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Stanley Cavell considers the modern stroller, or the flâneur, as foreshadowing the emergence of films. Film theorists have argued that the emergence of film and the flâneur can be attributed to the alienation and estrangement that modernism brings to society. This form of estrangement encourages a distanced view of the world along with a desire to view the world as a child. Despite the fact that the flâneur shares a lot of characteristics with the film audience, they are fundamentally different in how they understand the form of alienation endemic to modernity. In this paper, I examine the origins of the flâneur and film to better understand the similarities and differences between the flâneur and the film audience, arguing that while the flâneur deliberately alienates himself in order to participate in this form of estrangement, the film audience is conditioned to participate in this estrangement.

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Estranged from the World: The Film Audience as the *Flâneur*

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Abstract

Stanley Cavell considers the modern stroller, or the flâneur, as foreshadowing the emergence of films. Film theorists have argued that the emergence of film and the flâneur can be attributed to the alienation and estrangement that modernism brings to society. This form of estrangement encourages a distanced view of the world along with a desire to view the world as a child. Despite the fact that the flâneur shares a lot of characteristics with the film audience, they are fundamentally different in how they understand the form of alienation endemic to modernity. In this paper, I examine the origins of the flâneur and film to better understand the similarities and differences between the flâneur and the film audience, arguing that while the flâneur deliberately alienates himself in order to participate in this form of estrangement, the film audience is conditioned to participate in this estrangement.

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What is it about films that people from all around the world can relate to? Why do people even go to cinema halls to watch them? In attempting to answer this question, Stanley Cavell, in his book *The World Viewed*, argues that the origin of a modern figure, namely, the *flâneur*, can provide us with some insight as to why films appear natural to us. Cavell argues that Charles Baudelaire had recognized the need of film in modern life in his essay "The Painter of Modern Life." The *flâneur* emerges with the modern crowd and participates with it only through his imagination and curiosity, which he is only able to exercise by estranging himself from the crowd. This estrangement becomes possible due to the innovative spirit of modernism and the alienation that modernism brings with it in varied social contexts. The inventions of modernism provide for figures such as the *flâneur* to have an estranged view of the world, which allows them to interact with the world with a renewed perspective. Films are able to satisfy this desire of ours, to be estranged from the world we live in and view it with a renewed perspective. In this paper, I examine the origins of the *flâneur* and film to better understand the similarities and differences between the *flâneur* and the film audience. I argue that while the *flâneur* deliberately alienates himself to participate in this form of estrangement, the film audience is conditioned to participate in this estrangement.

On December 28,1895, the Lumiere Brothers presented the first silent short film on Paris to the world. With the introduction of films (and photographs before them), people could now not only view artists' *representations of objects* through their paintings but also *objects in themselves* as captured by the camera. This allowed for viewing things as they really were without having to worry about the artist's interpretation; the photographic image or the film showed the objects as they appeared in "reality." Film critic and theorist Andre Bazin writes that despite the effort of baroque art to give a "dramatic expression to the moment, a kind of psychic fourth dimension that could suggest life," the human obsession with realism of movement was only satisfied by films (Bazin 11).[1]

This obsession with realism, Cavell suggests, can be seen not just as our obsession with movement of objects, but as our "first fascination of objects, their inner and fixed lives" (Cavell 43). By "inner and fixed lives" and "first fascination," Cavell is trying to direct us to our feeling of curiosity toward the context and functions (inner and

[1] Bazin writes that the discovery of "scientific and mechanical reproduction, namely, perspective" satisfied our obsession of *realism of form*, specifically by depicting a three-dimensional object in a two-dimensional surface. However, our obsession with *realism of movement* was yet to be satisfied by the plastic arts.

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fixed lives) of objects that are foreign to us. A parallel can be drawn between what Cavell is referring to with the curious child who sees a pair of scissors for the first time. However, in watching *familiar objects* in films, we can find ourselves reimagining the context in which these objects are used, much like the child learning how to use a pair of scissors by watching its demonstration (instead of putting it in her ears); and due to film's ability to reproduce movements of objects, we are exempt from having to interact with them to learn something new about them. We can also make this same claim for events that occur in the world. Therefore, one can say that films satisfy our curiosity toward the objects and happenings of the world, without us "having to do anything" and just "by wishing" them (Cavell 39). However, much like the curious child who attentively watches the scissors demonstration, we are not entirely "not doing anything"; in fact, we too are attentively watching each scene that follows in the film because we *wish* to know.

Ontologically, films have the ability to estrange us from the world we live in because they place us at a distance from the world, making us realize the limitations of our experience and knowledge. On film's ability to estrange us from the world, Cavell writes, "It is as though the world's projection explains our form of unknownness and of our inability to know. The explanation is not so much that the world is passing us by, as that we are displaced from our natural habitation within it, placed at a distance from it" (41). Instead of looking at the Empire State Building with our eyes, which is "our natural habitation," when we see a film of the Empire State Building we are "placed at a distance from it," prompting issues about whether or not we know the building personally as we have only seen it from a distance. This created distance becomes the source of our estrangement from the world, as we feel uneasy answering whether or not we really know how the Empire State Building looks.

By estranging us from our world, photographs and films have the ability to "returns to us and extends our first fascination with objects," as though we are looking at the objects of the world for the first time (Cavell 43). Since photographs and films are reproduction of objects, we conclude that what we are looking at are not the objects themselves, but photographs or films of those objects. However, although we couldn't claim that we have seen the object in person when we see it in a film, we could claim that we know of the object's existence because we have seen it in a film. And the distance that we enjoy in viewing a photograph or a film provides us with an opportunity to learn about the object by looking at it afresh, returning to us and extending "our first fascination with objects." German writer and translator Franz Hessel has compared viewing film with childhood due to a film's ability to return to the

first fascination.[2] However, this form of estrangement and distance that satisfies the "first fascination of objects" has a historical origin, one that came before films did.

One might ask, then, Before films, how did people exercise their "first fascination of objects"? The obvious answer is that people travelled to witness events that took place, or that other people demonstrated to them how to work objects that were new or foreign. Films only saved the long trip for people who wanted to witness an event, and eliminated the need for the demonstrator to be present while teaching the workings of the object.[3] Rather than asking the obvious question, though, we should consider how people started to become estranged to and distanced from society and objects of daily use.

The estranging and distancing from society and objects of daily use can be traced back to the invention of matches. German philosopher Walter Benjamin argues that the invention of matches was one among many inventions that estranged people from objects of daily use. The introduction of an efficient way of lighting fire exempted people from having to strike rocks and metals correctly and repeatedly to produce a spark. However, this comfort came with the price of people becoming dependent on those who created the matches, instead of on their own practice of striking metals. In his book *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, Benjamin writes, "Comfort isolates; on the other hand, it brings those enjoying it closer to mechanization. The invention of the match… brought forth a number of innovations which have one thing in common: one abrupt movement of the hand triggers a process of many steps" (131). The development of technology reduces the human effort or practice from tasks we were engaged in, and, in doing so, we are denied the forms of knowledge or connection bound up with these efforts and practices. This improvement quickly took over most of human interaction with objects of daily use, for example, the telephone and the camera.

The smooth functioning of a society that treasures comfort is founded on this constant feeling of being dependent on others, or other's innovation, which once used to be a feeling that arose only in times of need (ibid.). In today's context, it seems much easier to trust Google Map blindly than carry a physical map, or even more so, than

[2] Described by Anke Gleber in *The Art of Taking a Walk: Flanerie, Literature, and Film in Weimar Culture* (Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 160.

[3] The fact that before films existed, people learned about the world and objects through books or newspaper is not considered because they involve the act of reading rather than an act of "not doing anything."

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memorize all the highways, boulevards and streets of America. An introduction of each new technology "eliminates certain modes of behaviour and emotions," rendering the individual into a "state of savagery—that is, of isolation" (ibid.). An example of this might be the loss of the practice of walking up to a complete stranger to ask for directions; comfort and dependency does indeed isolate and estrange us from those with whom we share our space.

However, despite the comfort that the person lighting a match and the person watching a film share, there is still a difference between them: the person lighting the match is estranged from the objects that they *use*, whereas the film audience is estranged from the objects and society they *see* in film, and the world that they *live* in. To better understand why films estrange us from the society we live in, a more accurate parallel should be drawn between the film audience and someone who, before the emergence of film, was already engaged in this form of estrangement. In the 50-year period between the invention of matches and movies, figures such as the film audience emerged with the rise of modern crowds in cities such as London, Berlin, and Paris.[4] A diagnosis of these figures' traits will help us understand our own practice of watching films and where the idea of films originated.

One example among such figures is the *flâneur*, who was first recognized in Parisian arcades by the modernist poet and philosopher Charles Baudelaire. However, as a character, the *flâneur*'s description can be found in Edgar Allan Poe's story *The Man of the Crowd*. Baudelaire writes, "In the window of a coffee-house there sits a convalescent, pleasurably absorbed in gazing at the crowd, and mingling, through the medium of thought, in the turmoil of thoughts that surrounds him" (7). The description of the *flâneur* Baudelaire provides is alarmingly close to the film audience: the *flâneur* is separated from the crowd by the window, so it makes it easier for him to gaze at the crowd without being seen. The arcade, where the city crowd dwell, becomes the world for the *flâneur*. For the arcade, according to an illustrated guide to Paris of 1852, was "a rather recent invention of industrial luxury," "lined with the most elegant shops" whose "proprietors [had] combined" to make it like "a city, even a world, in miniature" (Benjamin, *op cit.* 12). Descriptions of this sort suggest that the arcade was an invention for comfort, and those who visited these arcades were dependent on the proprietors for this "industrial luxury."

[4] Several other figures such as the *flâneur* emerged during this time. They could be classified as gentlemen of leisure who didn't participate in the hustle and bustle of the crowd; other such figures are the popular figure in Berlin, Nante, and *baduad*, who, as opposed to the *flâneur*, loses his individuality in the act of watching the crowd.

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Benjamin suggests that the *flâneur* is someone dependent on the proprietors of the arcade, with whom the *flâneur* is estranged because the *flâneur* is concerned about the crowd. The proprietors who have opened the coffee-house and the "elegant shops" are not people with whom the *flâneur* engages; instead, he engages with the crowd. But the *flâneur* cannot engage with the crowd through "the medium of thought" without the arcade. Therefore, the *flâneur* becomes dependent on the crowd and the proprietors who are but strangers to him. Likewise, the film audience is also dependent on several individuals whom they barely know, such as the actors, the directors, the producer and the cinema-hall owner, for the entertainment they get from films. Therefore, both the *flâneur* and the film audience become dependent on those who are most estranged to them.

However, the *flâneur*'s desires to interact with the crowd is thwarted by the "inner and fixed lives" of the people in the crowd, as they aren't as readily available for him as the inner lives of objects are. Therefore, he is limited to "mingling" with the crowd only "through the medium of thought": he has to resort to his imagination of these people to interact with them. This is a faith that the audience share with the *flâneur*, as the audience is also limited to the "inner and fixed lives" of the characters as presented to them in films;[5] outside of the film, the audience has no access to the "inner and fixed lives" of the characters.[6]

Yet, the *flâneur* is unaffected by the fact that he doesn't have access to the "inner and fixed lives" of the crowd apart from his encounter with them in the arcade, because the *flâneur* is excited by that which is unknown to him. On what motivates the *flâneur* to observe the crowd, Baudelaire writes, "Finally he hurls himself headlong into the midst of the throng, in pursuit of an unknown, half-glimpsed countenance that has, on an instant, bewitched him" (Bauldelaire, ibid.). The *flâneur* does not want to reveal himself to the crowd; the privacy that he enjoys behind the coffeehouse window enables him to revel in his imagination of people's lives. He is not concerned about the actual lives of the people; in fact, the less he knows about the crowd, the more he can exercise his imagination and curiosity.

This form of "pursuit of an unknown" that Baudelaire attributes the *flâneur*, along with the *flâneur*'s extensive use of imagination, is where the idea of film originates. In her book *The Art of Taking a Walk*, Anke Gleber writes that"spectators enter their

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[5] While the "inner and fixed lives" of the characters might not be accessible to the film audience, publicly available objects shown in the film can be further explored by film audience.

[6] The abundance of fan theory on the internet demonstrates the result of this deprivation.

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observation of the filmic image in terms of what Hessel and Benjamin call the 'the art of getting lost'" (159). Benjamin and Hessel imply the estrangement that films bring when they compare it with the "the art of getting lost," emphasizing that one can't be lost in a place they call home. Much like the *flâneur*, who is "in pursuit of an unknown," Benjamin and Hessel note that the film audience are performing "the art of getting lost" within the world of films, allowing them to "stray away from the paths of prescribed meanings into a dizzying maze of signs, to be driven into distraction by the multiple meanings of modern realities" (ibid.). Both film and crowd represent "the multiple meanings of modern realities," as each film and each crowd have their own purpose for existence, and both the *flâneur* and the film audience take the responsibility of interpreting these meanings. As these meanings are open to view, but are not available for interaction, the film audience "stray away from the paths of" their prescribed meanings, whether those meanings come from work or family, by distracting themselves with these "multiple meanings of modern realities."[7]

The *flâneur* and the film audience, therefore, both want to engage with the unknown because it functions as a distraction from what they should know best: themselves. Instead of following "prescribed meanings"—heritage, rituals, and practices—the *flâneur* and the film audience want to engaged in these "multiple meanings." However, this phenomenon is not solely of their choosing; the emergence of the *flâneur* already suggests the deprivation of such rituals and practices by modern inventions such as matches. Denied "certain modes of behaviour and emotions" by inventions of modernity, both the *flâneur*'s and the film audience's subjectivity become empty, compelling them to draw "an entire world of exterior reality into the blank of [their] interior mind" (Gleber 163). The continuous stream of life in films and the modern crowd provide the "exterior reality" for "blank" minds that are deprived rich subjectivity. That is, both the film audience and the *flâneur* aim to fill the "blank of [their] interior mind," not with their own experience, which modernity strips away from them, but with *life outside of them*, which modernity provides. As a result, both the *flâneur* and the film audience find comfort in the unknown to escape addressing the estrangement and alienation technologies have brought to their lives.

However, the *flâneur* and the film audience differ with respect to the form their estrangement takes within society: while the *flâneur* actively estranges himself from the crowd, the film audience take participation in this form of estrangement to escape alienation. The *flâneur* is a man of leisure, who walks around the arcade with his

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[7] As in the act of viewing a film, there is no interaction with the film to confirm their interpretation. Interaction with the directors and writers after viewing the film isn't considered here.

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pet turtle, letting the turtle set his walking pace (Benjamin, *op. cit.* 37). The *flâneur*'s existence is a protest against the productive agenda of modernism, a voice that refuses to participate in the "prescribed meaning" of society, the society of which, ironically, he himself is a product. However, the film audience isn't just limited to men of leisure. Some thinkers, such as Georges Duhamel, even believe that films are "a pastime for helots, a diversion for uneducated, worn-out creatures who are consumed by their worries."[8] Duhamel's view might be exaggerated, but what we can't deny is that the film audience shares the form of alienation endemic to modernity. On this alienation, Gleber writes, "As alienation in labor corresponds to the isolation of an urban anonymity, this estrangement from existing purposes calls for a detached but attentive perception of these structures" (163). Films attempt to provide this "detached but attentive perception" of structures, modern structures that we are familiar with, but that, at the same time, are the source of our alienation. This suggests that the film audience goes to watch films to familiarize with the modern structures that has estranged them from their society. The difference between the *flâneur* and the film audience, therefore, pertains to their respective abilities and degrees of willingness to participate in the form of estrangement with society: whereas the *flâneur* is deliberate, the film audience is conditioned.

Ironically, modernity is the one who hears the voices and concerns of the *flâneur* and the modern crowd, promising them remedy by giving them arcades and films. Thus, the fascination of the unknown, which gives birth to the *flâneur* and films, becomes a way to fill up subjectivity that has been emptied by modernity.

In this paper, I have argued that the film audience, as opposed to the *flâneur*, is conditioned to watch films because of the alienation they suffer on a daily basis in their work, education, and civic lives. In examining the origins of film and the *flâneur*, one can also discover where the desire to watch films comes from, as well as what we lose when we fulfill this desire.

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[8] Cited in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn (Schocken Books, 1968), p. 239.

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