

From the kaleidoscope to the x-ray: Urban spectatorship, Poe, Benjamin, and Traffic in Souls (1913).

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## From the Kaleidoscope to the X-Ray: Urban Spectatorship, Poe, Benjamin, and Traffic in Souls (1913)

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**From the Kaleidoscope to the X-Ray:**  
Urban Spectatorship, Poe, Benjamin, and *Traffic in Souls*  
(1913)

*Tom Gunning (bio)*

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for Yuri Tsivian

## I. Modern City Scenes: Beyond the *Flâneur*

What men call love is a very small, restricted, feeble thing compared with this ineffable orgy, this divine prostitution of the soul giving itself entire, all its poetry and all its charity, to the unexpected as it comes along, to the stranger as he passes.

Charles Baudelaire “Crowds,” *Paris Spleen*

Theorists of the representation of the modern city from Walter Benjamin to Dana Brand have used Edgar Poe’s 1845 short story, “The Man of the Crowd,” to describe the changing relation between the modern metropolis and the practice of urban spectatorship. In its complex treatment of the urban modes of visual observation, I believe Poe’s story also offers us models for the archeology of the film spectator, modes of viewing that seem to have first been rehearsed within the urban environment. With only the bare bones of a plot, Poe’s story circulates between three different spectator positions and modes of visual engagement with the city. The first comes as the story’s narrator settles himself before a window of a London coffeehouse and observes the passing [End Page 25] crowd. He notes various urban types as they pass his window, as well as the change in the character of the crowd as evening comes on. Eventually, however, his detached observation ceases as the narrator is drawn into the street by a glimpse of a strange figure. The contradictory qualities of this figure’s countenance, its inability to conform to any established typology, infect the narrator with “a craving desire to keep the man in view—to know more of him.”<sup>1</sup> The narrator leaves his armchair and plunges into the now “dark yet splendid” atmosphere of a city night threatening rain, “resolved to follow the stranger whithersoever he should go.”<sup>2</sup>

The stranger he pursues, the eponymous “man of the crowd,” pushes

the narrator's detached and thoughtful observation of the passing city crowd into another register as the mysterious figure traverses the main streets and byways of London all night long in search of the energy and vitality of urban bustle. The old man's search, which provides the motive and trajectory of the final part of the story, has a pronounced air of desperation, as his own vitality seems dependent upon the proximity of others and of scenes of city life, his energy flagging as the crowds disperse, gaining life and elasticity as new locales of urban night life are encountered. As if a projected shadow of this figure, the narrator's immobile contemplation from his window vantage gives way to a furtive pursuit, transforming the image of the city into diverse locales, as the stranger leads him from the city center to outlying slum alleyways and then back again.

Brand has persuasively made a correlation between the three modes of urban spectatorship which appear in this story (detached observation; desperate search for sensation; and shadowy pursuit) and three urban types as described by Walter Benjamin: the *flâneur*, the *badaud* (or gawker) and the detective.<sup>3</sup> These three ideal types may shade into each other within the course of a narrative (as the narrator of the story moves from his reverie of detached *flânerie* to his detective-like shadowing of the old man), but they can also be morphologically distinguished. Within Poe's story the operative oppositions distinguish a detached act of observation (mediated by the large window), an actual pursuit motivated by curiosity and suspicion, and a complete submission to urban sights, a gaping wonder which is fueled by a voracious appetite for stimulation. For the narrator the city first appears as a surface that can be **[End Page 26]** watched, as well as read, from a single vantage point. As he observes from his window, the narrator fits the members of the crowd (according to details he observes of physiognomy or dress) into a variety of social classes and behavioral types. For the mysterious stranger the city exists as a locale to be endlessly and repetitively crisscrossed in search of excitement. As...



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