

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 *navette*, 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 surrealism 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*.³ This surrealist experience evokes the face of a city in "dream images" that entail the "psychic force of memory" manifested unconsciously.⁴ 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 surrealist urban phenomena by which they are captivated through a metaphor that the *flâneur* is an "I" with an insatiable appetite for the "non-I."⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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 of *flâneurs*.⁹

The "profane illuminations" of the individual *flânerie* also resonate with the surrealist "luminous phenomenon"¹⁰ 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 surrealism and *flânerie* is seemingly manifested through surrealist painter Giorgio 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."¹¹ 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.¹² 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*.¹³ 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."¹⁴

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."¹⁵ The *flâneur* 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ He then stated that the ordinary practitioners of the city who lives "down

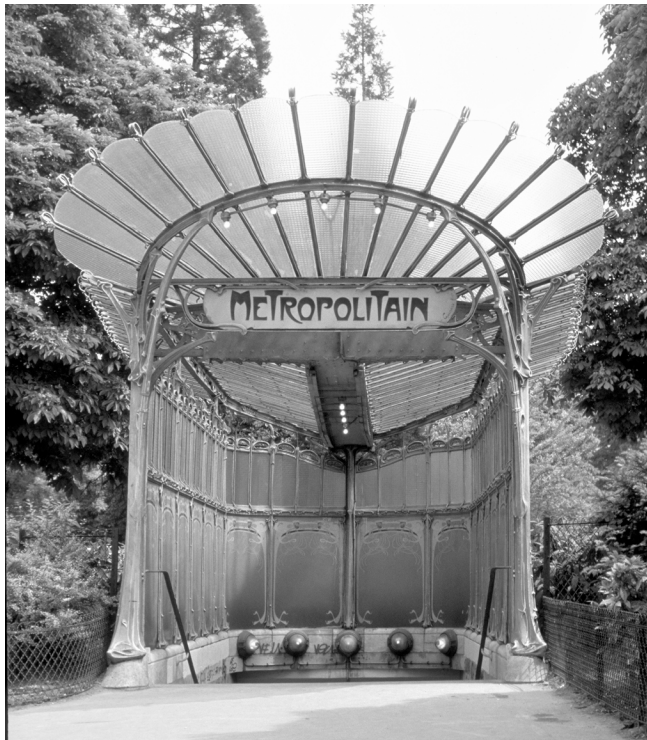


Figure 1. Paris Métro Porte Dauphine Station Entrance. Courtesy Allan T. Kohl/Art Images for College Teaching (AICT)

below” are walkers, whose bodies follow the “thicks” and “thins” of an urban “text” they write without being able to read it.¹⁸ A *flâneur* is the walker in Michel de Certeau’s writing, who refuses to read the urban space as a cartographer but dwells and dreams in the city. The *flâneur* was the “ambulatory observer” figure in Jonathan Crary’s writing who was shaped by a convergence of new urban spaces mapped out by Walter Benjamin with a heterogeneous texture of events and objects, and the perception of the city was temporal and kinetic for such contemplative beholders.¹⁹ The *flâneurs*, therefore, interpret their walks through fragmented “dream images” as the surrealist philosophers.

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*.²⁰ He emphasized that through unpremeditated 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 Paris. 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



Figure 2. Tadao Ando Bookstore/Gallery Exterior. Courtesy of Hui Zou.

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 commercial 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 *navetterie*, 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 *navetterie* 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 Taodo 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

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6. Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin*, 211-16.
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12. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 879-80.
13. *Ibid.*, 879.
14. Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin*, 263.
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18. *Ibid.*, 93.
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