From Streets to Screens: the Entangled Histories of the Medium of Film and Parisian Streets

Carla Farrugia
Institut für Kulturwissenschaft, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, 10117, Berlin, Germany
Email: carla.farrugia@gmail.com

Abstract

What is the relationship between city and film? This relationship is crucial to the 1920s and 1930s *city symphonies*. Recent scholarship confirms that these films form a distinct genre due to their relation with the city (Jacobs et al., 2019). This article argues that to better understand the relation between city and film, including in the city symphony genre, we need to explore in more detail those specific aspects of the city that become entangled with film. I ask: in which ways is the medium of film entangled with the lived experience of the city, more specifically to the history of the material reality of city streets? To investigate, I focus on Paris, a significant landmark for the intersection of cities and cinema (Mennel, 2019, p. 2), and a key urban place of art production in a wider sense (Wilson & Chassey, 2002). Paris' transformation by Haussmann in the mid-19th century serves as the defining moment for my argument, one that changes the lived experience of Parisian city dwellers. Walter Benjamin notices how this change to urbanity impacts art as manifested in Charles Baudelaire's poetry. Expanding on this idea, I turn my attention to film and explore the ways in which it responds to the changed streets of Paris through its medium. Alberto Cavalcanti's *Rien Que les Heures* (1926), a Paris city symphony, is key. Jean-Luc Godard's *À Bout de Souffle* (1960) is a later point in the history of film's entanglement with Parisian streets. By looking more closely at how the cinematic medium integrates into its mechanism the space-time of city streets, this article offers further insights on the relationship between art and street, here more specifically between film in relation to the fate of the streets in Paris. We do not need to watch films *about* the city to experience it, in many ways the medium of film itself integrates and parallels the experience of the city and its modern urban streets. Based on this, if the city symphony is indeed a film genre based on its distinctive relationship to the city, it compels 'genre' to engage medium among its formal parameters.

Keywords
street; city symphony film; French avant-garde film; lived experience; urban art.

1. The Urban Street and the Medium of Film

A woman strolls in the middle of the *Avenue des Champs-Élysées* in Paris, selling the *New York Herald Tribune*. The camera follows her movements, we are moving behind her at her pace, walking with her, ambling in the expanse of the space of the avenue, surrounded by the cars, the trees, the shops and the buildings. One man comes into the frame from the corner, he approaches and talks to her, buying a newspaper from her before handing it back. Changing direction, they now both walk towards us, while the camera retreats, taking us with it back along the avenue. As we move with the characters, streams of passers-by walk into and out of the frame on the sides, others cross it, for a second blurring our field of vision.

The iconic scene is from Jean-Luc Godard's *À Bout de Souffle* (Godard, 1960) with Jean Seberg playing the American journalist and newspaper seller Patricia Franchini and Jean-Paul Belmondo in the role of the misogynistic gangster Michel Poiccard. It is one of the many scenes in the film giving us a vivid impression of Paris in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Scovell, 2020). Like most other *Nouvelle Vague* films it is shot out of the studio, in real-life locations, and is thus able to show us the places in which it is set, here in Paris. Looking beyond the story and the images of the city in which the characters stage the narrative, we are able to focus on the role in the scene that deserves our attention here, the street, the Parisian avenue. More specifically, not this particular street or city (although Google Maps can find both) as they are represented in the film, but how they

serve as a case of the lived experience of space-time of the urban street and its traversal as it interacts with and materialises itself in the medium of film.

What is the relationship between city and film? Are cities usually used simply as an exhibition space for cinematic narratives? Perhaps films spotlight the cities they capture, showcasing them as an aesthetic spectacle in their own right?

As the authors of a book exploring a historical form of this connection specify, their relationship runs deeper than that. They write: "the 1920s and 1930s saw the rise of the city symphony, an experimental film form that presented the city as protagonist instead of mere décor" (Jacobs et al., 2019, p. 1). City symphonies, like the scene described in my introduction, were filmed outside of film studios on real locations, and as the authors continue "in all cases, the substance of these works was the city itself—or, rather, its cinematic representation" (Jacobs et al., 2019, p. 4).

The authors argue that for this reason city symphony films constitute a genre of their own: "We would like to make the case that the city symphonies phenomenon of the interwar years amounts to a full-fledged genre—not the strongest or most stable of genres, perhaps, but a full-fledged genre nonetheless" (Jacobs et al., 2019, p. 14).

In this article I propose that in order to get a better insight on the relationship between city and film, including in the city symphony, which bases its status as a genre on this relationship, we need to be more specific and to look more closely at the intrinsic qualities of film and the ways they relate to the city. This involves not only elevating the city's role in film from mere décor to a protagonist. It also requires exploring what defines this genre with more specificity, beyond its representation of cities.

This invites the question: in which ways is the medium of film entangled with the history of urban modernity and the material reality of city streets? That is, by what means does the cinematic medium integrate into its very mechanism the lived experience of the city street and its traversal?

2. The urban transformation of Parisian streets and their impact on lived experience

To better start exploring my question we need to begin by looking at the history of the street itself and the urban transformations implemented on its material reality, changing it from its earlier forms to the ones we familiar with today in the urban centres we live in. My focus lies on Paris, not only "a highly symbolic site for the fused development of cities and cinema" (Mennel, 2019, p. 2), but also a key urban location for art production in a wider sense (Wilson & Chassey, 2002). To this day, its streets remain among the most trafficked in Western art, both in thought and representation.

The urban transformations implemented on Parisian streets in the 19th Century become important for my question due to the way the urban fabric of the city was radically shaped, thus concomitantly changing the lived experience of its urban dwellers.[1] By lived experience in this article I mean a phenomenology of the space-time that we encounter in our daily lives, one that we make in relation with our environment. This can be crystallised into, but is not reducible to its intelligible products, for example into our knowledge of and thinking in relation to a place. A transformed lived experience, then, does not point to a purely cognitive change on the level of thinking, but a change in humans themselves as experiencing beings, "human sensoria" in Benjamin's lexicon, due to their physical and psychical encounter with urban space.

Georg Simmel describes the difference between a modern urban lived experience and one available in a rural milieu

1 - The notion of a lived experience was used in various works on phenomenology. For example Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012) was interested in living in and through one's body being in the world. Another account of lived experience, this time in its explicitly social and collective dimensions, is in Alfred Schutz et al., *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (1972).

in *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (Georg Simmel, 2002, pp. 11–19).[2] He identifies the metropolis (*die Grossstädte*) as the prototypical setting of modern, urban life and writes: "the metropolis creates these psychological conditions – with every crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life" (Georg Simmel, 2002, pp. 11–12). The new experiences which arise out of the urban context, "the rapid telescoping of changing images, pronounced differences within it that is grasped at a single glance, and the unexpectedness of violent stimuli" (Georg Simmel, 2002, p. 11) provide "a deep contrast with the slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of the sensory-mental phase of small town and rural existence" *(Georg Simmel, 2002, pp. 11–12)* to those experienced on the modern street. The distinctly optical character of these observations ("telescoping" in particular[3]) bears emphasis. For the purposes of this article, I focus on the topic from an optical perspective.

Developing on Simmel's observations, Walter Benjamin zoomed more closely on the transformations that were effected on streets through their Haussmannisation and the impact it had on the spatio-temporal experience of urbanites.[4] He writes:

'Street', to be understood, must be profiled against the older term 'way'. With respect to their mythological natures, the two words are entirely distinct. The way brings with it the terrors of wandering, some reverberation of which must have struck the leaders of nomadic tribes. In the incalculable turnings and resolutions of the way, there is even today, for the solitary wanderer, a detectable trace of the power of ancient directives over wandering hordes. But the person who travels a street, it would seem, has no need of any waywise guiding hand. It is not in wandering that man takes to the street, but rather in submitting to the monotonous, fascinating, constantly unrolling band of asphalt (Benjamin & Tiedemann, 1999, p. 519).

In his research published as The Arcades Project (Benjamin & Tiedemann, 1999), he describes the changes to the topography of Paris directed by Baron von Haussmann between 1853 and 1870,[5] including the transformation of Parisian streets into thoroughfares and boulevards.

"The strategic perspectival articulation of the city" (Benjamin & Tiedemann, 1999, p. 121) encompassed various aspects, from a "stifled perspective" (Benjamin & Tiedemann, 1999, p. 122), "the narrow, tangled, putrid alleyways" (Benjamin & Tiedemann, 1999, p. 122) of the older Parisian streets to "long open vistas" (Benjamin & Tiedemann, 1999, p. 126) and the monotonous, unrolling bands of asphalt. For example, the experience of relative spatial distance to one's surroundings when passing through narrow, winding streets is different to that experienced on wider avenues and boulevards opening to the horizon. Additionally a change happens to the experience of time, as when traversing the straighter, smoother roads one moves with higher speed, now also possible on motorised transport vehicles. Along with the different experience of being in

2 - The original German title of the essay is *Die Grossstädte und das Geistesleben*, with a wider psychic rather than a narrower cognitive meaning. In attempting to provide a wider view of the term 'mental' in the English title, Boy (2021) translates *Geist* into English as spirit. The author suggests that rather than only focusing on its Hegelian implications, scholars now recognise the influence of *Völkerpsychologie* on Simmel's approach. Still unburdened by the notoriety that came with this field later, this method of psychology focused on the processes in the human mind rather than the observable products of thinking themselves, putting this wider view of the mind under the terminology of *Geist*. John D Boy, '"The Metropolis and the Life of Spirit" by Georg Simmel: A New Translation', Journal of Classical Sociology, 21.2 (2021), 188–202. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468795X20980638>.

3 - From the original German version of the text "die rasche Zusammendrängung wechselnder Bilder", directly translatable to 'the rapid crowding together of changing images'. Georg Simmel, *Die Großstädte Und Das Geistesleben* (Hofenberg, 2016, p. 4).

4 - Benjamin's interest in experience is most famously made by distinguishing between *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. Here the distinction between the two does not apply to my topic.

5 - The works started by Haussmann were finished later in the 1920s.

motion in relation to the landscape, there is also a relation to the motion of other people and objects. The vehicles, crowds of passers-by, moving with various tempos on pavements and crossing the roads, contrasts with that on narrower streets where sometimes hardly more than two individuals can pass each other by.

The devising of entryways into Paris connecting them with railroads, "to put them in communication with the city center by means of large arteries" (Benjamin & Tiedemann, 1999, p. 126), levelling down populous districts to spread out wide boulevards through the city, also results in the contraction of the experience of space-time when moving into and through the city.

Furthermore, the changed surroundings escalates a need for those going through the new streets to constantly reorient at the level of the reception of experience. An example that Benjamin gives is a description of how while earlier "passers-by cast glances in all directions which still appeared to be aimless, today's pedestrians are obliged to do so in order to keep abreast of traffic signals" (Benjamin, 1997, p. 132). Through the notion of lived experience, the focus here is not on the interpretation of the information on traffic signals, but on the continual phenomenological adjustments necessitated by the new streets.

3. The transformed street and its impact on art

3.1. Benjamin on Baudelaire

Benjamin's interest in a changed experience of those in an urban setting is driven by his interest in how this coincides with an effect on art. For him the poetry of Charles Baudelaire showed evidence of responding to the new urban experience in Paris. Baudelaire experienced first-hand the renovations executed by Haussmann on Paris, and this in turn manifested itself through his art. "With Baudelaire, Paris becomes for the first time the subject of lyric poetry" (Benjamin & Tiedemann, 1999, p. 21), as he writes "the profound and intricate poetry of a vast capital" (Benjamin & Tiedemann, 1999, p. 238). The experiences made on the streets are the source for this art: "from which the poet, in the (…) streets, wrests poetic booty" (Benjamin, 1997, p. 120).

Rather than thinking of art as an idea originating in the artist, we can consider it as a materialisation of a lived experience that a social formation has, here the crowds of Paris at the time of Baudelaire, and stemming from the place of the urban city and the street at the time of Haussmann. The artist transforms this experience, articulating it through a specific genre, into a form, on a medium, in Baudelaire's case the lyric poem as sonnet on the medium of print, responding to a changed Paris.

In his essay *The Flâneur* (Benjamin, 1997, pp. 35–66), Benjamin uses the example of a poem – *A une passante* (Benjamin, 1997, p. 44) (To a passerby) to show how Baudelaire's poetry responds to the changed experience when on the street. Traditionally, Petrarchan sonnets are formed in two parts, commonly themed on unrequited love or romantic beauty. In the first part (the octave, or two quatrains), the lines set a scene, express an idea or ask question, and in the second (the sestet, or two tercets), there are the thoughts and comments of the artist or the answer to the question, elaborating on its meaning. Between these two parts is a turn (*volta*), the shift in thought and narrative, before going to the second part of the sonnet. The turn represents a change in the argument of the previous section, it contradicts it, shows it in a new light or at times draws a conclusion.

Benjamin observes that in this particular sonnet by Baudelaire, the new experience of being part of the modern street, not only shows itself in the content of the poem, (now mentioning deafening traffic and a chance fleeting encounter with a woman in mourning), but it also instils itself in the form of the sonnet, changing it. Set on the street as if we are experiencing through the artist himself, the *volta* at the beginning of the second part involves a lightning flash (*un éclair)*, a shock experience marking a moment of change, registering itself in the poet who then relays it into the poem.

Benjamin notes that between the two parts of the poem, before and after the lightning flash, there is "a profound gulf between the quatrains which present the occurrence and the tercets which transfigure it" (Benjamin, 1997, p. 46). Rather than the second part responding to the first part,

commenting on or contradicting on the level of its argument, the juxtaposition of the two parts "penetrate[s] beneath their surface" (Benjamin, 1997, p. 46) to reveal a deeper experience of change when being in the transformed city. The genre of the lyric poem is here exposed to the shock of what is, as it were, off the page. The alignment of lightening (natural phenomenon drawn to the new electrical polarities in the city streets) and '*volta*' (the cultural aspect) produces a channel whereby the outside and the inside of the poem collide.

Through this Benjamin shows how Baudelaire's poems are not only showing a thematic change – featuring Paris and presenting the contents of urban experience like traffic on the streets. They constitute a change in their form, which discloses a deeper transformation in the lived experience of Parisians. Baudelaire's lyric poetry is the first example of art responding to the changing lived experience of urban streets – its form engaging the theme of the city in a new way.

3.2. The filmic medium and the city

Drawing from this spirit, the form of art that I relate to the city in this article is film. Indeed, it was not only poetry that Benjamin thought had this intimate connection with urbanity. He also recognised that cinema calls for the same experience that one has in the city: "A [railway] station gives the order, as it were, for a surprise attack, but it is an outdated manoeuvre that confronts us with the archaic, and the same is true of photography, even the snapshot. Only the cinema commands optical approaches to the essence of the city, such as conducting the motorist into the new centre" (Benjamin et al., 1996, p. 599).

Which brings us to the questions I am interested in: what is the relationship between the city and film? What insights can be gained from this relationship, crucial to the city symphony genre, if we explore how the film medium incorporates the lived experience of traversing city streets into its mechanism, rather than focusing solely on film representing the city thematically?

By the medium of film in this article I mean what Stephen Heath in *The Cinematic Apparatus* describes as: "the experience of the machine, the apparatus" (De Lauretis & Heath, 1980, p. 1), rather than what the medium represents in its content. The film as medium is often described through three inter-related components: the recording machine, the projection machine and the audience. Elaborating on his point, Heath notes that in the initial moments in the history of cinema, it was not what is commonly focused on by the cinema industry that was of interest, like the themes of a film. He writes:

The Grand Café programme is headed with the announcement of 'Le Cinématographe' and continues with its description: 'this apparatus, invented by MM. Auguste and Louis Lumière, permits the recording, by series of photographs, of all the movements which have succeeded one another over a given period of time in front of the camera and the subsequent reproduction of these movements by the projection of their images, life size, on a screen before an entire audience'. Only after that description is there mention of the titles of the films to be shown, the 'sujets actuels', relegated to the bottom of the programme sheet (De Lauretis & Heath, 1980, p. 1).

The connection between city and cinema was deliberately taken up in the early experiments in film known as city symphonies that I introduced in the beginning of my argument. These films' central theme was very clearly the city, making an ideal case from where to start investigating the connection between city and film, to then go deeper into how the film medium responds to the city. The authors of *The City Symphony Phenomenon*, advocating their recognition as a genre based on the relation they have to the city, write:

The dynamic and fragmented structure of cinema is presented as being an extension of the city itself— the shifting perspectives, the pace of the editing, the special effects are all presented as both expressions and products of modern metropolitan life. City symphonies, thus, indicate that cinema is the ultimate medium to depict the city or, conversely, that the city was the ultimate subject matter for the camera-eye. In other words, the city symphony demonstrates the correspondence between the flash-like and disjointed succession of images inherent to cinema

and the receptive disposition of the modern city-dweller (Jacobs et al., 2019, p. 29).

While I concur with this perspective, I would like to propose a more tightly focused approach, one that is required when we state that the city and film are entangled. We need to look more closely at the nature of this relationship and explore the *specific ways* through which the filmic medium is part the city.

This more specific approach also means that in the art forms we are looking at we can find evidence linking their response to a more concrete historical event of urban modernity while taking into consideration its subsequent historical development. The authors locate the emergence of city symphonies, as of other contemporaneous art forms, like visual arts and literature, with which they share similarities, in the more generalised processes of modernity at the same time as the films were being produced. They specify that:

these literary and artistic representations and evocations of the city are, of course, inherently linked to the accelerated processes of urbanization and modernization that characterized the entire Western world after the First World War. Most if not all of the city symphonies discussed in this book can be seen as responses to the startling changes that came with this (Jacobs et al., 2019, p. 31).

Instead, I propose that like Baudelaire's poetry described by Benjamin, city symphonies also had a direct impact specifically by the urban transformations effected by Haussmann on the streets of Paris and the changed experience that this brought about. This transformation continued until 1927 within Paris and was repeated in many other major cities around the world. We can trace this if we look at some explicit ways in which the medium of film is entangled with the history of the material reality of city streets, following their transformation in Paris.

Let us refer to the first city symphony made in Paris, at approximately the same time as the end of Haussmann's project and as Benjamin was writing about Baudelaire's art responding to it. *Rien que les Heures* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1926) is interesting for my argument as for the most part it was not filmed in the cultural and economic centre of Paris, but in the quarters in which the "humble and downtrodden" (Cavalcanti, 1926, 0:01:57) lived. The streets there were still part of the old Paris, the ways that in other parts of Paris had already been turned to avenues and boulevards. These older streets were not yet reshaped to circulate and display commodities, including fast vehicles and the newspapers that we see on the *Champs-Élysées* in Godard.

Like Benjamin, Cavalcanti was aware of the better connection of the filmic medium with the city over other optical art forms. In one of the first sequences of the film we see a close-up of an eye opening wide, followed by a number of paintings of city scenes by different art movements, which it seems to be taking in, then succeeded by a collage of several eyes. The words accompanying this state: "Painters of every nationality depict the city, but only a succession of images can bring it to life." (Cavalcanti, 1926, 0:02:27) The sequence, a succession of images displayed one after the other – showing paintings, but through film, itself a succession of images, establishes Cavalcanti's self-reflexive deference to film over other optical media at the start of the movie. While we can agree with the general statement that film is more suited to the transformed experience of space-time of the modern city, what gives us a clue to how film and street entangled is the comparison of two different shots in the film.

The next scene is of an elderly woman walking along a narrow street in the older, unrenovated part of Paris. The shot is from a high angle, as if from an upper storey of a building. The street she is walking on is cobbled, the woman has difficulty moving along it, and so would a film camera if it had to unobtrusively follow her movement. Later in the film, the same woman tries to walk down a step street, clearly in an old area of the city again. The recording aspect of the medium, the camera, does not and cannot directly follow the movement of the woman on these types of outside surfaces. In effect, it abstracts itself from the depicted action.

In this regard, the old streets' surfaces in the film do not contribute much more to the illusion of movement than the

paintings Cavalcanti featured in the initial sequence of his film, or the photographs referenced by Benjamin.

This can be contrasted with another sequence, in which another type of shot features, one of the very few like it in the film. A woman selling newspapers runs along a paved, smoothed street, clearly in a part of the city which had been transformed by Haussmann. Here the camera runs beside her, moving on what seems like a motor vehicle, relaying to the audience the impression of speed when moving through these newer streets, traversing them.[6] The material of the street itself is here facilitating the technical aspect of the camera in motion, and experiencing the film elicits the same experience as the one we have in the city in which movement with a higher speed has become possible.

This gives us a good clue about one type of interaction of film medium and the material reality of city streets on which it is filmed. The smoother streets facilitated the movement of the camera, the experience of which was integrated into the filmic medium, which the audience could then experience as the illusion of uninterrupted motion in film.

The newspaper seller in Cavalcanti's film moving on the smooth surface of the street, takes us back to Jean Seberg's Patricia selling newspapers on the *Champs-Élysées* in *À Bout de Souffle*. Also working outside of the film studio and now attempting to break the limits of what film had developed into with its institutionalisation, French avant-garde filmmakers took an experimental approach to film. In the *New York Herald Tribune* shot, Godard pushed Raoul Coutard, his cinematographer, on a wheelchair (Dixon & Foster, 2013, pp. 242–243), with Coutard using a handheld camera to film the characters literally rolling with them up and down the avenue in the famous shot[7 8]. This would not have been possible on one of the older streets, and this despite Godard's affection for the jump cut.

Comparing the narrow street in Cavalcanti's shot with that of the avenue in Godard's scene gives us more indications of how the medium of film engages the transformed streets of Paris. The high contrast in the shot of the narrower street, means that while the woman, located in the darker part of the picture in the confinement of the narrow street is visible, the outer parts of the shot are very bright, even overexposed. The scene in *À Bout de Souffle* has less contrast throughout. The lenses and apertures to film a narrower space where less light is available is different to that of filming a wider expanse like in an avenue with more access to natural light, as might be the developing process of the film. Coutard even mentions the type of film stock when certain lighting conditions are being filmed. He writes that while filming *À Bout de Souffle*, Godard asked him: "No more confectionery: we're going to shoot in real light. You've been a photographer. Which stock do you prefer?" (Coutard, 2016).

The depth of field also has to be arranged accordingly, if the 'long, open vista' of an avenue is being filmed instead of a narrow, winding street.

While these are some examples of direct ways in which the film apparatus interacts with the material of the transformed streets of Paris impacting its technical and formal aspects, there are other facets of the film medium that are made in parallel to and sometimes depending on the audience's mental life changing by being on these streets.

A good case in point of this is made through the example of film editing.

An urban population traversing the city from its outskirts straight to its center via avenues and thoroughfares in motor vehicles, rather than winding through the older streets, is adjusted to the experience of space-time contraction of the city. Paralleled in film, the audience, for

6 - Outside of Paris this technique is famously used by Vertov (Vertov, 1929) and Ruttmann (Ruttmann, 1927) using vehicles on the road to produce the illusion of motion/speed, going quickly to the city center.

7 - For images on how they used the wheelchair see: (Ventura, 1993, 0:22:38 – 0:23:14).

8 - A contemporary of Godard, Agnès Varda in Cléo from 5 to 7, similarly uses the smooth streets to run the camera on motor vehicles in Paris (Agnès Varda, 1962, 0:16:58 – 0:22:52).

example, travels into Paris with Belmondo's character in just a few minutes at the beginning of *À Bout de Souffle*. The whole course of a day in Paris (which in reality would have taken a much longer time to film) is edited and contracted to 45 minutes in *Rien Que les Heures*. Another change in the urban psyche paralleled by film through editing, is when the cinema relies on the audience being accustomed to constant reorientation at the level of their reception. Reorienting to the onslaught of input when traversing the modern city street, corresponds to experiencing a cut from a long shot to a close up or from one scene to another. Even though the camera cannot move on the street surface in the old parts of the city, the psyche of its residents attuned to the newer street experience still expects some movement – we can already see wipe transitions in *Rien Que les Heures* compensating for the lack of movement by the camera.[9]

4. Media of Communication in the History of the City

4.1. The Shift from Print to Film to Capture City Life

The historical narrative in this article, tracing the evolution from the art of Baudelaire's urban poetry on the medium of print to the transition to film, is also a history of communication media within the city. The street itself is a medium of communication, connecting one point of the city to another, changing historically in its form, from ways to streets to avenues. Looking more closely at our subject from a perspective of the history of communication media can give us further insights on the relationship between the city and film, evincing their entangled historical development.

A key question that arises here is: for what purpose is communication in the city taking place? According to Walter Benjamin, the reorganisation of Parisian streets had a specific objective – it was intended to aid circulation in the city for both military and financial purposes (Benjamin & Tiedemann, 1999). On the one hand it was meant to avoid insurrection and inhibit the erection of barricades after the Paris Commune, while making possible the quick mobilisation of the military to the areas of insurrection. On the other, the same urban transformation also facilitated the circulation of commodities on an urban space that was quickly becoming the turf of the bourgeoisie and a place where the main experience was of the commodity form. Benjamin's observation echoes what Marx had noted a few decades earlier, that capitalism's expansion and its logic of accumulation depends on the circulation of commodities and the "shortening of time and space by means of communication and transport" *(Marx, 1910, pp. 64–65)*

One of the forms of communication circulating through the city streets, exemplified in the two films I mentioned, was the newspaper—itself a commodity. Newspapers, like Baudelaire's poetry, are part of the medium of print, the most popular optical medium of communication before film. The use of the street as a space of circulation for newspapers features in both films I discuss here, each of the sequences featuring a woman trying to sell and circulate newspapers on a Parisian street which has already been transformed by Baron von Haussmann.

A comparison of the two relevant sequences puts a spotlight on the eventual fate of the print medium in relation to the history of the city, while the latter was becoming entangled with the medium of film as I am tracing in this article.

In Cavalcanti's *The Newspaper Salesgirl* sequence in *Rien que les Heures* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1926, 0:30:40), the street functions in order for the newspaper to circulate and reach its audience quickly. In this scene, the shots of the running woman are interspersed with a number of other shots of French newspaper mastheads spinning round as if on a spinning wheel. Simulating the circulation of newspapers, here literally into and out of the frame, each shot increases in speed from the one before it, in parallel to the woman trying to flag down buyers running faster in each shot on the smoothed streets of Paris. This juxtaposition puts into the forefront the meaning of the word *circulation* in French – used to mean the circulation of newspapers, but also

9 - As if paralleling the increased movement that was progressively enabled in the history of the streets of Paris, camera pans and tilts became more common throughout film history. While in early film history cameras stayed mostly still, by the time of Godard these movements were a common technique used in filming.

meaning vehicular traffic, the speed of which is here one and the same of the camera moving on a motor vehicle.

This constellation of meanings around *circulation in the sequence* – between newspapers, communication, traffic, street and film features as the urban moment of convergence during a key shift in the history of the city in relation to its media of communication. Even if, as Friedrich Kittler points out in his lectures on the history of optical media, "Gutenberg's letterpress made the techniques that superseded it — from photography to the computer – possible in the first place" (Kittler et al., 2010, p. 67), the way the city developed means that ultimately the medium of print became too slow to be able to parallel the speed of the new urban city. Film, more suited to the tempo of the modern city and the speed of its circulation on its reorganised streets, takes the place of print and becomes the most popular optical medium.

Further emphasising the relationship between the city and film and the way film replaced print in this manner, we have Godard's sequence, a later moment in this historial arc. Looking at the level of narrative content first, Patricia tries and fails to bring others into the communication network of print and to move the circulation of newspapers that she is selling. Michel looks at the newspaper and says "No horoscope! It's the future" (Godard, 1960, 0:11:40) before handing it back. While the nihilistic 'no future' prediction can apply to Marcel's fate in the film itself, in the context of the scene as a stand-alone, it also hints at the newspaper's increased redundancy in keeping up with the pace of circulation of the city.

To back up this implication made in the content of the film, we can look more closely and make a comparison of the different ways the montage is arranged in the two sequences in which the newspaper takes a central position to provide us with more solid evidence. Attesting to the decreasing importance of the medium of print here exemplified by the newspaper, we can refer to the use of the close-up in the two scenes, commonly used in film to emphasise the importance of the object being focused on. While both women are framed in a medium shot in the two sequences, Cavalcanti's sequence has the addition of close-ups of the newspaper mastheads. This kind of shot does not feature at any point in the scene in *À Bout de Souffle*. In the latter we only see the newspapers in the characters' hands in medium shot. The pace of the two sequences also varies, alluding to the eventual failure of the newspaper to keep up with the pace of urban life. In the Cavalcanti sequence there is still an analogy made between speed and newspapers and their circulation. The woman is filmed from a moving vehicle. Accentuating this, the sequence is constituted from multiple shots edited together and sped up. The dynamic composition of the mastheads moving diagonally in and out of the frame adds to the same effect. In Godard, the pace of the one-shot scene is slow throughout – the wheelchair it was filmed from being slower than the vehicle used in the other sequence. The dynamics of both movement and composition here are much less intense[10].

With the recognition that film replaced print as the latter was too slow for the pace of the modern city, we get novel insights on the relationship between city and its media of communication. While newspapers can still circulate on the transformed street as commodities—even rapidly sometimes—through film the street is still able to function as a means of communication rather than just a space facilitating the circulation of commodities. By way of film the city can communicate the lived experience of what it is to be on its streets, in spite of Haussmann's original aims stated by Walter Benjamin. Film functions to communicate from, to and about the city, in effect it is as if the modern urban city is recording itself and communicating this through film.

4.2. The Notion of 'Symphony' in the City Symphony Genre

Viewed from this perspective, the connection between city and film prompts important questions about the use of the term 'symphony' in the context of the city symphony genre. If we are to consider these films as a distinct genre, they must all share a common aspect that connects them to the city. As Maja Mikula points out, "*genre* is a French word that means type, kind or form. Understood as a category of

10 - The slow pace of the scene is further emphasised by the accompanying soundtrack by Martial Solal (Solal, 1959).

text in art, literature and the media" (Mikula, 2008, p. 79), genre is created through sets of socially-agreed criteria or conventions.

What are the agreed conventions that categorise films in the city symphony genre, relating them to the city through the notion of 'symphony'? The authors of *The City Symphony Phenomenon* note that "it was Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin* which fully established the genre, touched off the phenomenon, and whose subtitle, *Die Sinfonie der Grosstadt*, provided this movement with its nickname" (Jacobs et al., 2019, p. 6). They then explain the use of the term 'symphony' in relation to the films by finding comparisons between the structure of the films and that of symphonies. They ask: "What are the essential components necessary to capture the energy and dynamism of the modern metropolis? The most common device utilized by these directors was a 'one-day-in-the-life-of-a-city' structure, one that simulated a chronological order—generally either a dawn-to-dusk or dawn-to-dawn narrative" (Jacobs et al., 2019, p. 24). This is then paralleled to a similar structure in the musical symphony: "many city symphonies self-consciously adopt a musical structure, and are frequently organized in terms of 'movements'" (Jacobs et al., 2019, p. 27). That is to say that musical symphonies also have a sequence and narrative form in the progression of their movements[11]. In this argument, symphonic structure serves as the common denominator to the films making the genre, with which they share a similar narrative structure.

In both cases of film and musical piece, symphony becomes synonymous with harmony, as the expected progression and eventual resolution elicits a pleasurable response in the audience. This is one of the tenets of genre, according to Mikula: "the familiarity and repetitiveness of generic texts is often assumed to have therapeutic or consolatory effects on the reader" (Mikula, 2008, p. 79). She adds, "In contemporary society, generic texts tend to follow the rules of the market, by endeavouring to anticipate and incorporate the elements expected by the audience" (Mikula, 2008, p. 79).

I suggest that focusing on the narrative structure of city films, just like focusing on their themes, is a social convention of the genre that can hide an even deeper connection between films and cities. It also further obscures the nature of the filmic medium itself, which independently of the city symphony phenomenon had strong links to the city and urban life, especially in its infancy as filmic medium developing from photography. Before film became institutionalised and started to be used to tell stories, using specific themes and narrative structures, film was used to record urban life. The first films were indeed scenes of cities and streets[12], as if the city itself started using the medium which emerged in conjunction to it, to record itself as it was changing and developing. Sometimes, like in city symphonies, to deliberately record its own representation, and what it means to live an urban life.

While this argument does not mean that we need to discredit the many wonderful examples of city symphonies or dispose of the term 'symphony' in relation to the genre altogether, it does require that we question it, together with the significance that symphony adds to the relation between city and film. I propose a use of the notion of 'symphony' that remains true to the connection between city and film, without limiting it to a recognition based solely on narrative structure. We can acknowledge that symphonies developed into the musical forms we know today—composed of movements in a sequence—in the early 18th Century (*The Evolution of the Symphony*, 2024). The term 'symphony' itself "comes from *sinfonia*: derived from the Greek *syn* meaning 'together' and *phonê* meaning 'voice, or sound'" (*The Evolution of the Symphony*, 2024)—sounding together. This meaning of the term does not necessarily feature harmony, or an outcome with a

11 - An example of a well-known example of a symphony with a narrative sequence is Beethoven's *Sixth Symphony* (*Symphony No. 6 in F, Op. 68 "Pastoral"*, 1808).

12 - See *Traffic Crossing Leeds Bridge (Le Prince, 1888)* or *Leaving Jerusalem by Railway* (Promio, 1897).

pleasing effect, it is simply the coordination of disparate elements[13]. This brings 'symphony' closer to 'montage', a term commonly associated with film. Free of its later signification associated with an expected pleasurable outcome bound to narrative structure, is a more fitting meaning of the term 'symphony' to refer to the entangled relation between city and filmic medium. This would mean that the scene I described previously from *À Bout de Souffle*, for example, would also to some extent be symphonic with the city. This also makes sense from the perspective that Godard consistently sought to distance himself from the conventional norms of film-making throughout his career and that film had a stronger connection to the city before becoming more institutionalized. It might also mean that we, as both writers and readers of the subject, are participating in the conceptual symphony—or montage—of these elements of the city.

If instead we had to find a closer parallel between city films and another art form, rather than music, it might be useful to refer again to poetry, belonging to the preceding medium of print, more specifically the poetry that also arose out of the experience of the transformed streets. Godard might have been onto something when he said that the *Fleur du Mal* is the precursor of cinema, and when in *Histoir(e) du Cinéma* he compares film to Baudelaire's poem *Le Voyage* due to its panoramic views of the world and quick change of general frames (Pop-Curşeu, 2018, p. 48).

Le Voyage is the final poem in the collection by Baudelaire and it does more than show panoramic vistas quickly. It evokes directly the space-time of the traveller, the person constantly on the move, going nowhere, always disappointed, resounding Godard's disillusionment with cinema. While his frustration can be interpreted to be directed only at the film industry, (and so that film, like print before it, became increasingly commodified), it is also possible that in some way the film-maker was anticipating that the filmic medium itself was becoming haunted with the possibility of being a failed voyage[14]. Just as the filmic medium replaced print, so is film becoming too slow for the pace of life and will eventually be replaced by a more suited medium on which we can make art that is entangled with the lived experience of the urban city.

5. Conclusions

Like in Baudelaire's poems, film also responds to the city through its themes. Paris is a major theme in both films I am describing here. To represent what being in Paris means, the film-makers make use of related themes like the contrasts of different lives of city-dwellers, or freedom from expected life-style conventions, or possible forms of crime we encounter in cities. While these themes illustrate what the city might represent, this aspect of the relationship between city and film alone in insufficient to capture what a city is. Similarly, the narrative structure of city symphony films as a day in the life of a city, and paralleling them to the structure of musical symphonies, is not a close enough inquiry into the relationship between city and film.

13 - The perspective on 'symphony' that does not define it strictly through its auditory aspect, brings up a number of questions on the genre itself, about which there is a lot more to say. For example, how is a term relating to music applied to films in the silent era of cinema, among other topics? For the purposes of this article I will not go into these questions, although they open compelling implications that might reveal further insights on the relationship between city and film and the entangled history of their development. We can ask: what does the transition from print – solely optical, to silent movies, to sound films, tell us about the relationship between these media and the city, the experience of which is itself both optical and auditory? How is the city continuing to develop and what does that mean for the media through which it now needs, and will in the future, to continue to express its lived experience?

14 - Godard's last works are testament to this perspective. While on the one hand, later in his career he became much more cynical about the ability of film to keep a sense of autonomy from the film industry, at the same time he keeps putting pressure on the medium of film itself, which John Kelsey describes as performing "a DIY history from outside the discipline, looking back from the profound boredom of a voyage to nowhere" (Kelsey, 2020). For example in *Bildbuch (Godard, 2018) he is imagining the short-comings of cinema, while* filming on digital video.

It is through film's mechanisms as a medium that we find the fundamental correspondence between the city—more specifically the lived experience of the street—and film. We do not need to watch films *about* the city to experience it, as the medium of film itself in many ways integrated and paralleled the experience of the city and the traversal of its reshaped streets.

This provides us with a key insight on the city symphony and the scholarly efforts to designate it as a genre based on this relationship: if the city symphony is a genre, then it has to take in consideration the ways in which the medium of cinema is part of it. The representation and capturing of a city through film has to include the way in which the city enables its own capture through this medium.

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