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# A STATIONARY STROLL THROUGH HONG KONG: AN EXPLORATION OF THE FLANEUR IN A GROUNDLESS CITY

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*Baudelaire's Flâneur has been a feature of modernist discussion for over a century now, often being resurrected in academic discussions. As recently as 2013, Bijan Stephen wrote an article for The Paris Review titled "In Praise of the Flâneur" where he questions "as we grow inexorably busier—due in large part to the influence of technology—might flânerie be due for a revival?" This presentation asks how we can conceive of the flâneur in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Hong Kong, particularly in regards to the mid-level escalators. Can the flâneur exist within a city so rife with cosmopolitanism? Does this moving walkway turn Hong Kong into a mall or an airport (a postmodern/late capitalist space par excellence)? Are there modes of resistance to be found in said spaces? This technology not only controls and inhibits movement on a given path but disallows movement away from the prescribed path. More so, it transforms the flâneur, with his wandering eye, from watcher to watched. This article first explores the image of Hong Kong, arguing that the explosive expansion of capitalistic space (which included the construction of the mid-level escalators) created a city without a foundational ground. In this environment, the flâneur becomes an impossibility as he is blended with his environment. Secondly, this article explores modes of resistance, ultimately arguing that as a cosmopolitan entity, the flâneur needs to take on an active role of resistance. It identifies two possibilities in which the flâneur figure can be re-understood to still exist and do this task.*

**Keywords:** *Cosmopolitanism, Flâneur, Benjamin, imageability, figure-ground, sous rature, erasure*

## **Introduction**

Charles Baudelaire created the concept of the *Flâneur* or the "urban wanderer" of the 19<sup>th</sup> city — a man who strolls through the city for the sake of strolling:

The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His

passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite [...] to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world.<sup>1</sup>

The *Flâneur* places himself directly in the middle of the crowded city while moving through it as something of an outside observer. Baudelaire's *Flâneur* has been a feature of modernist discussion for over a century now, often being resurrected in academic discourse. As recently as 2013, Bijan Stephen wrote an article for *The Paris Review* titled "In Praise of the Flâneur," where he poses the question: "As we grow inexorably busier—due in large part to the influence of technology—might flânerie be due for a revival?"<sup>2</sup> Stephen goes on to reference the work of Teju Cole and Tao Lin in order to answer 'yes' to his own question.

However, exactly how the flâneur – a figure from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century – fits into today's society, if at all, is a complicated question. This article will explore the figure of the flâneur as it exists in modern-day Hong Kong, a city whose growth and population density makes it an entirely different entity from anything Baudelaire would have seen. As a concentrated urban area that has served as a destination for immigrants for decades, Hong Kong presents itself as a cosmopolitan hub. From the ancient Greek term meaning "citizens of the cosmos," cosmopolitanism is a dense concept. At its core is the idea that all human beings belong to a single community, transcending local allegiances for this broader worldview — what Appiah defines in his article, "Education for Global Citizenship," as "universality plus difference." Particular focus will be paid to the mid-level escalators, a technological feature of the landscape that leaves the urban stroller immobile.

This article will argue that the figure of the flâneur is turned on its head when placed in the context of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century city like Hong Kong. It will first explore the "image" of the city as lacking a foundational ground. This situation makes the flâneur, as traditionally understood, an impossibility as it becomes *blended* with the environment itself. At first glance, this makes the flâneur an impossibility – simultaneously immobile and under-watch. However, there are two modes of resistance that this article identifies that work in a cosmopolitan context. First, the concept of immobility itself can be turned on its head. *If* the flâneur is wedded to his ever-changing environment, then we can conceive that he does not need to move through it to explore — that is, the environment can just as easily move around him. Secondly, the (im)possibility of this figure is just that: an impossibility insofar as he can no longer move or remain invisible. Thus, the modernist flâneur must conceive of himself *sous rature*. This term was originally coined by Heidegger and later picked up by Derrida, who used it extensively in much of his work. In

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1 Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1986), 9.

2 Bijan Stephen, "In Praise of the Flâneur," *The Paris Review* (Oct 17, 2013).

her introduction to Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, Spivak explains that to put a word *sous-rature* is "to write a word, cross it out, and then print both the word and the deletion."<sup>3</sup> This technique is used within texts where key terms and concepts may be paradoxical or self-undermining (to the extent their meaning is undecidable). This description is entirely relatable to the immobile flâneur insofar as his anonymity cannot be taken for granted; rather, his erasure must be conceived of as an active (not passive) function, which will be explored in more detail within the conclusion. Finally, Hong Kong can be understood as an inductive example of how the flâneur can be conceived and perceived in other vastly expanded urban environments.

### Hong Kong as a Capitalistic City

In speaking of the almost cancerous growth of capitalistic space, David Harvey states:

Capitalism cannot do without its 'spatial fixes'... Time and time again it has turned to geographical reorganization [...] as a partial solution to its crises and impasses. Capitalism thereby builds and rebuilds a geography in its own image. It constructs a distinctive geographical landscape.<sup>4</sup>

He notes that capitalism will construct spaces that facilitate itself. It will do so even as a series of 'partial' solutions to its growth, which modifies its geography like a palimpsest. Arguably no other city in the world serves as a better illustration of this "capitalist production of space" than Hong Kong.

Moreover, the capitalistic development of Hong Kong's urbanism was and is a highly deliberate one. In the mid-1980s, the government adhered to a development control over urban densities through the "planned conversion of mixed commercial/residential uses into totally commercial uses (notably of offices and hotels)."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, since the mid-1980s, four Regional Development Strategy studies, Metroplan, addressing the issue of the future supply of land for public housing, reiterated the same logic of prioritizing capitalist needs in terms of land use.<sup>6</sup> This prioritization of capitalistic needs makes it hard not to see Hong Kong's ever-budding building construction as fitting Lefebvre's definition of "the homogeneous matrix of capitalistic space."<sup>7</sup> The mass of the city not only grew *from* capitalistic activities, but it was

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3 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, translator's preface to *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), xiv.

4 David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 54.

5 Lawrence W. C. Lai, "The Property Price Crisis," in *The Other Hong Kong Report 1994*, eds. Donald H. McMillen and Si-Wai Man (Hong Kong: Chinese UP, 1994), 201.

6 Tsung-yi Michelle Huang, *Walking Between Slums and Skyscrapers* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 27.

7 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), 227.

constructed *for* capitalistic activities.

At heart, these governmental policies were conceived and implemented because of the global compression Hong Kong has faced. Global compression is a term referencing not only a heavy population density but also a heavy diversity in this density. Having more than doubled its population since 1960, Hong Kong saw an almost unprecedented level of compression. The extreme nature of Hong Kong's population growth and subsequent compression was the result of globalization and mass immigration over the past several decades. In fact, by the time the Hong Kong government passed emergency bills in the 1980s to restrict the inflow of immigrants, one out of twelve Hong Kong residents had only been settled in the city for less than three years.<sup>8</sup> It was a growth that naturally led to the development of a geography along the lines of capitalism, a growth that not only mirrored but also encouraged capitalistic expansion.

This growth was synonymous with an expanding cosmopolitanism in Hong Kong insofar as flexible capital leads to a flexible citizenship. Ong explains:

Flexible capital accumulation is dialectically linked to the search for flexible citizenship as a way to escape the regime of state control, either over capital or over citizens. In Hong Kong, a small industry has arisen to disseminate information about the legal requirements and economic incentives for acquiring citizenship abroad.<sup>9</sup>

Ong provides an example of two brothers from Hong Kong, one of which lives abroad to manage the family's North American holdings while one lives at home. The basic tenant of his argument is that Hong Kong's cosmopolitan and compressed nature welcomes not only the notion of a diverse population within the city limits but also a broader understanding of citizenship itself.

One might be able to view this global compression in culturally positive terms. For instance, using neutral terminology, Siu notes that "the rate of transformation in Hong Kong's physical landscape symbolizes the society's floating outlook."<sup>10</sup> This 'floating outlook' could speak to a power of adaptability. However, it could just as easily refer to the detached expansion inherent in population explosions.

There are also multiple concerns over urban development's relationship with culture. For instance, in Huang's work, she says that: "Global compression is a process of eliminating our sense of history and creating a homogenized space through technologies, a make-believe 'small world' in Disney's magic kingdom, where physical or temporal boundaries have to be traversed to serve the purpose of

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8 Zhou Yongxin. "Hong Kong Faces Population Explosion," *Qishi Niandai* (1980): 23.

9 Aihwa Ong, "Flexible Citizenship among Chinese Cosmopolitans," in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*, eds. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 146.

10 Helen F. Siu, "Immigrants and Social Ethos: Hong Kong in the Nineteen-Eighties," *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 26 (1986): 13.

assuring a fast return of profit: a depthless space as Fredric Jameson describes.<sup>11</sup> She is citing Jameson's postmodernist conceptualization of the "modern" city that comprises of a hallucinogenic space with its newness, an untethered space to a previous history, or vernacular in which concepts of volume no longer apply. The constant building and rebuilding within Hong Kong makes it a prime example of Jameson's modern city, a space where historical temples can exist next to, below, or possibly within modern construction. It is an architectural car crash of various cultures brought together as one in a cosmopolitan soup.

### The Visual City

Hand in hand with this concept of culturally and temporally homogenized space is the image that it projects. Abbas claims that architecture "constructs visual space that to a large extent resists critical dismantling."<sup>12</sup> In other words, we simply pass through this space without turning a critical eye to it. He warns that architecture, particularly these capitalistically designed spaces, has the dangerous potential of turning us all into the same tourist-like figure, "gazing at a stable and monumental image."<sup>13</sup> This argument is one of the reasons why Abbas identifies a need to engage in critical discourse on Hong Kong architecture, which this article hopes to continue.

It is also worth noting that Abbas was writing when Hong Kong was between two periods of colonialism. He further echoes Huang's sentiments that global compression has eliminated authentic history, specifically the kind being seen within architectural spaces. Abbas notes that there is a desperate attempt to clutch at "images of identity," regardless of how clichéd these images may be. In terms of architecture, he claims that sites of historical preservation project not actual historical identity but a falsely constructed *image* of a historical identity. In fact, he goes as far as to claim that there is no such thing as an authentic historical identity. He claims that "culture as preservation leads not to the development of a critical sense of community but works to keep the colonial subject in space, occupied with gazing at images of identity."<sup>14</sup> This space is decidedly cosmopolitan according to Andrew Benjamin insofar as it begins to eschew the symbol:

What characterizes [sic] the cosmopolitan is the possibility that it is the form of modernity once the modern has been freed from the oscillation between the national and the international. Once modernity is introduced then the question to be addressed is not what modern architecture is but what is the architecture of modernity. Part of the argument developed here is that a

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11 Tsung-yi Michelle Huang, *Walking Between Slums and Skyscrapers* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 17.

12 Ackbar Abbas, *Culture and Politics of Disappearance* (Minnesota: U of Minnesota Press, 1997), 64.

13 Ibid, 65.

14 Ibid, 67.

beginning can be made once it is understood that modernity has to eschew the symbol.<sup>15</sup>

Hence, the image of the city is never truly historical when cosmopolitan expansion takes over. Because of this phenomenon there has been a weakening in the sense of *visual* chronology, “of historical sequentially, so that ‘old’ and ‘new’ are easily contemporaneous with each other, and ‘continuities’ and ‘discontinuities’ can exist side by side, *without being integrated*.”<sup>16</sup> What is the visual effect of a city where discontinuities are stacked upon one another in the architectural sense?

Abbas frames his discussion by referencing Paul Virilio, claiming that “disappearance is a consequence of processes of speed and digitization that deprive forms and figures – whether paintings and sculptures or monoliths and architectural constructions – of their material support and physical dimensions.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, the figures and forms of Hong Kong’s skyline (or their absences) reflect a certain *unprecedented* speed of growth. Specifically, he argues that because of this growth, Hong Kong “is a space that engenders images so quickly that it becomes *nondescript*.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, the saturation of continuous growth leads to a visual quagmire that seems to have no ground.

As acknowledged by Abbas, this kind of disappearance features prominently in Adam Frampton’s book *Cities Without Ground*. This work contains an array of diagram and maps, both current and projected, showing ground built upon ground to the extent in which the figure-ground relationship is obviated.

In Matthew Frederick’s influential *101 Things I Learned in Architecture School*, the author states that “Figure-ground theory states that the space that results from placing figures should be considered as carefully as the figures themselves.”<sup>19</sup> Similarly, “solid-void theory is the three-dimensional counterpart to figure-ground theory. It holds that the volumetric spaces shaped or implied by the placement of solid objects are as important as, or more important than, the objects themselves.”<sup>20</sup> However, what makes Hong Kong unique is the seeming erasure of this “empty” space. Instead, Hong Kong exists as a city of continuous growth to an almost parodic extreme such that the “ground” disappears, visually speaking.

Frampton himself wrestles with this obvious counterpoint example to conventional architectural perception. He first provides his own definition of ground

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15 Andrew Benjamin, “The ‘Place’ of Cosmopolitan Architecture,” *Architectural Theory Review* 7, no. 1 (2002): 26.

16 Ackbar Abbas, *Culture and Politics of Disappearance* (Minnesota: U of Minnesota Press, 1997), 75. Emphasis by the author.

17 Ibid, 70.

18 Ibid, 73.

19 Matthew Frederick Matthew, *101 Things I Learned in Architecture School* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), 3.

20 Ibid, 5.

as “a continuous plane and a stable reference point. It is the surface on which the conflicts of urban propinquity [...] are worked out [...].”<sup>21</sup> He then boldly claims that “Hong Kong enhances three-dimensional connectivity to such a degree that it eliminates reference to the ground altogether. Hong Kong is a city without ground.”<sup>22</sup> Without this ground, the figures in Hong Kong do not exhibit a legible order. Instead, we find a city bordering on a kind of impossible or fantasy space.

We can consider one of Frampton’s diagrams as an example. In the image titled “Festival Walk, Kowloon Tong, 2012,” the reader is presented with an image series of escalators so overlapping that they are reminiscent of M. C. Escher’s *Relativity*. The layers of steps placed upon each other creates a space that visually seems near-impossible. At the very least, the overlapping of the escalators seems to erase any concept of a bottom, or more accurately, a ground from which they rise. Examples such as this explain why Frampton comments that “the opposing forces of efficiency and profit-making collude to create a labyrinthine urbanism in which even locals are frequently lost.”<sup>23</sup> The continuity of built space results not just in a certain environment, but a relationship *with* the environment and *between* different environments.

Frampton continues: “In place of a spatial ground, Hong Kong has connectivity. On the north shore of Hong Kong Island it is possible to walk from the Macau Ferry at Shun Tak Centre through Central and Admiralty to Pacific Place 3 on the edge of Wan Chai without ever having to leave a continuous network of elevated or underground pedestrian passageways and interconnected malls and office lobbies...”<sup>24</sup> To a certain extent, one could argue, Hong Kong makes more sense on a map than in a traditional visual field. In *Toward a New Cosmopolitanism*, six manifestos on contemporary understandings of art and architecture emerging between global and local contexts are presented. In this work, Philip Tidwell speaks of cartography as follows: “Mapping is generally deployed as a means of demonstrating a particular set of relationships. From the well-known insurance maps that delineate property ownership and street organization to the tourist caricatures and subway maps that take liberties with the Cartesian order to more clearly demonstrate adjacency and organization.”<sup>25</sup> What we see rather than a visual depiction is an understanding of proximity.

This connectivity is wonderful from a practical, or purely cartographic, standpoint but its complexity complicates the visual field greatly in its elimination of spatial ground. Abbas claims that “when the visual becomes problematic because it is too complex, too conflicting, too unfamiliar, or too manipulative [...] then different

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21 Adam Frampton, Clara Wong, and Jonathan Solomon, *Cities Without Ground: A Hong Kong Guidebook* (Berkeley, CA: Perseus Books, 2012), 6.

22 Ibid., 6.

23 Ibid, 26.

24 Ibid, 25.

25 David Adjaye, Teresita Fernández, Jorge Pardo, Matthew Ritchie and Marc McQuade, *Authoring: Re-placing art and architecture* (Zurich: Lars Müller, 2012), 247.

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ways of seeing the city – different scopic regimes – have to be brought into play.”<sup>26</sup> He explores some possibilities for alternative scopic regimes, including the tourist’s gaze and the allegorical gaze. Both, however, lack any relationship with the social and historical, re-situating the visual subject in an affective grey area. Writing on Frampton’s maps, Cosmopolitist Andrew Benjamin notes:

What is opened is a return to place that takes note of what is discarded in the process; hence, the critical dimension. For Frampton, this return is positioned on the one hand by an acceptance of what he terms the ‘ubiquitous placelessness of our modern environment,’ and on the other by a positing of what after Heidegger is described as a ‘bounded domain’ in order that the latter rectify the former.<sup>27</sup>

Benjamin argues that this occurs by becoming sensitive to specific demands (climatic, cultural, etc.) that various places require. He also asserts that techniques need to be adapted in visual fields such as this that inhere in the building’s construction saying “the relationship between experience and construction means that locality and function are within built concerns from the start [...] this decentering of the visual in the name of the tactile knits critical regionalism to a form of architectural experience rather than positing architecture as a simple visual performative.”<sup>28</sup> Hence, the city is not meant to be looked at as a mere type of performance. The architecture of modernity / cosmopolitanism is about experience; place emerges as a fundamental site of attunement beyond the visual.

### A Question of Affect

The evocation of *affect* via architecture and the movement of bodies through said architecture is referred to by many theorists as a dialectic: “This dialectic is implied in especially post- structural theories of built space.”<sup>29</sup> The crux of this dialectic is the inextricable linking of the body with the architectural space through which it dwells.

Physicist Robert Jones claims space is coexistent with our very existence. In other words, we, as bodies, have no particular existence outside of space. Mentally, we cannot actually conceive of an existence excepting in space. One could even go so far as to say it is not only our bodies but their existence in some space that proves our existence.

Thus, the goal of architectural design is to, therefore, enable the channeling

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26 Ackbar Abbas, *Culture and Politics of Disappearance* (Minnesota: U of Minnesota Press, 1997), 76.

27 Andrew Benjamin, *Style and Time: Essays on the Politics of Appearance* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 78.

28 Ibid.

29 Peter Kraftl and Peter Adey, “Architecture/Affect/Inhabitation: Geographies of Being-In Buildings,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 98, no. 1 (2008): 226.



of affects, bodily or otherwise, through the configuration of various spatial fields. Architects and the buildings they create construct affective fields by organizing “and distribut[ing] bodies, materials, movements, and techniques.”<sup>30</sup> It is never a question of the design of space but the design of a space *for bodies*.

However, there is something unconventional about Hong Kong’s *non-distribution, non-movements, and non-descriptive spaces*. This “City without Ground” seems to defy at least some of the basic conventions of spatial design. It is a perfect example of what geographer and social scientist Doreen Massey describes as “thrown togetherness.” Massey states that the goal of her scholarship was to “bring space alive, to dynamize it and to make it relevant, to emphasize how important space is in the lives in which we live, and in the organization of the societies in which we live.” However, she notes that space is never a static concept. On the contrary, it is always under construction, and place is not so much a thing as it is an *event*. Hence, Massey’s concept of “thrown togetherness” speaks not only of a hectic space but encapsulates the ever-changing nature of place. It is fundamentally the *event* of place that produces the never-before occurring situations – those of different people, objects, noises (etc.), things that simply have to get along.

If we conceive of place as an event, it is always synonymous with the “passing through” of said space. Influenced strongly by Walter Benjamin, Harrison notes this passing through “absorbs architecture into the body, and vice versa, via tactility ... an embodied, geohistorically specific, sensuous knowing (enacting) of the everyday.”<sup>31</sup> Affect comes from this soaking or absorption, which is actually experienced in Harrison’s conception by both bodies and buildings; it is dependent upon the event.

### The Flâneur

The event of place could be said to be the act of wandering through it. In fact, one could argue that might be *every* event of place. Spring-boarding from Harrison’s comments, we can easily connect the tactile embodiment of architecture within the body to the concept of the *Flâneur*.

Walter Benjamin described the *flâneur* as the essential figure of the modern urban spectator, an amateur detective, and investigator of the city. More than this, his *flâneur* was a sign of the alienation of the city and of capitalism; he was a force *against* the pace of modernization by virtue of being detached from the city he wandered through. In *The Flâneur*, he states “once a writer had entered the marketplace, he looked around as in a diorama”—that is, detached from involvement

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30 Sanford Kwinter. *Architectures of Time: Toward a Theory of the Event in Modernist Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002): 14.

31 Paul Harrison, “Making Sense: Embodiment and the Sensibilities of the Everyday,” *Environment and Planning D-Society & Space* 18 (2000): 511.

with its practical concerns and purposes.<sup>32</sup> He looks about in an attempt to orient himself.

Huang identifies Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express* as a chronicle of the director's take on the *Flâneur* (albeit indirectly) in film.<sup>33</sup> In certain sequences of the film, the main character remains in focus while blurry silhouettes of the crowd and surrounding buildings move around him. Known as "step-printing," the original *Chungking Express* effect was created by shooting at a lower frame rate; Wong Kar-Wai claims he did this as a practical solution to dealing with several low light situations. The visual effect of this style is to indeed create a "detached" main character while creating a disorienting surrounding.

Despite all of this, however, Hong Kong offers several challenges to the figure of the Benjaminian *Flâneur*. First, Benjamin's *Flâneur* is separate from his environment. His *Flâneur* "moves in the 'Nebelregion' — not so much of a religious world but one of capitalist reification, by perceiving the man-made, familiar city as a phantasmagoria, an autonomous, potentially fear-inspiring world of objects independent of himself."<sup>34</sup> The Phantasmagoria noted here was a form of precinematic visual entertainment where an image was projected onto a diaphanous projector moved forwards and backwards to create the illusion of an approaching or vanishing figure. To the perception of either the *Flâneur* or the city that he moves through, the other is always this type of appearing and disappearing figure. The other is precisely an 'Other.'

Yet, in making public places into a type of showplace, the *Flâneur* takes advantage of the very systems of public order and control as well as of the production he separates himself from to stroll safely and be entertained by the human comedy.<sup>35</sup> The *Flâneur* can never be separated from the very entity to whose contrast he constitutes himself.

Furthermore, according to Michel de Certeau, pedestrians' unplanned footsteps are "transgressive and liberating in a world constructed by the panopticon power: the macro-discourse of the urban system cannot contain the wild footsteps of city walkers; rather, it is the pedestrians' performative act that (re)shapes the city."<sup>36</sup> Hence, we return to the concept of place as an event, one dependent upon both the space, architectural or otherwise, and the bodies that occupy it. In no other example is the blending of bodies and space more extreme than in Hong Kong's. It is truly a "thrown-togetherness" in which bodies themselves are thrown together.

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32 Walter Benjamin, "The Flâneur," *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: New Left Books, 1973): 35.

33 Huang, *Walking Between Slums*, 51.

34 Martina Lauster, "Walter Benjamin's Myth of the 'Flâneur,'" *The Modern Language Review* 102, no. 1 (Jan. 2007): 142.

35 Deena Weinstein and Michael A. Weinstein, *Postmodern(ized) Simmel* (New York: Routledge, 1993): 59-60.

36 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: U of California Press, 1984): 3.

The second complication is one that is concerned with the conception of the *Flâneur* when the very structure of the city not only blends with the pedestrian but makes it so that he can no longer walk. The next section will begin to address this question with an exploration of the Mid-Level Escalators.

### Escalators

Amidst the Hong Kong government's decision to prioritize the use of space for commercial uses, the very same uses that create the *flâneur*, the first serious discussions on travellers emerged. The proposal of the project began in November 1987, when the government faced the problem of increasing vehicular traffic in mid-levels.<sup>37</sup>

Chris Patten, the 28th Governor of Hong Kong amidst this construction (1992-1997), stated in his memoir that "rapid urbanization is one reason for the huge need for Asian infrastructure investment on, for example, urban transportation."<sup>38</sup> Citing the Asian Development Bank, he further comments that 55% of Asia's population will be urbanized by the end of the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, compared to 35% in the nineties. These statistics and this statement clearly indicate the mid-level escalator is not only a uniquely urban problem, but one of an extreme urbanization.

An escalator might seem like a trivial angle from which to explore a city's image however, in his qualitative study of city "imageability," Kevin Lynch notes the importance of paths on an image: "Paths are the channels along which the observer customarily, occasionally, or potentially moves. They may be streets, walkways, transit lines, canals, railroads. For many people, these are the predominant elements in their image."<sup>39</sup> Hence, this study would suggest that instead of being trivial, this escalator could have the strongest impact on the image of the city.

More so, it is worth reiterating that this urbanization is extreme. The project eventually became the central-mid-levels escalator and walkway system. It is the longest outdoor covered escalator system in the world. A French company, *Constructions Industrielles de la Méditerranée*, was charged with engineering the system, which would grow to cover over 800 meters (2600 feet) in distance and elevates over 135 meters (443 feet) from the bottom to the top. It was finished in 1993 in the hope of providing a better commute from within Central and Western District on Hong Kong Island, an area that had been plagued with increasingly severe traffic. Although, the traffic was originally forecasted to be 27,000 people per day, the daily traffic today exceeds 85,000 people.

I recently visited Hong Kong in March of 2017 and rode the mid-level escalators. On a cursory view, it is not obvious that the walkway is a commercial entity in line with the government's general guidelines for construction as there are

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37 Brian Wong, "HK's Lofty Plan for World's Longest Moving Walkway is a Step Nearer," *South China Morning Post* 4 (November 1987): 1.

38 Chris Patten, *East and West* (New York: Macmillan, 1998): 137.

39 Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960): 47.

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not many advertisements greeting commuters on either side of the walkway. I also wonder if many would see the escalator's purpose being to bring its commuters past shops, comprising a veritable mall walkway. However, passengers must wait until they reach the top of the escalator to get off and there are simply not that many shops along the escalator, relatively speaking.

With that acknowledgement however, there is a strong commercial character to the walkway. In "Traces of a Modern Hong Kong Architectural Practice: Chau & Lee Architects, 1933–1991," Leung-kwok speaks of how the covered walkway harks back to a traditional Chinese architectural design. Covered walkways, analogical to the mid-level escalators, were traditional features of Chinese tenement houses, where the front of the upper or first story is supported by a series of columns that formed a covered walkway on the ground floor. The reason for this design was to allow "fluidity of circulation and access to shops."<sup>40</sup> Thus, while one cannot simply "hop-off" the escalator at any point, it is divided so commuters can easily access the surrounding shops. There is a definite fluidity to the movement in this area.

Secondly, despite the *covert* appearance of shops in every stretch of the escalator, they are there. In a "travelogue" of sorts along the escalator, Waters notes that much of this area was not commercially based in the post-World War II era. However, today, the buildings in this area are "used almost exclusively for commerce, for purposes ranging from hair dressing, 'suits made-to-measure in 24 hours', general clothing as well as accessories such as handbags."<sup>41</sup> There are said to be about 800 bars, restaurants, clubs, shops, and other money-making establishments in the area.

Finally, Business (capital 'B') did dictate the path of the mid-level escalator. In drawing up the plans for the escalator, some of the strongest concerns were the impact on local businesses. Some of the businesses concerns are fascinating:

Starting at the then-existing elevated walkway along the north side of Connaught Road, the route was to run northwards through the new Hang Seng Bank building about to be built on the site of the old Central Fire Station [...] However, the advisers to the Hang Seng Bank believed that this was a bad *fung shui* feature. It would direct the evil spirits directly into the bank. The design was therefore modified, at the Bank's expense.<sup>42</sup>

The traveller was influenced by business interests in more ways than one.

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40 Prudence Lau Leung-kwok, "Traces of a Modern Hong Kong Architectural Practice: Chau & Lee Architects, 1933–1991," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch* 54 (2014): 67.

41 Dan Waters, "A Stroll up the Hong Kong Mid-Levels Escalator with a Few Digressions along the Way," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch* 53 (2013): 267.

42 Richard J. Garrett, "The Hillside Escalator Link," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch* 54 (2014): 219.

Moreover, while the space is not an extreme visual assault of advertising, it is one of predominant commercial space.

All in all, the same commercial forces that created the then-modern city of Baudelaire and led to the figure of the *Flâneur* led to these escalators. It is at this point that we must ask: has capitalism and consumerism, the extreme expansion that is Hong Kong, created an environment that consumes one of its own figures?

### Revisiting the *Flâneur*

What does it mean to be an immobile *Flâneur*? What does it mean to take a stationary stroll? Is this an oxymoron? Far from intending this to be a mere play of paradoxes, these questions are meant to question the natural paradoxical outgrowth of the *Flâneur* concept, using Hong Kong as something of an inductive example.

Moving forward, I will be citing scholarship on airports as an analogous example to thoughts on the mid-level escalators. There are several reasons for doing as much. First, sites such as the airport “facilitate and symbolically display the processes of international travel, migration, the mobility of capital and the commodity.”<sup>43</sup> All of these points tie to various aspects of Hong Kong as an international hub of mobility and migration. Adey notes that the environment of the airport is consciously designed to affect the emotional state of the passenger; the environment “is meant to literally close-off the passenger’s capacity to disrupt the security processing system through, for example, walking the wrong way, or by telling a joke or misbehaving.”<sup>44</sup> Hence, there is a certain obedience instilled in the mobile passenger, not unlike Michel Foucault’s notion of Panopticism; the space is designed to impose self-control. We can see design imposing self-control in everything from crosswalks to stoplights.

Dreyfus and Rabinow attribute to Foucault a certain cosmopolitanism that is neither wholly universal nor relative.<sup>45</sup> Instead, they argue that whatever brand of the cosmopolitanism found within Foucault requires an engaged ethos. Explicitly connecting the flâneur to Foucault, Rozpedowski writes: “rather than uncovering ‘deep truths,’ an engaged Foucauldian subject is to concern herself with inventing new ways of thinking in order to resist being led passively by those who claim an exclusive, categorical political mandate for defining the direction of her thought.”<sup>46</sup> Hence, a flâneur in a cosmopolitan realm must be conscious of their existence in the panopticon so to speak. Even though the flâneur may be mobile, he or she must

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43 Peter Adey. “Airports, mobility and the calculative architecture of affective control,” *Geoforum* 39 (2008): 439.

44 Ibid, 449.

45 Hubert, L. Dreyfus, “Being and Power: Heidegger and Foucault,” *International Journal of Philosophy* 4, no. 1 (2004): 1.

46 Joanna Rozpedowski, “Transdiscursive cosmopolitanism: Foucauldian freedom, subjectivity, and the power of resistance” (master’s thesis, University of South Florida, 2009), 175.

assume an active role under watch.

Another reason this connection to airports is noteworthy is the comparative dimension of consumerism. Airports are structured to accommodate consumerist needs. There are many studies that maintain that airline passengers have certain affective hierarchical needs: "If one need can be fulfilled the need moves up to the higher level. For some airports this hierarchy is envisaged as an emotional pyramid of wants."<sup>47</sup> In this structure, each stage on the pyramid is associated with a process within the airport processing system and the passenger's affective status. For the airports, "if one of these lower levels functions has not been satisfied, passengers will not be concerned about the provisions made for their higher level needs."<sup>48</sup> At the top of this pyramid is retail.

However, the main reason for connecting airports to the mid-level escalators and the ongoing discussion of the *Flâneur* is due to the immobility they create, also partially via 'travelators' and 'moving walkways':

Passengers are often made relatively immobile, encouraged to dwell and stay within specific areas of the airport space [...] airport authorities attempt to create spaces where passengers are more likely to spend money and time, and they do their utmost to hold them there.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, Adey connects the immobility of the passenger with not only the consumerist space that made said passenger, but a consumerist space that encourages its own expansion. In other words: *Buy*.

The question remains: how can one take a stroll while made immobile? On one hand, the extent to which urban environments have made "pre-selected" paths is taken to such an extreme that the *flâneur's* job may be to simply remove themselves from this type of environment, if possible. The ultra-capitalization of space could be said to make the urban wanderer's task even easier by hyper-delineated pathways. The question then becomes not a matter of strolling *through* environments but strolling *between* them. All the same, this point may be where the airport analogy breaks down: one cannot simply choose to *not* go through security at an airport the same way that one can choose to not follow a given path within a city. There will always be *some* alternative path. This point of view could avoid many of the complications to the *flâneur* that the immobility of the mid-level escalators and areas like airports create. However, there are a number of issues with this argument. First, it ignores the extremes with which capitalistic space, or at the very least parts of it, establish pre-set pathways. Second, if concepts like a "groundless" city and the Panoptic city wed the *flâneur* to his environment, for the *flâneur* to simply be

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47 Brad Bowes, "The Effects of Emotion and Time to Shop on Shopping Behaviour in An International Airport Terminal" (dissertation, Griffith University, 1999), 20.

48 R. Bates, "The spending state of mind," *Airport World* 5, no. 2 (2000): 44.

49 Peter Adey, "'May I have your attention': airport geographies of spectatorship, position, and (im)mobility," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 25 (2007): 516.

separate from said environment would be unacceptable.

### **Cosmopolitanism and the Concept of *Sous Rature***

How can a flâneur stroll through an environment in which he is made immobile? More specifically, how can he move through an environment that he is wedded into, and how can he be the observer in an environment that observes him? The answer lies within cosmopolitan theory. Ulrich Beck was a sociologist who first posed a new version of cosmopolitan critical theory opposed to nation state politics; Beck's scholarship focuses on global capital and civil society instead and proposes a sociological frame of reference in the cosmopolitan imagination. He writes of cosmopolitization from within which for Beck, is dependent upon the internal functions of individuals. Therefore, it is both an active and performative concept.

Van Leeuwen connects Beck's theories to the flâneur in asking: "To what extent can we interpret th[e] role of the flâneur [...] as a representation of world citizenship?"<sup>50</sup> He argues the two most prominent features of the flâneur, being an urban dweller and being drawn to socio-cultural experiences, as firmly situated on the side of cosmopolitan attitudes and practices. Ultimately, he concludes that the flâneur is cosmopolitan in the cultural sense of the term, writing "to live up to the demanding moral ideal of world citizenship, the flâneur needs to change: from detached observation to more meaningful forms of inter-cultural engagement. Hence the flâneur offers some clues for the kind of ethos that is required for a cosmopolitan subjectivity as well as for how it falls short."<sup>51</sup> Van Leeuwen argues that the flâneur moves from a point of detached observation to engagement. Similarly, Huggins and Debies-Carl argue that the flâneur needs to be an active agent while traveling through the city within a modern context; no longer is strolling passive.

Thus, to fall within this cosmopolitan structure, there first has to be a reconceptualization of immobility. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the city was a separate entity from the flâneur who walked through it. Lynch describes the perfect "imageability" of this city, abstractly conceived, as follows:

Such a city would be one that could be apprehended over time as a pattern of high continuity with many distinctive paths clearly interconnected. The perceptive and familiar observer could absorb new sensuous impacts without disruption of his basic image, and each new impact would touch upon many previous elements.<sup>52</sup>

Hence, the flâneur, a "perceptive and familiar" observer, would be separate from this image. Furthermore, this basic image would remain static.

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50 Bart van Leeuwen, "If we are flâneurs, can we be cosmopolitans?" *Urban Studies* (September 2017): Online.

51 Ibid.

52 Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960): 10.

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However, it is hard to ground even the basic image of Hong Kong. As established, there is no separation between figure and ground. The flâneur becomes blended within the very environment he traverses, an environment which is always in motion no less. Hence, even a stationary “flâneur” could be said to wander through an environment *insofar* as the environment moves around him. This reconceptualization of what it means to be immobile in a mobile landscape is intriguing, but it does not wholly resolve a fundamental paradox: *How can an immobile spectator play the part of a mobile spectator? A better approach might be not to try and resolve this paradox but work within it.*

As such, I believe the postmodern concept of *sous rature* (putting a text “under erasure”) is applicable here. Derrida expanded Heidegger’s conception to not only say that erasure marks a lost presence but also the potential impossibility of presence altogether. He writes that the *sous rature*:

is not the disappearance of origin [...] it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin [...] it thus becomes the origin of the origin [...] if all begins with trace [*sous-rature*] there is above all no originary trace.<sup>53</sup>

Hence, there is nothing beyond the present absence of presence. How this concept could be applied to the flâneur is manifold. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century has turned the very figure into a paradox, and it must ~~exist~~ as such. To be clear, this is not a call of foolish rebellion — for example, going the wrong way on the escalator or making a disruptive scene. These acts would not only make the flâneur more visible but would also reinforce his status as something solely near an *object* – an immobile thing watched. Instead, the flâneur’s goal is to acknowledge its own paradoxical existence, or perhaps to acknowledge its existence as paradox. What might it mean to exist under erasure? There are several routes from which to approach this question.

In “Performing Laicite: Gender, Agency, and Neoliberalism Among Algerians in France,” Jane Goodman tells a story of Kamal (a pseudonym), one of Amkan’s more than two thousand immigrants living in Paris, who sought the author’s help in his desire to get fellow immigrants to know each other. To succeed, he believed this enterprise needed women. He asked the author to call Zahra (also a pseudonym), another immigrant, and see if she would participate. Goodman writes:

[Zahra’s] choice was to speak from the sidelines, handing her text to Kamal while displaying her own labor in comments made from her seat in the audience. She adopted a related tactic when she affixed her virtually illegible signature to the association’s letter to Amkan residents of Paris, essentially putting her name under erasure, where it could be simultaneously

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53 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1976): 61.



deciphered or denied.<sup>54</sup>

This is the operation (*sous rature*) at the heart of this act – to simultaneously be able to agree and deny. However, this analysis of her signature might fall short if only applying it to one's name. It might not speak of the richness of dwelling, living, existing in the world, even temporarily as a flâneur.

Zahra's choice to "speak from the sidelines" offers a little more insight into what it means to *exist sous rature*, or what it means to be a person existing under erasure. It's fitting that most research on living "under erasure," or having a person placed under erasure, interprets Heidegger's and Derrida's idea as being synonymous with marginalization, whether it be race, gender, sexuality, disability, etc. In this light, an interesting dilemma to the usage of this concept to the flâneur is that the flâneur was assumed to be a man at its inception – at least in every implicit assumption as indicated by pronouns alone. It might be ironic to speak of a concept often applied to the marginalization of a figure that was traditionally not any kind of emblem of that since marginalized identities or the perception of them was not an identity chosen like the flâneur; it was something given. However, the concept of *sous rature* carries no denotational necessity of marginalization. In fact, it is a rather broad concept that can be applied to almost anything if it were abstracted outside of language.

However, there is something to be taken from this detour through social theory. To be under erasure for most social scholars is to reject the categorical. It is a rejection of transcendent identities in favor of gaining identity through its loss. This phrase is another way to describe living *sous rature*.

Interestingly enough, another good route on which to proceed seems to be pedagogy. In "Becoming Unsettled Again and Again," Audrey Aamodt explores what it means to be a settler or having a "settler" heritage while teaching and writing about postcolonialism. This seems inherently problematic. After grappling with this question for some time, Aamodt states: "perhaps what becomes necessary is putting my settler self under erasure thereby putting a strikethrough myself as settler. Instead, I might call myself a settler to denote the (im)possibility of what that subjectivity implies."<sup>55</sup> What her statement means requires further explanation. Social researcher, MacLure states that if we are talking about deconstruction as a method, we must do so by putting it "under erasure" itself, that is "the acknowledgment that it is one of those impossible things that we cannot do without."<sup>56</sup> Aamodt uses this paradox of an impossible thing that we cannot do without as inspiration for her subsequent

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54 Jane E. Goodman, "Performing Laicite: Gender, Agency, and Neoliberalism Among Algerians in France," *Ethnographies of Neoliberalism*, ed. Carol J. Greenhouse (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010): 205.

55 Audrey Aamodt, "Becoming Unsettled Again and Again: Thinking With/in and Against Autobiographical Writing," *education* 22, no. 2 (Autumn 2016): 27.

56 Maggie MacLure, "Deconstruction as a method of research," in *Theory and Methods in Social Research*, eds. B. Somekh & C. Lewin (London: Sage, 2011): 288.

comments and conclusions. First, in speaking of putting these subjectivities under erasure, she is on one hand taking away many of the identities or qualities that make us who we are (such as the title of “settler”). However, this is not used to entirely erase the identity in question. Instead, Aamodt uses this idea much more in line with its Derridean sense, that is, she sees it as a route to rebel against one fixed meaning: “Therefore, perhaps my identity as a settler need not be conceptualized as fixed.”<sup>57</sup> Subjectivity, and the process of subjectivities, becomes a process as opposed to a static state.

However, Bingham warns against an attempt at putting these subjectivities under erasure, stating “one must not pretend to erase oneself.”<sup>58</sup> Therefore, Aamodt takes a step back, concluding that she cannot erase herself as settler. However, the notion of settler may be put under erasure so that a more complicated settler subjectivity may continue to be constituted. This act is precisely what the flâneur must do – become active, see its identity as a process, and exist in a type of paradox. More so, this statement seems to offer some reconciliation of the difference between the identity we chose and the identity that is thrown upon us. As a mechanism of formation, of revealing what is present in its absence, the act of *sous rature* allows a reconstitution of self, even in the face of paradox.

We can also connect this concept back to the Mid-Level escalators themselves and the hyper-urbanization and cosmopolitanism of Hong Kong more generally, particularly with an eye to the cameras that watch the flâneur as he tries to be the watcher. Writing on posthumanism, Katherine Hayles argues that the very definition of the embodied self is under erasure in cybernetics discourse; technology portends “unexpected metamorphoses, attenuations, and dispersions” of the humanist self.<sup>59</sup> In the current example, the embodied self is already lost within a city image that borders the impossible – a city without a ground. Whereas Lofland argued that the cosmopolitan in the 1970s partakes in “body management” that can create a “shield of privacy,” the camera always interacts.<sup>60</sup> However, as soon as the flâneur is watched by the camera, he or she exists even further under erasure by virtue of becoming an image. Hence, there seems to be little else to do but accept being placed under erasure.

## Conclusion

Thus, the flâneur is the flâneur. It is a figure that must embrace its impossibility in a setting like Hong Kong. Its subjectivities must be fought for under the process of

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57 Audrey Aamodt, “Becoming Unsettled Again and Again: Thinking With/in and Against Autobiographical Writing,” *education* 22, no. 2 (Autumn 2016): 27.

58 Charles W. Bingham, “Derrida on teaching: The economy of erasure,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 27, no. 1 (2008): 30.

59 N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 30.

60 Lyn Lofland, *A World of Strangers* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 140, 146.

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being placed and placing itself under erasure. We might say it is the crowd in which the flâneur must lose himself or herself. In this sense, the flâneur can take one natural consequence, such as massive crowds, of capitalistic hyper-urbanization / cosmopolitanism and use it to constitute itself. However, this is only meant to be one suggestion of what should be an actively fluid and multiple subjectivity. Much more can be said about the flâneur figure as times and cities change.

Finally, while this article focuses on Hong Kong, it may be considered inductive of what the flâneur figure can and would look like in other cities that are experiencing or will experience similar growth and density of population. A new century requires a new identity for the flâneur, and it ought to be one that is fluid and ever-changing, multiple in its own right.