera. Is this the arcades of Paris in the 1900's or the modern-day equivalent to it? He sees someone reading Walter Benjamin, a link, and they exchange numbers. He drinks coffee and works in one of the Arcades. Robinson longs for a past that doesn't seem to exist in present Capitalist London. He talks about escaping and entering a nomadic life, 'a longing of escape' (Keiller, 2020). He sees flashes of the old London, amongst the people and cafes but this is few and far between. He bemoans the lack of poets writing in a Tesco Café and as such Robinson is angry at the world that he no longer fits in. He has plans to write and is optimistic for the future in the suburbs and being part of a revolution rising with poets and Artists reclaiming the streets from the Isle of Dogs (Canary Wharf). He is an optimist, longing for Café life in London, can he survive Banking and Finance?



The film develops a homage to exiled French writers and Poets, most notable Rimbaud who wandered the streets of London when he couldn't write due to the strangeness of Victorian London. His poems are featured to bridge past and present, linking Paris with London, Robinson to the Flâneur. Jeff Malpas suggests 'London is to Keiller what Paris was to Benjamin, and Keiller's project in London seems almost to be a relocated version of Benjamin's investigation of Paris as evident in his so called (and never completed) 'Arcades Project' (Benjamin, 1999), drawing upon ideas and techniques presaged in that project, including Benjamin's focus on the figure of the flâneur'. (Malpas, 2016)

Their second expedition entails a journey to find the school of Edgar Allen Poe, a journey that allows them to wander through the people, the markets, the 'the street becomes a dwelling for the flâneur, he is as much home among the facades of houses as a citizen is in his four walls, to him the shiny, enamelled signs of business are at least as good a wall ornament as an oil painting is to a bourgeois in his salon'. (Benjamin, 1990, pp. 36-37) This is the domain of the stroller, flâneur, his optimism despairs when they can't locate the house, and only to find the house where Daniel Dafoe wrote Robinson Crusoe. 'He had

gone looking for the Man in The Crowd and had found Shipwreck', (Keiller, 2020, p. 168) the story of Isolation. The Man in Crowd is met in the film with affection, a man after his own heart, who is retained by police for shouting wild conspiracy theories.



Further evidence of Robinson as flâneur is nostalgia, a certain way of being, a golden age. 'Keiller's films also carry a strong sense of nostalgia – but nostalgia that is the inevitable accompaniment of the experience of time, and of time in place, and the sense of loss that is part of that experience'. (Malpas, 2016) This element again demonstrates his modernity. Chris Jenks states 'The flâneur is essentially a product of modernity, it provides one image of how that state of being in time can be realised or, at least, understood. It is also an attempt to 'see' modernity; a metaphor for method. (Jenks, 1995) Robinson understands that he can't do anything about the past apart from mourn its loss. He does this on numerous occasions in the film, A housing estate built by London Council in the late 1800's, London's Café Society, the walls of the Roman City – present day London 'which has become the preserve of International Finance'. (Keiller, 2020) all these help explain the problem of London, which he does include possible outcomes for, or at least identifies the reasons why, which is a development of the would be stroller, wanderer, Flâneur.

In this section I will discuss how the film subverts the idea of the flâneur in its traditional sense. The films form suggests an anonymity of character. We hear narration, but we never see the Characters, who's narrative are we following? 'One might thus be led to the conclusion that, for all that Keiller distances himself from Robinson, in a strange way Robinson is Keiller' (Malpas, 2016) "The more I looked the more I found, and the more I found the more I looked, but gradually my interest shifted from the instant transformation of a building (object), to the discovery of a deeper sensation of place (space)" (Keiller, 2013, p. 22). This is evident through the Photography captured through the film. The images of banal spaces are reminiscent of the work of the New Topographics in their representation of the modern world, signage, billboards, Car Parks and man altered landscapes.



Lewis Baltz

This incorporated with elements of Eugene Atget the French Photographer and surveyor of Parisian streets, 'The scene of a crime, too, is deserted; it is photographed for the purpose of establishing evidence. With Atget, photographs become standard evidence for historical occurrences, and acquire a hidden political significance'. (Benjamin, 1973, p. 228)



Eugene Atget

Keillier's Images in the film take on a similar context, what is the crime? Political turmoil, the aftermath of a Terrorist attack, Capitalism, Modernism, Commuters going to work, Images of the banal, London's Insurance district, all Photographed with a lack of depth. 'The Images evoke smoggy vistas of Scotland Yard, conjuring up Images of Sexton Blake and Fu Manchu rather than Cool Britannia', (Woodcock, 2000, p. 116) the non-places and technological landscape.



As Previously shown the parallels between Robinson and the Flâneur is clear to see, but it is also evident that Robinson displays a further progression from Baudlairaire and Benjamins's street wanderer. No longer just an observer, he becomes an active part of the Space and interacts with his surroundings. He becomes part of the narrative and haunts our conciseness. Starting with the Surrealists and progressing to the Situationists, the figure evolves. The writing of surrealist Louis Aragon (Paris Peasant) 'outlines 2 walks undertaken in Paris in 1924 and 1926 bears witness to a city disappearing before his eyes' (Coverley, 2018, p. 95). Aragon 'preferred 'fringe' and 'equivocal' zones, where 'freedom and secrecy had the best chance of flourishing' (Baker, 2003, p. 329) Sometimes alone, often with a friend, they are witnesses to a disappearing Paris, drawing parallels with Patrick Keillers film on a disappearing London.

The emergence of The Situationists in 1957, Guy Debord, further developed the concept of the Flâneur. Coining the phrase Psychogeography (how space and place alter the behaviour and emotions of individuals) and by 'providing three central concepts which are wholly relevant to the walking methodologist (within the [post] modern city), these being: the *dérive*; *detournement*, and, perhaps most significantly, the 'spectacle' (Jenks, 1995, p. 153). The *dérive*, aimed to develop conscious walking as opposed to aimless wanderings, 'the *dérive* is conducting a psychological investigation and is expected to return home having noted the ways in which areas traversed resonate with mood and ambiances. (Coverley, 2018, p. 124) The map becomes a map of the mind, but consciously altered through space. Robinson is clearly affected by space and place due to his own experiment. He drifts through the city and develops a commentary on the space. The *dérive* allows its practitioner to ascertain the true nature of the urban environment, which leads to his unhappiness (or happiness). Robinson though is more just an observer; he is active in the *dérive* and is affected by his surroundings. Another aspect from The Situationists that seems relevant to the film is the use of *detournement* – the reuse of existing elements

to create something new, 'not orientated by convention, but can be playfully and artfully 'see' the juxtaposition of the elements that make up the city in new and revealing relationships'. (Jenks, 1995) Robinson himself is a merging of characters, past present, Benjamin, Baudelaire, ghosts from the past, but this can also be applied to the form in which the film is made, a unique hybrid of part travelogue, part documentary guided by a placid narrator 'Paul Schofield, the pared down, xanaxed of Lears'. (Sinclair, 1994, p. 13) Despite never seeing Robinson, and being a third person in the narrative, his opinions are always second hand, moderated by his researcher/narrator which begs the question, does Robinson really exist?

What is clear to see is the notion of the dandy strolling through the arcades of Paris in the 19th century has evolved into something other, no more aimless strolls, the *dérive* pushes the urban walker into a more purposeful expedition. 'The Concept of 'strolling', aimless urban wandering, the *flâneur*, has been superseded, we have moved into the age of the stalker; journeys made with intent. (Sinclair, 1997, p. 75) The modern world is no place for the slow urban walker, no 'botanizing the Asphalt', (Benjamin, 1990) no more window reflections, sitting down for a coffee, melancholy for the past, the stalker is on a mission, he has a purpose. Robinson, has a purpose, a thesis, which he attempts to answer and it is only in certain sequences in the film where he unsure of his destination.

One final subversion is the possibility that Robinson is not present in the film and he is a mere spectre of the past. French Philosopher Jacques Derrida in *Spectres of Marx* (1993) argued that Marxism would come back and haunt western society, that time is out of joint. That traces of past still linger in the present. This idea is further developed in the writings of Mark Fisher on Hauntology, 'think of hauntology as the agency of the virtual, with the spectre understood not as anything supernatural, but as that which acts without (physically) existing. (Fisher, 2014, p. 43) The film can be read as a souvenir of the past, its pilgrimage to London's heritage and history, to French Romanticism, Iconic buildings being sold to international Consortiums. Spectres of Rimbaud, Dafoe, Poe, Hogarth are all around decorating the city. Physically the city streets only show a handful of people in them or empty apart from Commuters. The capital is seen often as a City of Ghosts, with remnants of the past.



Robinson leaves no trace in the film, but the effects of Conservative led Government linger over the images and soundtrack, 'It seemed there was no longer anything a Conservative government could do to get voted out of office' (Keiller, 2020, p. 75), these are the effects of this. We see the aftermath of a terrorist bomb, broken glass, blue flags in Downing Street.



The images are oppressive and claustrophobic. Is Robinson the man in the crowd? Is he reading Walter Benjamin in the Shopping Mall? Does he have a melancholia for the great French Poets? There is only so much the city can take. Does Robinson then become a symbol of the City, the observer of the modern world. 'The true identity of London', he said, 'is in its absence. As a City, it no longer exists, in this alone it is truly modern. London was the first metropolis to disappear'. (Keiller, 2020, p. 225)



In this essay I have looked at the role of the flâneur in the context of Robinson the main character of Patrick Keiller's Film Essay London (1994). This essay has looked at the DNA of the elusive figure who has its origins in the work of Daniel Defoe, the hallucinatory docklands of Thomas de Quincey, Edgar Allan Poe's Man of the crowd, crossed the channel and moved onwards to the Arcades of Paris. Never still, the flâneur has strolled and wandered the streets for centuries 'as the spectator and depicter of modern life, most specifically in relation to contemporary art and the sights of the city. The flâneur moves through space and among the people with a viscosity that both enables and privileges vision'. (Jenks, 1995, p. 146). Immortalised by French poet Baudelaire and developed by Walter Benjamin in the Arcades Project, strolling the Café Sociétés of Paris, The flâneur, through the guise of Robinson (a wandering lineage as discussed), lands in London during the backdrop of Civil unrest, Conservative Government and a rapidly changing landscape. Updating the flâneur to modern London, suggests hardships for the urban wanderer, how does he fit in modern spaces. Robinson embodies the traditional flâneur, his love of the crowd, the arcades, the history, and legacy of the French writers he admires but is ultimately cast adrift and needs to adapt to modern life. Coincidentally London is part of a Trilogy, and in the second film Robinson in Space (1997) he retreats like one of his heroes Rimbaud to Reading, unable to navigate London and its problems.

While looking at how the film subverts the Flâneur, as the invisible Protagonist alludes to, he needs to adapt to his surroundings. The film's sequel title suggests a playful metaphor for the position he finds himself in. He is ultimately in the wrong place and wrong time. Space and place have resulted in his disintegration. The walker / stroller must adapt to his/her surroundings to survive modernism, he must become politically aware and look to the future rather than the past. The development of Psychogeography and The Situationists gave the wanderer a purpose. The dérive developed the idea of urban strolling into a calculated planned excursion to see how the urban environment could effect one's emotion. Robinson is politically aware and, on a mission, to discover the 'problems of London' rather than wander aimlessly around shopping arcades and markets.

One final reading the film portrays is the idea of Robinson as Spectre. Haunting the City, floating around central London and the suburbs. A figure from the past who reminds us of who we once were. A figure who refuses to change and sticks to their values. The voice of the street. The city is portrayed as a city of Ghosts from the past. Robinson, embodies the flâneur in all its mysteries. An urban legend, a Keyser Soze figure who we are ambiguous to. An eccentric who has a sense of humour. A passive intellectual who is both excited and disgusted by the modern world, a living being or a spectre, ultimately a paradox.



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