From Flâneurs to Navetteurs: Perceptions of Urban Space through the Commuter of the Contemporary City

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The flâneurs of the twentieth-century Paris traversed the city subconsciously through spontaneous walks, who perceived urban space as a mnemonic mechanism that provoked sensational experiences charged with intimate imagination. Oppositely, the urbanites of the twenty-first century Shanghai navigate the city by rapid underground transportation with a sense of immediacy and intentionality that dissimulate subconscious urban experiences. To identify this contemporary counterpart to the flâneur, I have adapted the French word navetteur, which extrapolates the meaning “shuttle” to describe a transportation method between locations with singularity and rapidity. In contrast to the flâneur’s invocation of strolling, the word navetteur captures the eidetic experience of directionality and intentionality by commuting with underground metros. This paper investigates Parisian flâneurs and Shanghai’s navetteurs’ perceptions of urban space through a surrealist theoretical framework and finds that the Parisian flâneurs craft a surrealist phenomenon in urban space with the city opening up as a mnemonic mechanism that evokes dreams and imagination; whereas the navetteurs of Shanghai recollect the city with fragmented metro stations covered with signage and perceive the city with a sense of estranged exteriority that confines their urban perceptions with detached conformity. This paper further compares the changing and transformative urban perceptions between flâneurs and navetteurs and investigates the enigmatic relationship between navetteurs of Shanghai and flâneurs of Paris, specifically with the cases of Tadao Ando’s Shanghai bookstore and Hector Guimard’s Paris Métro entrances, and generally with its implications to contemporary cities to understand urban space through human movements and imagination. Consequently, this paper argues for the return of the flâneur as a method of reminiscing perceptions of urban space in surrealist experiences through which we can revisit our intimate relationship with the twenty-first century contemporary cities and ruminate on the predicament of the contemporary urban life.

INTRODUCTION

The flâneurs perceive urban space as a mnemonic mechanism that provokes sensational experiences charged with intimate imagination while traversing the city subconsciously through spontaneous walks. Walter Benjamin recounted a consciously manifested Berlin through intimate memories from his flânerie amongst various cafés in the city, and he recognized the arcades as an urban phenomenon in Paris that transformed the public urban space into a “place of habitation” as he meandered through Paris.¹ Benjamin argued that the streets of Paris unfolded itself to the flâneurs as “phantasmagorias” that appeared as continuous landscapes.² His flânerie reinvented the urban space with a sense of interiority and demarcated the city with an intimate dimension. The flâneurs operate in the city with inadvertent decisions and narrate it with sensational experiences that elicit emotions, memories, and imagination through their unceasing flânerie. In contrast to the flâneur, the urbanite of the twenty-first century Shanghai navigates the city by rapid underground transportation with a sense of immediacy and intentionality that dissimulate subconscious urban experiences. To identify this contemporary counterpart to the flâneur, I have adapted the French word navette, which extrapolates the meaning “shuttle” to describe a transportation method between locations with singularity and rapidity. Contrary to the flâneur’s invocation of strolling, the word navetteur captures the eidetic experience of directionality and intentionality by commuting with underground metros. As navetteurs navigate the city through metro stations, their expeditious and decisive movements delineate a city of velocity, rigidity, and repetitions.

The Parisian flâneurs craft a surrealist phenomenon in urban space, as they walk on the streets with provocative imagination that perceive the city with a sense of domesticity; whereas the navetteurs of Shanghai recollect the city from fragmented metro stations covered with signage, and perceive the city with a sense of estranged exteriority. The flânerie and navetterie act as approaches to the city with which one can develop disparate urban perceptions, and simultaneously as attestations that reflect the predicament of contemporary urbanity amid mass urbanization. While the city reveals to the flâneur as a mnemonic landscape, it conceals itself to the navetteur as a rigid map of destinations.

This paper compares this changing and transformative perception of cities between flâneurs and navetteurs; and investigates the enigmatic relationship between navetteurs of Shanghai and flâneurs of Paris specifically and generally to understand urban space through human movements and
imagination. Consequently, this paper argues for the return of the flâneur as a method of reminiscing perceptions of urban space in surrealist experiences through which we can revisit our intimate relationship with the twenty-first century contemporary cities and ruminate on the predicament of the contemporary urban life.

FLÂNERIE AND SURREALISM

Flânerie consecrates the city with surrealism, where the flâneur perceives the urban space as a landscape that unfolds in phenomena, and through which, one can explore the city in dreams, sensations, and memories. Such a connection between surrealist and flânerie was also drawn in Walter Benjamin’s essay “Surrealism.” In the essay, Benjamin argued that the surrealist experience sparks a non-religious “profane illumination,” and French Surrealist writer André Breton illustrated characteristics of this “profane illumination” through the flâneur figure in Nadja. This surrealist experience evokes the face of a city in “dream images” that entail the “psychic force of memory” manifested unconsciously. The surrealist “profane illumination” thus connects the experiences of flâneurs with the urban space in a field of senses and phenomena that are imbued with idiomatic flânerie and distinguishable meanings.

French poet Charles Baudelaire further described the relationship between flâneurs and the surrealistic urban phenomena by which they are captivated through a metaphor that the flâneur is an “I” with an insatiable appetite for the “non-I.” In Paris the flâneur “I” is what Walter Benjamin defined as the “illuminati,” the dreamer, and the ecstatic, who explores, overruns, and occupies the city of Paris, discovering the surrealistic and mysterious facets of the city through the “profane illuminations” of the everyday thinking and walking. Benjamin’s interpretation of Paris was recollected from selected parts and fragmented pieces such as the arcades, the cafés, the taverns and the parks, which is against the contiguity but for the ruptures. The ruptures embodied Benjamin’s flânerie that sparked the illumination of walking in the city. Thus, being the flâneur, Benjamin perceived the urban space of Paris as the “non-I,” and the “little universe” where he dreamt and wandered, disclosing a surrealist face of Paris, which he called the true face of the city. Benjamin’s Paris is revealed through a combination of various cities, including dialogues with Paris mentioned in the body of the text by Charles Baudelaire; by Victor Hugo; by Georges-Eugène Haussmann; by Georg Simmel; by Honoré de Balzac and by Louis Aragon, through which Paris is constructed with memories and dreams from various flâneurs.

The “profane illuminations” of the individual flânerie also resonate with the surrealist “luminous phenomenon” André Breton described in his Manifesto of Surrealism, which connects the sparks of “surrealist images” to that of flâneur’s “dream images.” Such a relationship between surrealist and flânerie is seemingly manifested through surrealist painter Gorgio de Chirico’s reverie of solitude in Versailles. He described the sparks of surrealist images in his flânerie as “one bright winter afternoon I found myself in the courtyard of the Palace of Versailles. Everything looked at me with a strange and questioning glance. I saw then that each column, each window had a soul that was enigma...At that moment I was filled with the sense of mystery that drives men to create certain things.”

Evidently, one can argue that flânerie elicits surrealist sparks in the field of urban phenomena endowed with emotions, in which the flâneurs experience the city with transcendent imagination.

Analogously, the navetteurs operate in the city mechanically where they are dispatched with a velocity that deprives themselves of engaging in a surrealist sensational phenomenon of urban experiences imparted with dreams and imagination. Therefore, this inextricable relation between flânerie and surrealism distinguishes the flâneur from the navetteur, whose individuality is dissimulated under the veil of repetitive predetermined itineraries fueled with peremptoriness.

FLÂNEUR OF PARIS AND HECTOR GUIMARD’S MÉTRO ENTRANCES

Walter Benjamin believed that a transformation for a flâneur took place with respect to the street, which led the flâneur through a vanished time, and he further stated that the streets were the dwelling place for urban life which he called the collective. The collective for the flâneur is a transformed domestic experience in the public urban space. Benjamin described the shop signs as the oil painting in the drawing-room of a bourgeois; the walls as writing desks, newspapers as libraries and the café terrace as the balcony; and that the urban street in the Paris arcade revealed itself as the furnished and familiar interior to the flâneurs. The city of Paris was made into “the promised land of flâneurs” that presented inhabitants with urban phenomena through flânerie, and it split into its “dialectic poles” which unfolded as a landscape to the flâneur and simultaneously enclosed the flâneur as “a parlor.”

Charles Baudelaire regards the perfect flâneur as a lover of pictures, who lived in a magical society of dreams painted on canvas and set up one’s house in the heart of the multitude, amid the “ebb and flow of movement,” in the midst of the “fugitive and infinitive.” The flâneurs does not live in the house, they observe beyond their windows and dwell beyond the boundaries of their walls to gaze upon the landscape of the great city, such as the flâneur figure Monsieur G. depicted in Baudelaire’s The Painter of Modern Life, who was regretful of staying in the house sleeping and having missed seeing the “illuminated things,” then went out to marvel at the eternal beauty and the amazing harmony of life in the city. Michel de Certeau argued that to be above the city ground and high in the elevation transfigures the urbanite into a “voyeur.” The voyeurism transforms the bewitching world by which one was “possessed” into a text that lies before one’s eyes, therefore, one can see and read the city at a distance. He then stated that the ordinary practitioners of the city who lives “down
In "A Berlin Chronicle," Walter Benjamin described Paris as a city of a maze which disclosed itself to him in the footsteps of a hermetic tradition of flânerie he traced back to Franz Hessel. He then argued that the Paris maze was not only of paths but also of the underground Métro tunnels and the hundreds of shafts of North-South line which can only be recollected through his endless flânerie.19 He emphasized that through unpromediated walking to lose oneself in the city was different than not being able to find one’s way in the city. To get lost in Paris, for Benjamin, was the “art of straying,” which fulfilled a dream that showed traces in the labyrinth.21 One would speculate that Benjamin must have encountered numerous metro entrance buildings in Paris designed by art nouveau architect Hector Guimard. While wandering inside Paris arcades, he might have seen the Quatre-Septembre station designed by Guimard after leaving the Passage Choiseul which is to the south of the metro station. Unlike the other competition entries that were nearly always conceived of as “houses,” which are complicated, however, allowing no or little lights to permeate from the outside,22 Hector Guimard’s metro entrances opened up the underground interior to the street level exterior, by doing so, bringing the exterior into the interior of unknowns and enigma. On the Etoile-Porte Dauphine link, the Porte Dauphine station (Figure 1) was designed according to the dragonfly B model prototype with the art nouveau style iron framework and the translucent glass roof canopy,23 which more or less resonated with the arcades in Paris, blurring the boundaries between interior and exterior, creating an airy and visual threshold where commuters walk between the “interior” underground and the “exterior” urban space. In this case, this interior is the enigmatic underground world of tunnels and shafts. However, this relationship is interchangeable. Guimard’s Paris Métro entrances spoke an individual identity to the flâneur of Paris through their unique mascarons, struts in the form of branching stems, lamps concealed with a large corolla that “shines like an eye behind half-closed lids,”24 which also acted as the decorated hanger stands or the doorway sculptures in a bourgeois’ house, transforming the exterior urban space into a flâneur’s living room and reversing the relationship of interior and exterior. The editorialist of the time described the Paris Métro entrances as “outward displays” to “hide the shabbiness underneath” with its utilitarian monumentality.25

The entrance was both a mask and an urban façade of the manifold Paris urban landscape. Located in the Jardins de l’Avenue-Foch, the Porte Dauphine station acts as a gateway echoing the Arc de Triomphe, where the flâneurs can find themselves lost between the monumental past and the utilitarian and technological present. It was from the utilitarian non-heroic buildings, surrealist painter Salvador Dali discovered his own flânerie reverie, as he described the Paris Métro entrances: “those divine entrances to the Métro, by the grace of which one can descend into the region of the subconscious of the living and monarchical aesthetic of tomorrow.”26 Being a flâneur, Walter Benjamin observed the Métro in Paris subconsciously through his endless flânerie, by which he claimed, constructing the underworld landscape of Paris Métro through imagination.27

For Salvador Dali and Walter Benjamin, their flânerie offered imagination and dreams of Paris through which they engage with the city in a field of surrealism phenomenon. The “divine entrances” were the mysterious portals for Dali, to which he surrendered himself and dreamt in the labyrinthine maze of enigmatic Pairs. The interplay between interior and exterior in urban space crafted through Benjamin’s urban perception model of flânerie transformed the public urban street into a domestic place in flâneurs’ eyes. The city is therefore constructed into a surrealist “house” sheltering flâneurs with intimate dimensions.
NAVETTEUR OF SHANGHAI AND TADAO ANDO’S PAVILION OF LIGHT

Do the early twentieth-century Paris flâneurs exist in the twenty-first century far-eastern megacity Shanghai, the so-called “Paris of the Orient” of the 1920s to 1930s? In today’s Shanghai, the flâneur has dissimulated themselves in the immediacy and velocity of commutes in the city and transformed into the navetteur by virtue of mass urbanization. The navetteur is the contemporary counterpart to the flâneur who navigates the city with rapid underground metros. They disengage themselves from the urban fabric and travel through the city with rapidity and directionality, which demystifies the city into a map of routes and destinations and dissipates the subconscious surrealist engagements manifested through the endless flânerie. Navetterie emerged from contemporary Shanghai as a necessity in response to the mass metro development that exploded the city into multiple urban cores and destructed the traditional intimate dimensions of a city. A contemporary Shanghai native-born literary critic commented that infrastructure facilities, such as metro stations in Shanghai, form a sort of servant and master relationship with the real estate, neither having choices in their locations nor having anything to do with urban planning.28 For navetteurs in Shanghai, the underground metro maze is perceived as a juxtaposed layer interwoven by intertwining and intersecting metro lines and stations, which confronts the traditional urban core of the city with estranged exteriority. It provides navetteurs with the instruction for navigations in a contemporary labyrinthine city depicted with lines and points, upon which navetteurs are bestowed with a sense of orientation.

Unlike flâneurs who approach the city through spontaneous discoveries, Navetteurs approach the city through reoccurring metro stations. The metro stations constantly deliver navetteurs with surprise attacks, presenting them with shifting photographs or snapshots every time when they arrive at a new metro station, thus gives orders to the navetteurs.29 At the People’s Square metro station in Shanghai, the station provides navetteurs with abundant metro maps, signage, time schedules, and instructions for transferring between metro lines and illustrates directions to the connected underground shopping malls, escalators, restaurants, and passages to the street level exits that are marked with “iconic” buildings. Consequently, navetteurs are imparted with the knowledge of the city in this catalog of information and memorize the city as data. Their perceptions of the city are solidified with static, immobile, and isolated urban elements that entail street names, iconic buildings, metro stations, and travel times. As navetteurs journey through the underground, they are demarcated in the “walls” of the metro station, constantly being assailed with shocks of the changing pages of such a city catalog. Therefore, traveling in the metro network, the navetteur is dislocated, dispatched and deposited, and the perception of the city is formed through the changing metro stations within a matter of minutes.

They execute their movements repetitively without engaging with the city at a sensational level that yields “dream images,” and as a result, they remember the city with patterns, durations, and fragments. For Walter Benjamin, the flâneur’s urban experience and perception are like a film that commands optical approaches to the essence of the city.30 However, the navetterie phenomena in the city embody disconnected and dichotomous experiences, that disguise a true city into a series of postcards. The navetteurs are parts of the postcards in navetterie phenomena while traveling on the metros, as during which they become motionless. As Beatriz Colomina said, the immobility of urbanites who sat in a “modern” square rendered them invisible and indecipherable, like being an “object in an exhibition.”31 Comparably, the navetteurs are deprived of faculties to gaze into the city when they remain immobile on a metro train, and instead, some of them enter into fabricated virtual worlds through mobile devices, during which they become invisible from the urban phenomena. If the metro stations are the mask of the city, then the navetteurs are no less part of the mask than presented with a mask of the city. Their journeys in the city resemble finality and fixity, anchored with abruptly shifting city fragments.

A scholar of Chinese studies Leo Ou-fan Lee argued that by comparison to the history of Paris, Shanghai developed into a modern metropolis within only a few decades during the early twentieth century; it is a city whose material splendor seems to have dazzled its writers that they had not yet developed the detached and reflective mentality characteristic of the Parisian flâneur.32 Citing Walter Benjamin’s description of arcades in Paris Lee stated that “glass-covered, marble-paneled passageways” are “the world that the flâneur is at home.”33 However, he observed that the urban space of Shanghai, at the end of the twentieth century, did not necessarily provide such a world that the Chinese flâneur would regard as domestic.34 The urban space in Shanghai posited clear boundaries to the private domestic space because unlike the arcades that offered a sense of domesticity to the Parisian urban life, the massive department stores in Shanghai only offered felicitous dining and entertainment venues for the rising Shanghai middle class by mixing more programs in the urban buildings.

In contemporary Shanghai, however, there are opportunities in the city for the returns of flâneurs from navetteurs to occur. At a certain moment of navetteurs’ urban life, the twenty-first century Shanghai provides some urban places that evoke sensations and offer surrealist experiences to the navetteurs, which interrupt the immediacy of navetterie and transform the navetteur into a flâneur. One place that elicits this transformation is the egg-shaped bookstore and gallery “building” Tadao Ando designed for a commercial complex called the Xinhua Redstar Landmark in Shanghai. Anchoring on the rooftop of the metro commercial complex, the egg-shaped structure contains a bookstore and an art gallery that appears to float above the streets of Shanghai (Figure 2). The structure entails
Ando's design of a two-story block in the upper stories of the existing commercial complex which was not designed by Ando. In Ando’s building, the lower level bookstore and the upper level privately owned art gallery called Pearl Art Museum are both enclosed within the egg-shaped double-height void wrapped in bookshelves. The bookstore’s entrance is on the seventh floor inside the commercial complex and is accessible from Shanghai metro line ten, as the metro station underneath this commercial complex brings people directly to the ground floor of the complex where navetteurs can find themselves being relocated from an estranged underground space to an urban interior space on the ground. One can argue that such an urban commercial complex in Shanghai that is designed to integrate with metro stations resonates with the arcades in Paris, where urbanites claimed as domestic habitations. Tadao Ando asserted that his design was originated from the idea of “an egg cradled by a bird”, and he wanted to implant the egg within the skyline of the vibrant city of Shanghai as an expression of hope for the future, bringing the “light of culture” nourished by books and art. \(^{35}\) One can proclaim that “the light of culture” instills an unexpected surrealist intervention amongst the navetteurs’ ordinary commuting, offering hopes to the loss of culture due to the mass of navetiterie, and serve to revolt against the masking of identity.

This unanticipated intrusion of a journey corresponds to the unexpected sensational phenomena arisen from incessant flânerie. It also resonates with the surprise characteristic pavilion in traditional Chinese gardens, where the solitude idler stops for good scenic views (jing) during one’s meandering. Ming dynasty Chinese garden scholar Ji Cheng cited Tang dynasty Chinese poet Sikong Tu in his garden treatise Yuan ye (The Craft of Gardens, 1631) to explain that the Chinese term for “pavilion” (ting) means to stop and rest which indicates a pavilion as the place for one to reverie in their own ruminations.\(^{36}\) The garden pavilions provide the place for solitude idlers to appreciate the scenery that stirs emotions and recite poetry after waking from dreams.\(^{37}\) The bookstore/gallery in Shanghai brings navetteurs to a momentary retreat like the pavilions in a Chinese garden, where the rigid navetiterie is disrupted with fluid flânerie. The bookstore/gallery seduces navetteurs, exposing their own identities and individualities by calling for a return to the flâneurs. Such a relationship was manifested between cafés in Berlin and Walter Benjamin. Benjamin argued that the Romanische Café, the same as other cafés in Berlin provided intimate domestic places for the flâneurs, who occupied them as they were homes for their minds.\(^{38}\) Ando’s bookstore/gallery acts as such a domestic place of retreat for Shanghai urbanites, just as the cafés were for the flâneurs of Paris and Berlin, from which their identities are both unveiled from masks.
Albeit being a single building, the bookstore/gallery offers us insight for constructing an urban pattern with nodes of such archetypal retreats in contemporary cities, that can interrupt the immediacy and directionality of navetterie and bring back the flânerie, through which reconnecting urbanites of the twenty-first century with the city they inhabit in a field of surrealist phenomena that shelter their imagination.

CONCLUSION: THE RETURN OF THE FLÂNEUR

In Paris, the flâneur dwelled in the public urban space and permeated the urban space with sensations, memories, and imagination through idiomatic flânerie and subconsciously transformed it into an interior and domestic territory, illuminating a surrealist phenomenon. The city, as a consistent structure, established a holistic and intimate relationship with the flâneur and revealed itself as a mnemonic mechanism that evoked dream images for flâneurs. The flâneur “opens” the city and crafts urban perceptions with inward individualities. In Shanghai, the navetteur is lost in the mass of the metro vessels that connect the city through speed, orientation, and repetition. Their relationship with the city is immediate, estranged and exhausted. The city, as a network of fragmented pieces, is revealed to the navetteurs as a rigidly designed catalog that buries navetteurs’ individuality and deprives them of dreams and imagination. The navetteurs therefore “close” the city and confine their urban perceptions with detached conformity.

As a result of mass urbanization, contemporary cities craft a new reification of “phantasmagorias” through mass urban developments, in which the navetteurs have become the norm and navetterie a necessity. However, they act as manifestations to the contemporary “phantasmagorias,” rather than as the participants who appreciate and gaze into such “phantasmagorias” like the historical flâneurs. One can argue that contemporary Paris harbors similar navetteurs amid the mass urbanization. Shifting from flâneurs to navetteurs, the problematic urban perceptions of navetterie disconnect themselves from reveries and sensations that bestow the urbanity with surrealistic phenomena, which have diminished their individuality. By re-examining Tadao Ando’s bookstore/gallery in Shanghai, one can disclose these nodes of surrealist retreats as patterns in the city to embrace the fragmentation of contemporary cities with a surrealist approach and, through dreams and imagination, stitch it back together. By doing so, dreams and imagination can be illuminated again in the profane urban space, through which the city is re-constructed and perceived in the eye of a flâneur.

Recognizing Navetterie’s disengaged urban perceptions provokes us to revisit the urban space with transcendent emotions, spontaneous encounters, and bodily senses so that one can reflect on the predicament of contemporary cities through the lens of a flâneur and incite earnestly the calling for the return of flâneurs.

ENDNOTES

2. Ibid., 21.
8. Benjamin, Walter Benjamin, 211.
13. Ibid., 879.
16. Ibid., 10.
18. Ibid., 93.
23. Ibid., 155.
25. Ibid., 88.
26. Ibid., 88.
27. Benjamin, Reflections, 9.
29. Benjamin, Reflections, 8.
30. Ibid., 8.
33. Ibid., 38.
34. Ibid., 38.
37. Ibid., 121.
38. Benjamin, Reflections, 22-23.