

# The City as a Spectacular Monster and the Hysterical Baudrillardian Flâneur

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**Gian Carla D. Agbisit**  
University of Santo Tomas  
Manila, Philippines

## abstract

Propelled by the new kind of capitalism, and aided by a scientific and technological progress that culminates in virtual perfection, the city has now become both the producer and the consumer of spectacle. Caught in a tangle of means and ends, the spectacle that used to be merely an icing of the cake, a tiny ribbon of the dress, a glitter, or a slight shimmer, has become the product to be consumed.

## keywords

**City, Consumer, Spectacle, Hysteria, Flâneur**





*All societies end up wearing masks.*  
-Jean Baudrillard, *America*

## **Media, Image and Voyeurism**

According to Neil Postman,<sup>1</sup> the development of technological communication ushered in a shift from elaborate prosaic letters to the word bursts of the telegram. Because of the problems of space and time and the difficulty of bridging these, together with the cost of sending one, writing a letter required the sender to elaborate a point, to lengthen a story, to anticipate (and answer) possible questions, and to clarify passages that could be misunderstood by the reader. These messages were carefully constructed and there was a sense of finality to it. The ease of communication that the telegram presents permitted man to send messages that have a sense of urgency. Today, instant messaging technology, and the cheap price that comes with it, allowed man the luxury to send messages that are not necessarily carefully thought of or constructed—messages that are banal; messages that are without depth; even messages that taunt.

In Postman's analysis of Marshall McLuhan's "the medium is the message,"<sup>2</sup> modes of communication that are tied to modes of production lead to an epistemological shift. With the telegraph comes the possibility, then the prevalence of bite-sized information. The value of elaboration has lost its place, and it has been replaced by images that whole-heartedly and almost instantly flashes the reader the very picture the reader was once tasked to imagine. Once, there were descriptions like cornflower blue that reminds one of children with crayons, long summers, and young men with unrequited love. Now, one needs only to

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<sup>1</sup>See Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (USA: Penguin Books, 1986).

<sup>2</sup>Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet Books, 1964), 23-35.

look at the picture. This change in communication became the rule that imposes upon everything the demand that each idea is always to be accompanied by an image, or to be an image itself. The image is no longer the accessorial element of the message. The image is now the message, and the caption serves only as an extra wreath that celebrates the death of the meaning in the triumph of appearances. In fact, Daniel Boorstin writes:

the images themselves become shadowy mirror reflections of one another: one interview comments on another; one television show spoofs another; novel, television show, radio program, movie, comic book, and the way we think of ourselves, all become merged into mutual reflections.<sup>3</sup>

The image has triumphed. Consequently, the city houses urbanites that have become worshippers of images. The senses of hearing, of smelling, of tasting, and of touching have been superseded by the rule of seeing. Everything has to appear, because it can appear. Hence everything has to be seen. In addition, the new technological ability to zoom in to pixelated bits—like an instantaneous subjection under a microscope—permitted us to put each other under lewd scrutiny. This is obscenity, this demand for transparency, this need for constant surveillance, this sick taste for the close-up. Baudrillard comments: “Today there is a pornography of information and communication... it is no longer the obscenity of the repressed, the obscure, but of the visible... it is the... obscenity of that which no longer contains a secret.”<sup>4</sup> We are not the peeping Tom, with cameras and secret knives hidden in the cinema’s darkness, whose voyeurism is still something to be ashamed of. We don’t even walk softly anymore. We have become the perverted voyeur brazen with the demand that everything must be under the spell of the panopticon; surveillance must penetrate the nanoscale; everything in a fast-forward burlesque show. Truth has been stripped down, and its “nudity wraps it in second skin, which no longer has even the erotic charm of a

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<sup>3</sup>Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 258.

<sup>4</sup>Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, trans. Bernard and Caroline Schutze (New York: Semiotext(e), 1988), 22.

dress.”<sup>5</sup> And how could it, when all secrets have been revealed and publicized? The dress of reality is gone, but also its epidermis, and its muscles. We are nothing but tiny cancer cells in proliferation.

“The [spectacular society] made ocular vision an analogue for knowing.”<sup>6</sup> And only what appears is truth. Buried under the debris of collapsed differences, meaning was unearthed and transferred to a glass case in a museum. It was only meant to be looked at. For some this is not oppression per se, as oppression for some theorists necessarily happens to people. And yet this has to be deemed as is oppression precisely because the other is oppressed, no longer because he was forced to hide, but because he was never allowed to. The other is eradicated through encoding his other-ness into the system.

[The] voyeur’s eye has always been complicitous with patriarchy and racism. It has been attuned to a form of spectatorship that turns the female and alien ethnic or racial other into a site for the scopic and investigative pleasures of the state and the masculine eyes of the police, the Peeping Tom or the private investigator.<sup>7</sup>

Oppression is mummifying the indigenous in their *bahags*. Oppression is trapping the woman in the pedestal of fashion magazines and consumerism. Oppression is choking the LGBTQ community of feather boas. Oppression is blinding the revolutionaries with Cannes awards and plaques of appreciation. Oppression is precisely the reduction of the other to mini spectacles in the show.

Each stage of servitude is both more subtle and worse than the one which precedes it. Involuntary servitude, the servitude of the slave, is overt violence. Voluntary servitude is a violence consented to: a freedom to will, but not the will to be free. Last comes voluntary self-servitude or enslavement to one’s own will: the individual possesses the faculty to will but is no longer

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<sup>5</sup>Jean Baudrillard, *Perfect Crime*, trans Chris Turner, (London/New York: Verso, 1996), 3.

<sup>6</sup>Norman Denzin, *The Cinematic Society: The Voyeur’s Gaze*, (USA: SAGE, 1995), 193.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 192.

free in respect to it. He is the automatic agent of that faculty. He is the serf to no master but himself.<sup>8</sup>

Oppression is the eradication of meaning, and therefore, the eradication of the other. We have made something into a wonderful spectacle, and that could have been harmless if that wonderful something was not something we live in. The closing gap between illusion and reality, between entertainment and real life, between commercials and current events, is the eradication of the foul smell of the city through air-conditioning, the elimination of rough bumpy roads, and the flattening of valleys and hills and mountain to create the expressway of deserts. Baudrillard writes:

The best strategy for bringing about someone's ruin is to eliminate everything which threatens him, thus causing him to lose all his defences, and it is this strategy we are applying to ourselves... What becomes of a master without a slave? He ends up terrorizing himself. And of a slave without a master? He ends up exploiting himself.<sup>9</sup>

Because of the spectacular society, meaning is lost, and the other is eradicated. But it is not altogether true to say that we have become desensitized like cold metallic robots. We are half-crazed salivating Pavlovian dogs, conditioned to go 'ooh' and 'aah,' out of shock, out of bliss, out of ignorance, out of sheer desperation, but most of all, out of spectacular entertainment.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Jean Baudrillard, *Impossible Exchange* (London: Verso, 2001), 61.

<sup>9</sup>Baudrillard, *Perfect Crime*, 113.

<sup>10</sup>In Guy Debord's society of spectacle, the environmental effects of a highly urbanized city serve as the differential factors that reinforce the society's greatness, and in turn, we are conditioned to respond the way the society expects us to respond: to maintain the spectacle. He writes: "The spectacle makes no secret of the fact that certain dangers surround the wonderful order it has established. Ocean pollution and the destruction of equatorial forests threaten oxygen renewal; the earth's ozone layer is menaced by industrial growth; nuclear radiation accumulates irreversibly. It merely concludes that none of these things matter. It will only talk about dates and measures. And on these alone, it is successfully reassuring - something which a pre-spectacular mind would have thought impossible" (Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of Spectacle*, trans., Malcolm Imrie [London/New York: Verso, 1990, 34).

## Spectacle as Reproducing Difference

In his essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin notices that with the dawn of mass reproduction comes the democratization of culture that changed the way we produce, and consume images.<sup>11</sup> Hence, these new technics of production, through the democratization of culture, broke down the barrier between high art and low art. At the same time, these technics, by paving the way for economic progress, gradually shattered the seemingly strict divisions of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Because of the collapse of these historically installed differences, social differentiation became the value to uphold. In the past, one's access to education, or culture, or prestigious goods marks one's position in the social hierarchy. Now, through mass reproduction and democratization of culture, accessibility is greatly enhanced – today, anyone, can have a diploma, anyone can download a Beethoven, and anyone can have a smart phone. This radicalized the manner by which we consume, out of which a new form of 'difference' ensues. Personality became a commodity, and everyone has to insist on being a unique snowflake.

Also tied to Benjamin's critique of mass reproduction and culture production is his account of the history of the image. To a large extent, the history of photography and cinema and the evolution of the camera maybe seen as a microscopic representation of what is happening in all levels of production. The history of photography and cinema is perhaps the best metaphor, as the digital camera is also capable of mass reproducing the image, not to mention, of efficiently capturing an image, its spatial and temporal dimensions without human inaccuracy.<sup>12</sup> Together with the phenomenon of mass

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<sup>11</sup>See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968), 218-219.

<sup>12</sup>Benjamin writes: "To an ever-greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the 'authentic' print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based

reproduction is the emphasis of difference, specifically visual difference, and the speed in which visual difference changes into something else.

Hence, a cake is not a cake – at least not in its own right – if it does not have its own unique icing, and own unique design, and own unique gimmick. Forget the taste; what matters is how different it looks. A dress is not a dress if it does not have a name, and does not belong into a collection, and is not first introduced to the world in a runway. Image is the new function.

Because of mass reproduction, because of the flattening of differences, to be different became a duty.<sup>13</sup> And all the more is it a duty in the city. It is the seat of civilization, and the nucleus of the pulsating atomic energy of technology. Densely packed with a rapid succession of technological innovations, the city is a black hole<sup>14</sup> that makes futile any attempt to escape the spectacle.

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on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice – politics” (Ibid., 236).

<sup>13</sup>This is not a matter of creating false needs. In fact, Baudrillard’s critique of Marxism and the consumer society makes Baudrillard deny the idea of *true* or *real* needs. It is just that the way we think, our epistemological bias, has changed because of these new modes of production. The possibility of having multiple copies of one image, without diminishing the quality, the color, made us disregard certain images, and uphold the images that we think are irreproducible. The portraits, despite not being completely capable of mimicking or representing the face, are of a higher value than a digital copy of a photograph. Baudrillard, influenced by Benjamin, takes the analysis of technics further to insist upon how simulation works in a society where the idea of original no longer makes sense. Simulation is becoming more and more complicated, and multifaceted that it can now maintain the perpetual illusion of reality.

<sup>14</sup>Paul Virilio writes: “The phrase ‘to go into town’, which replaced the nineteenth-century’s ‘to go to town’, indicates the uncertainty of the encounter, as if we could no longer stand before the city but rather abide forever within... The city is no longer organized into a localized and axial estate. While the suburbs contributed to this dissolution, in fact the intramural-extramural opposition collapsed with the transport revolutions and the development of communication and telecommunications technologies. These promoted the merger of disconnected metropolitan fringes into a single urban mass” (“The Overexposed City,” in *The Blackwell City Reader*, eds. G. Bridge and S. Watson [UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2002], 441).

In fact, the city has become, in itself, a grand spectacle that uses the reification of categories as a differential device that helps perpetuate the spectacle. To maintain the spectacle does not merely mean a succession of fireworks and dance sequences in everyday life. To maintain the spectacle also means to declare holidays from spectacles, hence, making work Mondays, school nights, and 30<sup>th</sup> birthdays as much part of the spectacular as all the other events. In this light, Baudrillard writes:

Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulacrum... [And anywhere else] one recycles lost faculties, or lost bodies, or lost sociality, or the lost taste for food. One reinvents penury, asceticism, vanished savage naturalness: natural food, health food, yoga.<sup>15</sup>

This is to be the open secret of simulation. The society is turning itself inside out, then outside in, over and over. Medical technology that promises immortality memorializes death. Aesthetic surgeries celebrate natural beauty. Pornography glorifies the purity of the innocent. Capitalism advertises thrift. Our preoccupation with difference makes identity a museum artefact, and patriotism, a historical chapter.

These barriers are nothing but a collage of cut-up pictures and computer-generated emoticons that serve as signposts of context. Here is where the private ends and the public begins. These barriers, because they are merely appearances, do not keep one from crossing the line. They make possible a logically contradictory world because the reified binary oppositions are differences only in so much as they are encoded within the system. With the artificial suns of mass reproduction in its high noon, showing no sign of setting, or letting up, everything lost its shadow. All shadows have become active performers themselves, no different, and no longer dependent on the bodies they were supposed to underscore.

Meanwhile, the real and the illusory are in an irreversible collision where everything is destined to be shared: blood and

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<sup>15</sup>Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (USA: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 12-13.



body, shadows and reflections. On the one hand, the subject is objectified. He is polished and prepackaged, labelled and advertised, and sold to himself. He looks up to the mannequin, and personally personalizes his personality for the plastic model's approval. On the other hand, the object is taking the place of the subject. It is reified in its omnipresence. It transcends even the materiality of consumer goods. It is a god glorified in its pseudo-novelty – the iPhone in its second coming, and third, and fourth and so on. Each instance is a renewed judgment day: Are you urban enough?

Both Baudrillard and Benjamin recognize that mass reproduction has made the idea of the original meaningless. Everything is a copy of a copy without changes of quality, of form, of color. And because everything could be copied, because everything could be politicized or aestheticized or sexualized, values, traditions and meanings have been trivialized. Baudrillard asks, "What has become of the constellation of meaning in all this?"<sup>16</sup> The importance of the other as the other, its respectable position, is diluted in the world of appearances. In the same light, Paul Virilio writes:

What used to be the boundary of a material, its 'terminus', has become an entryway hidden in the most imperceptible entity. From here on, the appearance of surfaces and superficialities conceals a secret transparency, a thickness without thickness, a volume without volume, an imperceptible quantity... This overexposed attracts our attention to the extent that it offers a world without antipodes and without hidden aspects, a world in which opacity is but a momentary interlude.<sup>17</sup>

All of these contribute to a different kind of oppression that is more subtle and more epistemological than physical. These modes of production are changing the society. And while the most apparent of these contributions are the physical changes that are easily visible in the society, the epistemological biases that these technics produce are perhaps more significant.

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<sup>16</sup>Jean Baudrillard, *Perfect Crime*, trans by Chris Turner (London/New York: Verso, 1996), 4.

<sup>17</sup>Virilio, "The Overexposed City," 443-444.

## The Hysterical Flâneur in Manila's Dreams

Social theorists and critics, especially of the 1960's, noticed the significant changes of the society they live in. The economic and technological progress and its social effects demanded a new critique that could respond to conspicuous consumption, image-valorization, and so on. This new critique also includes a deviation from the classical Marxist theory of labor and capital.<sup>18</sup> In Baudrillard's case, he took Marxist theory to the turf of semiotics and semiology. He married Marx to cultural practices, sociological viewpoints, and the virtual world. Using the critique of capitalism as a springboard, the Baudrillardian projectile crossed pre-modern symbolic exchange, crossed art, culture, politics, and cyberspace, crossed sci-fi and postmodern pataphysics, and its trajectory became too unreasonable for academics to take seriously.<sup>19</sup> The most sympathetic to Baudrillard's theory, therefore, would advise a "selective forgetting" of Baudrillard.<sup>20</sup> They would insist that not only is

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<sup>18</sup>After the failure of traditional Marxism, social critics believed that Marx's theory needs to be extended and analyzed alongside other theoretical frameworks such as literary criticism, semiotics, psychoanalysis and sociology in order to be able to respond to the new social pathology. Despite his Marxist influence, however, Baudrillard believed that more than the misinterpretation and reification of Marxist theories, Marx also made certain mistakes that allowed for the failure of Marxism to happen.

<sup>19</sup>See Christopher Norris, "Lost in the Funhouse: Baudrillard and the Politics of Postmodernism" in *Textual Practice*, vol.3, no.3 (1989), 360-387; Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (London: Macmillan, 1991). Arthur Vidich, "Baudrillard's America: Lost in the Ultimate Simulacrum," and J. Hoberman, "Lost in America: Jean Baudrillard, Extraterrestrial."

<sup>20</sup>This idea was borrowed from Richard Gilman-Opalsky, *Spectacular Capitalism: Guy Debord and the Practice of Radical Philosophy* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2011), 34-62. Others who share the same sentiment, and even more sympathetic are Chris Rojek and Bryan Turner's "Introduction: Regret Baudrillard?" in *Forget Baudrillard* (London/New York: Routledge, 1993), ix-xviii, where Rojek and Turner emphasized Baudrillard's importance as the exposition of "the limitations of certain established ways of thinking about 'society,' 'culture' and 'meaning'" (xvi), and Rex Butler's *Jean Baudrillard: The Defence of the Real* (London: SAGE Publications, 1999).

Baudrillard's theory only applicable to highly developed cities, it is also the case that the existing highly developed cities, at least in Baudrillard's time, are not even postmodern enough for a Baudrillardian theory, that is, that Baudrillard's astral America is not the real America. However, for some theorists, calculating the speed of technological progress,<sup>21</sup> they would concede that Baudrillard's theory does seem relevant today, but only in highly developed cities.

### **Manila, Reality and Simulation**

The vertigo of a vertical city<sup>22</sup> is radically different from the crawling buildings of Manila, its convoluted streets that twist and turn like snakes shedding skin, and the corrugated aluminium Lego blocks of houses precariously balanced on a tightrope of faults. The worry over the tyranny of an urban planner who will scrub the city clean of culture becomes a privilege in a city in dire need of order. And yet curiously, Manila is also a spectacle that reproduces and perfectly hides the same subtle oppressions as that of affluent cities.

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<sup>21</sup>Today, full face transplants have already been done. There have been discussions regarding head transplants that are alleged to be possible in two years' time. Panels are convened for geoengineering discussions that would try to mitigate global warming. Military funds in America go to bionic arms and possible mind-controlled aircraft.

<sup>22</sup>See Michel de Certeau, "Walking in the City" in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans by Steven Rendall (USA: University of California Press, 1984), 91. It seems that social theorists of the late 1960's, especially those influenced by Marxist theories were wary of what is behind the projection of an affluent city. Along with de Certeau are Henri Lefebvre, Walter Benjamin, Baudrillard, Boorstin, Vance Packard, Lewis Mumford, etc. After all, due to the rapid economic progress after the industrial revolution, there came significant changes that man was not prepared for; changes such as the new critique that a new form of capitalism demands. There are cities however that are still developing. And yet they are still part of the global society where it has become possible to experience a lifestyle of conspicuous consumption. In cities such as these, therefore, is the most appropriate critique still the traditional Marxism?

For Baudrillard, the affluence of cities is a simulation.<sup>23</sup> The presence of peace pacts and environmental laws, the improvement of the economy, and the rise of scientific and technological progress create the illusion of freedom. But peace pacts are not peace. Environmental laws presuppose environmental degradation. Economic improvement takes to a different level the idea of social classes. And today's version of scientific and technological progress takes away the ambivalence of meaning through calculation. Affluence, growth, and progress veil the subtle oppressions these very 'values' perpetuate.

However, in Manila, and perhaps in other developing cities, simulation presents a different face. Manila's stark difference from affluent cities—its lack of urban planning, its complete disregard of any tinge of scientific calculation, and its tango with order—is the cradle that allows the monster to grow. This poverty is a two-pronged weapon that cripples the revolutionary consciousness of the masses while inducing the dream of a utopian First World, and it derails the revolutionary-conscious intellectual from addressing the present future because in the present *present* poverty is the *real* problem.<sup>24</sup>

For others, it seems that simulation, precisely because it is propelled by the development of technics, is completely tied to it, that is, the tyranny of simulation can only happen after the billboards of affluence, growth and progress have been successfully installed. It seems that Baudrillard's perfect crime can never be executed by parched bodies and starving minds; that grumbling stomachs and grubby faces translate to reality, and only blissful nonchalance could be made into masks. And

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<sup>23</sup>Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London: SAGE, 1998), 51.

<sup>24</sup>When Baudrillard declared that the "gulf war did not happen," critics retorted that Baudrillard's rhetoric steals away people's attention from the real problem, that is, that people died in a war. And yet, it seems that for Baudrillard, this declaration is more than just a literary device. We have to pay attention towards the absurdity that real people died in a war that does not happen, that did not happen, that will never happen, in a war that is not a war. In the same manner, perhaps it is time to pay attention to the issue of poverty as not merely an economic problem, as something that is no longer just an economic problem, but as something that has also become a problem of culture and meaning.

yet isn't this a simulation too? Isn't it a stronger simulation when the entertainment becomes a little too real?

Baudrillard clarifies that simulation is not the opposite of reality. In fact, in a double strategy, it is simulation that makes possible reality.<sup>25</sup> Like Nietzsche, Baudrillard believed that man can never access Reality, that is, that what we call 'real' is nothing but a by-product of thought.<sup>26</sup> It "[refers] to what is commonly taken to comprise the common world (i.e. both social and natural) that we turn up in... reality is thus determined collectively and cooperatively, that is, in an agnostic way."<sup>27</sup> Reality is a reservoir that comprises the individual contributions of one's narratives, and memories, experiences and expressions, ideas and ideals. And yet like water, this reality can never be consumed as it is. It has to be purified by the biases of science, and philosophy, and politics, and art. Narratives are trimmed down to facts, memories to historical dates. Experiences and expressions, ideas and ideals, are preserved only according to whether you were once an influential person. Our material conditions, what we see, feel, and touch are also part of reality. But even these go through the filter. It is only after the purification process that the conceptual reality could be consumed.<sup>28</sup> Everything else is considered as an illusion. It is in this sense that Baudrillard insists that he is a 'reality agnostic.'<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>See Rex Butler, *Jean Baudrillard: The Defence of the Real*, (London, SAGE Publications, 1999), 23.

<sup>26</sup>Baudrillard writes: "[Reality] is but a concept, or a principle, and by reality I mean the whole system of values connected with this principle. The Real as such implies an origin, an end, a past and a future, a chain of causes and effects, a continuity and a rationality" (in *The Vital Illusion*, ed. Julia Witwer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 63.

<sup>27</sup>Gilman-Opalsky, *Spectacular Capitalism: Guy Debord and the Practice of Radical Philosophy* (London/New York: Minor Compositions, 2011), 48.

<sup>28</sup>For Baudrillard, this is also simulation. In a sense, simulation is part of the reality. Simulation is the filtered representation. Baudrillard insists that we can never really know whether our representation of Reality has resemblance, to say the least. And even then, whatever is outside our representation remains elusive.

<sup>29</sup>See Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Berg, 2005), 87-90.

Baudrillard believes that he can never speak of Reality, that to speak and think of reality is always to speak and think of its simulation, and for Baudrillard, the problem lies elsewhere. The problem lies precisely in the shadow who demands the annihilation of the body, because in the spectacular society, the shadow can exist alone. In cities like Manila, the case is quite different. Precisely because the problem has grown to spectacular proportions, the filtered reality is that of the present poverty, and poverty alone, and the solution to the 'real' problem is progress – without question.

This is not to say that Manila's problem is not that of poverty. It still is. But it is already as meaningless as the good things in the affluent cities. In Manila, poverty has become ambiguous. It means being a Badjao beggar in jeepney rides, singing pop songs from the radio. It means having to live in someone else's property or under bridges or in streets with flat screen TV's and portable DVD players. It means having to quit school only to end up as a latte-sipping Makati call center agent. Poverty is still poverty, but now, it has also become a spectacle. Admitting poverty entails a performance, the *kariton* is one's stage, and the show never stops.

In affluent cities, meaning is lost and the other is eradicated because everything has become spectacularly beautiful, because the city is planned and it has become inclusive, providing homes even for the homeless – the city's eyes, wide open, strained. In Manila, meaning is lost and the other is eradicated because dreaming of the affluent cities' homes for the homeless required closing one's eyes. In Manila, everything is a dream, and our entire lives are all about waiting for a chance to wake up in America.

Cities that are not cities, cities like Manila, are the middle children of historical changes. Their street corners are someone else's nostalgia, of old aristocrats and Spanish occupation, ancestral houses and Capiz windows on the same street as residential condominiums connected to big malls. With its Pasig River and Quiapo church, and the posh Makati malls with English-speaking security guards, Manila is a snake, frozen in mid-shedding. It is not Los Angeles with its palm trees as much a participant of the ambiance culture as air-conditioners. But still, with America being what it is, and Manila being a part of the global society, Manila of convoluted intestine streets dreams

of being sorted out. Despite everything, the drama of the Philippine proletariat demands an ending that will mirror the simulation of affluent societies. Despite the warnings of conspicuous consumption, and its voyeuristic tendencies, social theory pleads Manila to fulfill a First World destiny, that is, to forget projection and futurism. We are being asked to drive the machine, without looking beyond the horizon. After all, how can a flâneur walk in a city that is yet to dream of the Arcades?

### **The Flâneur's Radical Thought**

Taking after Baudrillard's idea that the demise of Marxist theory is its preoccupation with the concepts of labor and capital, and its "romanticization of the [proletariat]" that "[lead] to the reification of capitalist production as an independent variable,"<sup>30</sup> the traditional Marxist, still enchanted by the drama of the proletariat, can never recognize, and therefore, can never respond to the oppression of the banality of meaning, not in wide-awake America, and not in dreaming Manila. Perhaps, even, the traditional Marxist critique of society is a dream that leads to the fulfilment of the spectacular society. In addition, because of the cultural turn, critics like Walter Benjamin and Michel de Certeau would suggest a critic that does not occupy the place of the voyeur. The voyeur or the urban planner occupies a space that already presupposes an authority, a kind of elitist separation, almost fascist. De Certeau writes:

To be lifted to the summit of the World Trade Center is to be lifted out of the city's grasp. One's body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous

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<sup>30</sup>Gilman-Oplasky, *Spectacular Capitalism*, 39. Also, in the same light, Baudrillard writes: "This position of revolt is no longer that of the economically exploited; it aims less at the extortion of surplus value than at the imposition of the code, which inscribes the present strategy of social domination... It is a revolt of those who have been pushed aside, who have never been able to speak or have their voices heard... These revolts do not profile class struggle... The working class is no longer the gold standard of revolts and contradictions. There is no longer a revolutionary subject of reference" (Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production* [USA: Telos Press, 1975], 134-140).

law; nor is it possessed, whether as player or played, by the rumble of so many differences and by the nervousness of New York traffic. When one goes up there, he leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors or spectators. An Icarus flying above these waters, he can ignore the devices of Daedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths far below. His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was “possessed” into a text that lies before one’s eyes. It allows one to read, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god.<sup>31</sup>

There is an importance in being down there, in the city, being a part of the mass, rolled into it like clay, like dough. A panoramic view of the city is not enough, nor is it important. To witness the city’s explosion from a viewing deck or a rooftop is still to ogle at the city’s spectacle. One must live in the city. One must feel the quiver of the earth beneath one’s feet, what de Certeau calls the rumble, the nervousness. It is not enough to merely see. One must feel and hear the city’s vibrations, and that is why one must walk in it as well, that is, to subject oneself to the possibility of being lost, to the possibility of seeing anew. According to Benjamin,

The power of a country road is different when one is walking along it from when one is flying over it by airplane. In the same way, the power of a text is different when it is read from when it is copied out. The airplane passenger sees only how the road pushes through the landscape, how it unfolds according to the same laws as the terrain surrounding it. Only he who walks on the road on foot learns of the power it commands, and how, from the very scenery that for the flier is only the unfurled plain, it calls forth distances, belvederes, clearings, prospects at each of its turns like a commander deploying soldiers at a front. Only the copied text thus commands the soul of him who is occupied with it, whereas the mere reader never discovers the new aspects of his inner self that are opened by the text, that road cut through the interior jungle forever closing behind it: because the reader follows the movement of his mind in the free flight of day-dreaming, whereas the copier submits it to command.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, (California/London: University of California Press, 1994), 92.

<sup>32</sup>Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street* (UK: Verso, 1979), 50.



Both de Certeau and Benjamin insist on the importance of walking in the city, but also in treating the city not as a text but something else. To read requires a distance, and the use of imagination, which still is a form of image-making. To a certain extent, to read a text still puts primacy to the sense of sight. In addition, the treatment of the city as a text presupposes, too, that the city itself is logical and rational, that it follows patterns like causes and effects, motives and conflicts and resolutions. But the city is far more complex. Not only does it demand the opening of all senses, it also calls for a giving in to the call of the Sirens. We are not to be the voyeurs, but the seduced. We are not to subject the city under constant surveillance, stripping the city of mystery. Instead, we are to allow the city to lure us to the edge of the cliff, or to the ledge of a skyscraper, and we are to jump, enticed. This is Benjamin's flâneur.

Again, this is not about shutting one's eyes. The flâneur is different from the mass. He is still a critic, after all. The flâneur is a detective.

He only seems to be indolent, for behind this indolence there is the watchfulness of an observer who does not take his eyes off a miscreant. Thus the detective sees rather wide areas opening up to his self-esteem. He develop[s] forms of reaction that are in keeping with the pace of a big city. He catches things in flight; this enables him to dream that he is like an artist.<sup>33</sup>

The flâneur is an intellectual nomad. He walks around, and by walking he loses his place.<sup>34</sup> He wanders aimlessly. The lack of direction, the lack of purpose, allows him to follow the secrets of the city, because he does not impose what these secrets should be. The flâneur approaches "this destiny with a sensitivity that perceives charm even in damaged and decaying goods" because his participation to the spectacular society is of intoxication and not of blindness.<sup>35</sup> This is why his detached attitude, his cool nonchalance, his lack of emotional investment

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<sup>33</sup>Walter Benjamin, "The Flâneur," in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn, (London: Verson, 1983), 41.

<sup>34</sup>See de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 103.

<sup>35</sup>Benjamin, "The Flâneur," 59.

is possible despite his awareness of “the horrible social reality.”<sup>36</sup> Or perhaps, it is his detached attitude that enables him to be aware of social reality. The flâneur is neither pessimistic nor optimistic about the city. He does not dream of a sterilized culture, but neither does he denounce technological progress altogether. He does not need to think of a future because the flâneur is immersed, and perhaps with a tinge of nostalgia. He does not wait, because he knows it is all gone.

There is something ambiguous about Benjamin’s flâneur. While he insists that the flâneur is like a detective, or a critic, what kind of critique is the flâneur exactly involved in is uncertain. And yet this ambiguity helps in the sense that the flâneur as opposed to the voyeur is not controlling. The flâneur as part of, and apart from the city, his ambivalent position, evades the system of the spectacular society.

For Benjamin, the flâneur is not only a historical figure of the city but also a methodology of critique.<sup>37</sup> In the same manner, Baudrillard’s panic or hysteria is less of a real attitude than a produced and deliberate simulation. It is Baudrillard’s theory at work. This is radical thought. Manila, whose dreams are the nightmares of tomorrow, needs to be confronted with a theory that will jolt it wide awake. And this theory must terrorize, not merely the eyes, but one’s ears, and nose as well. Cities like Manila, cities lost in the fog of industrial belches are cities where “direct political action is no longer possible. We were left to do the same thing the terrorists do: destabilize.”<sup>38</sup>

In cities like Manila, we need more than Benjamin’s flâneur, who will immerse oneself in the city’s contradictions. On one hand, Manila must do away with its longing for an urban planner, or a voyeur. It must do away with preoccupations of being a manicured tourist spot. But neither does Manila need a stroller, because its streets make it impossible for one to be idle, for one to be intoxicated. The

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>David Frisby, “The City Observed: The Flâneur in Social Theory,” in *Cityscapes and Modernity: Critical Explorations*, (USA: Polity, 2001), 28.

<sup>38</sup>Jean Baudrillard, “A Seminar on Terrorism and the Media” in William Stearns and William Chaloupka (eds), *Jean Baudrillard: The Disappearance of Art and Politics* (London: Macmillan Press, 1992), 299.

streets of Manila cannot accommodate anyone who is waiting to be seduced, only to be repulsed. In fact, far from intoxication, what Manila needs is to wake up from its rational dream. What Manila needs is a futurist flâneur, a hysterical critic whose immersion and participation exceed idle detective work. What cities like Manila need is a flâneur who will not merely feel the quiver of the city, but to add to it, to echo it; someone who will not merely get himself lost in the crowd, but plunges into the crowd, like surfing in rock and roll concerts; someone who will not request for an elbow room but provokes a stampede; someone whose hysteria will heighten the feelings of collapse, to proclaim the city's future demise in present tense. For Baudrillard who has been a reality agnostic, this is what theory can do: to project.

Again, Baudrillard believes that theory can never mirror reality, and it is not supposed to. "The real is not an objective status of things, it is the point at which theory can do nothing."<sup>39</sup> To insist that thought or theory has an Aristotelian correspondence to reality is hallucinatory.<sup>40</sup> Hence, like the futurists<sup>41</sup> but perhaps more radical, Baudrillard's version of the flâneur or the critic would be someone who poses a "challenge to the real,"<sup>42</sup> whose proclamations are not necessarily descriptions of the now, but could be warnings for the future in present tense. Perhaps, today, in highly developed cities, the speed history has taken has already burned and skinned reality, that perhaps,

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<sup>39</sup>Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault, Forget Baudrillard* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1987), 125.

<sup>40</sup>Baudrillard, *Perfect Crime*, 98.

<sup>41</sup>Futurists believe that one's preoccupation should be directed towards the future precisely because the world changes in a speed only futurism could cope with. According to Alvin Toffler, "The faster the pace of life, the more rapidly the present environment slips away from us, the more rapidly do future potentialities turn into present reality. As the environment churns faster, we are not only pressured to devote more mental resources to thinking about the future, but to extend our time horizon—to probe further and further ahead" (*Future Shock*, [London/Sydney: Pan Books, 1971, 380).

<sup>42</sup>Rojek and Turner, *Forget Baudrillard*, 124.

[w]e have lost that lead which ideas had over the world, the distance which meant that an idea remained an idea. Thought has to be exceptional, anticipatory, and at the margin – has to be the projected shadow of future events. Today, we are lagging behind events. They may sometimes give the impression of receding; in fact, they passed us long ago. The simulated disorder of things has moved faster than we have.<sup>43</sup>

Perhaps, in New York, in Los Angeles, in Tokyo, in Singapore, and Paris, and Berlin, and London, perhaps in cities that have reached the end of history, in cities that are obviously spectacular, the flâneur could only pick up things and remember. But in cities like Manila, in cities that are *not yet*, the flâneur's walk is no longer a walk among the ruins of the city, in search of secrets. The flâneur's walk, hysterical as he is, matches the contained panic attack of a quivering congested pressure tank that is Manila.

This is the hypnic jerk, so wake up because in every dreaming sleeping snoring state, we are forced to appear in a voyeuristic society only to participate in the grand striptease of history. The show is a cliché, and images are meaningless; and we are deprived of echoing the beat of the city with our heartbeats, this time bomb tic, this rhythm that is both meaningful and meaningless, that is meaningful in its meaninglessness, this indescribable cacophony of sounds, of honking horns and bandurias, of explosions and implosions, of screams and screeches, and the silence of the city in mid-yawn or mid-scream. Stop. And listen carefully to the scent of sampaguita in EDSA heat, and the stench of sweat, and urine, and death. We just want to be heard. Wake up. Put a gun in our heads and wake up.

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<sup>43</sup>Baudrillard, *Perfect Crime*, 101.

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