

CHAPTER 5

WORLD CITIES, CITY WORLDS

For most people, seeing the world still means first and foremost seeing our own city. Taken together, today's global cities make a world of their own. A century ago, only two out of every ten people worldwide were city dwellers. Now the global majority is urban. This mass migration has created the new global megacities—São Paulo, Delhi, Shanghai, Buenos Aires, Beijing, Bombay, Tokyo—that have outgrown imperial and modern cities like London and New York. The new megacities are better understood as city regions, or metropolitan areas. It's hard to tell where they begin and end, harder still to determine accurately how many people live there. Shanghai has an official population of 23 million and an estimated 3 million migrants. The Chinese government has said it intends that there will be 30 million there by 2030, even though local unofficial estimates put the total population today at 40 million. There are currently six hundred such global city regions, where an estimated 1.5 billion people live. They generate no less than \$30 trillion annually,

amounting to half of global GDP. The World Health Organization projects that by 2050, seven out of ten people will be city residents. Almost all that growth will come in developing countries.¹

China, which became a majority urban nation in 2011, plans to move another 250 million people to its cities. (Not to be outdone, India proposed adding 500 million new urban citizens by 2020.) If that is accomplished, 1 billion Chinese people, likely to be one in eight of the world's population, will live in the new cities that are being created on a seemingly daily basis. It is often said that Rome was not built in a day. That is not true of the new global cities, especially in China. Chengdu had about 3 million inhabitants in 1990. By 2012, there were 14 million in the city, with a further 6 million in the surrounding areas. The city had an official growth rate of 13 percent that year and its exports were increasing at a rate of over 30 percent.²

The new global city extends beyond the older concept of city limits: it is a region in itself. The Gauteng region in South Africa extends across the cities of Johannesburg and Pretoria to townships like Soweto. You cannot understand Hong Kong without knowing its place in the Pearl River Delta and its relation to China's special economic areas in Guangdong Province. From day to day, the global city might experience low-intensity warfare that can escalate to full-scale insurgency or even civil war. These cities are intensely polluted, even toxic, especially, but not exclusively, for the poor. Global cities may present themselves as transparent hubs of frictionless commerce, but their

residents often experience them as conflicted, dangerous, and even haunted. These are the places from which we have to see the world today and where we learn how to see.

For if the classic city of the imperial period was highly distinctive—think of the way that Paris, London, and Madrid have very different styles and atmospheres—the rapidly emerging global cities perhaps have more in common, based on the global computer network that moves money and information between them. There are the ubiquitous high-rises and informal housing (unplanned buildings without legal access to services) on the periphery, surrounding the inevitable glass towers of the banks and the halogen-lit branches of global-brand shops downtown. Traffic is terrible and the milky white haze of smog is omnipresent. Because these spaces are key to understanding today's global visual culture, this chapter will concentrate on the ways in which cities now and in the past have shaped the way we see the world.

Rather than stressing the specificities of individual cities, I will look at how three city forms have shaped the world over the past two centuries. First was the imperial city (1800–1945), whose spectacular form nonetheless relied on keeping certain people and places out of sight. The imperial city was the place to see and be seen for those who constituted the public. That public was not everyone. It was mostly men, mostly white. In imperial capitals such as Paris, London, and New York, the dandy and the street photographer observed and recorded without being seen. Division became the central, highly visible feature of the

Cold War city (1945–1990). Of course, such divides, epitomized by the Berlin Wall, made the two sides invisible to each other. Today’s global city (post-1990) has inherited the center-periphery layout of the imperial city and retains the divides of the Cold War at key global intersections like Jerusalem, Baghdad, and Kabul. But it is literally erasing its own past and creating its own way of seeing. Seeing in the global city requires active self-censorship from its residents as part of a highly controlled environment, encapsulated by the now-notorious slogan of the New York Police Department: “If you see something, say something.” Whatever there is to see must be reported and the citizen is now the stand-in for the police.

At the same time, whenever the police call on us, we must move on and accept that there is nothing to see here. All of this highly effective control is nonetheless haunted by a set of anxieties. How can the real be distinguished from the fake? Are cities still home or just another place? And in a world where everyone can know their GPS coordinates, do we still know where we are?

THE IMPERIAL CITY

Let’s begin in Paris, one of the most visited cities in the world today. According to the French tourist ministry, just under 30 million people a year made it their destination in 2012, dwarfing the resident population of 2.2 million within the twenty central *arrondissements*, or urban districts.³ The city is carefully prepared to welcome them. The Eiffel Tower,

built for the International Exhibition in 1889, is lit up at night. Once neglected nineteenth-century statues have been gilded. The coal smoke that once made the city buildings black has been scrubbed off. As the German writer Walter Benjamin beautifully put it: Paris was once “the capital of the nineteenth century” (1999). It is now the largest museum in the world, the museum of the nineteenth century. As Woody Allen’s hit film *Midnight in Paris* (2010) captured very well, many tourists come in search of a city that has long gone, whether it’s the surrealist era of the 1920s, or the Impressionist heyday in the 1870s.

Nineteenth-century Paris was a city world in which the urban observer claimed a certain cultural power by seeing without being seen. There were distinct limits to this power. Not many tourists today probably realize that the broad avenues they stroll down were widened by the city prefect Baron Haussmann in the 1860s in order to provide a clear line of fire against potential revolutionaries. Paris the museum bears little relation to its own history. It is so popular because it presents a nostalgic view of a city life that has long departed.

But then again, it was always this way. In 1855, the novelist Honoré de Balzac announced to his readers: “Alas! The old Paris is disappearing shockingly fast.”⁴ And the poet Baudelaire added a few years later: “Old Paris is no more.”⁵ The pioneering photographer Charles Marville became famous in the 1850s for his pictures of the old streets taken just before they were demolished to make way for the new avenues.



Figure 48. Marville photograph, *Old Paris*

There are no people in those photographs. It was the buildings that provoked the nostalgia, not their impoverished inhabitants. Haussmann tore down the old Paris on purpose to protect Emperor Napoleon III from street revolution. The old revolutionary neighborhoods were demolished and the workers sent to live outside the city center in what became known as the red belt (meaning “radical”) in the twentieth century. Many of today’s global cities have

come to have the same layout: a wealthy core with good services, surrounded by people living precariously in informal housing. The center is highly visible, actively put on display for consumption by tourists, while the periphery is invisible, kept out of sight to all but its residents.

Paris became known as the City of Light, a reputation that began in the eighteenth century with the first installation of mirrored streetlamps. In the early nineteenth century, gaslight made it possible to stroll and shop in the city at night. To facilitate this new pastime, the city created its arcades, rows of shops covered over with a glass roof and provided with heat in winter. Shops began to display a new sign: “Free entry.” Previously it had been expected that anyone entering would make a purchase; but here was the beginning of the modern practices of browsing and window-shopping.

As Benjamin pointed out, it was as if all the center of the city became an interior in which various modern types came into being. There was the woman of fashion, her changes in style and adornment carefully noted by the newspapers of the time. Meanwhile, men in business or government began to dress in black, abandoning the colorful male clothing of the eighteenth century for the frock coat. In response, the counterculture began. Those not wishing to be taken for businessmen were visibly not at work, such as the poet Gérard de Nerval who famously took his pet lobster for a walk on a leash.

Watching and observing all of this were the *flâneurs*, a word that is hard to translate. The word *dandy* is close;

so is *gawker*; so, too, *idle stroller*. The *flâneur* was all of these. The modern city had opened a space for the *flâneur* by demolishing the narrow streets of the old city, driving out the poor, and creating a network of boulevards and arcades suitable for walking while observing. For Baudelaire, the *flâneur* was “a prince, everywhere in possession of his incognito”:⁶ a man who gained a certain power by seeing without being seen—a very urban accomplishment. Becoming what Edgar Allan Poe called “the man in the crowd” was the new way of seeing in the imperial city. The *flâneur* embodied male looking, the practice that would later be called the male gaze in cinema (Chapter 1).

As photography improved, the “man in the crowd” way of looking came to be incarnated in the street photograph, taken without the awareness of those being photographed. This secrecy and the realism of the resulting photograph are absolutely central to the success of these photographs. In recent years, we have seen repeated scandals as what seemed to be classic pieces of observation turned out to have been posed. The French photographer Robert Doisneau took a famous photograph of a passionate kiss in the streets of Paris in 1950, known as *The Kiss by the Hôtel de Ville*. The two lovers clinch, with the young man’s arm around an elegantly dressed young woman, who has seemingly been taken by surprise as her arms rest limply by her side. In the foreground, a man sits visibly watching them from the seats of a café. Indeed, it was standard practice for café seats to be arranged so that patrons could watch passersby. The figures stand out against the hazy background,

as if in a film noir. The scene is steeped in romance. Years later, when the photograph had become a poster classic and there was money at stake, two people sued, claiming to be the young couple. Doisneau was forced to admit that the picture was staged and the characters were young actors. He had taken shots in three different locations before deciding on the one ultimately used at the city's town hall. Why does this matter? If we know it's been staged, it's not really urban observation but street theater. Now we might think that her arms stay down not because she's been taken by surprise but because she's not really kissing him. And another illusion is shattered—the illusion that street photography is like being there without being seen.

And what of the *flâneuse*, the woman dandy/gawker/stroller? There were women who wore men's clothing to gain this freedom, like the novelist George Sand. Such women formed a social type known as the Amazon, after the legendary female warriors of antiquity. The *Amazon* in Figure 49 was painted by Édouard Manet in about 1882. She's dressed for riding in the all-black uniform of the masculine bourgeoisie, including top hat and kid gloves. Her hair is in a tomboyish pageboy and there is none of the adornment we might expect. Perhaps it's just the cinched-in waist that provides the anxious (male) viewer with a secure key to her gender. She presents us, as intended, with little to look at so that she can claim the right to look herself. There were numerous women artists who painted and drew their lives in the modern city, such as the Impressionist painters Berthe Morisot and Mary



Figure 49. Manet, *Amazone*

Cassatt. At the same time, one of the subjects that most fascinated the male gawker was the Parisian woman, something that has not gone out of style to this day. Recent art history has claimed that the paintings of women on their own in modern Paris would have implied to their contemporaries that these were sex workers. The term *public woman*, we are reminded, was a euphemism for *prostitute*. Yet there is still ambiguity.

I think of Edgar Degas's painting *L'Absinthe*, showing a woman drinking an absinthe by herself in a café (1876). There was certainly a scandal about the work at the time, allegations of degeneracy and alcoholism being thrown around by the usual suspects. The woman depicted was Ellen Andrée, a well-known popular actress, who also appears in paintings by Renoir. Absinthe was a powerful drink, alleged to induce hallucinations and much favored by the bohemian set. Andrée has a full glass in front of her. We cannot know if she will drink it or not, whether it is even her first ever or one of many that day. She's very fashionably dressed in white, with an elaborate hat. These are not streetwalking clothes. She is notably by herself. There's no interaction with the man seated next to her. Her thoughts are not available and her expression is blank. You could say we are free to look and imagine what we will. You can also say that she is not knowable and has a precise degree of independence. She is not at home, the Victorian angel-by-the-hearth, nor is she demonstrably a sex worker.

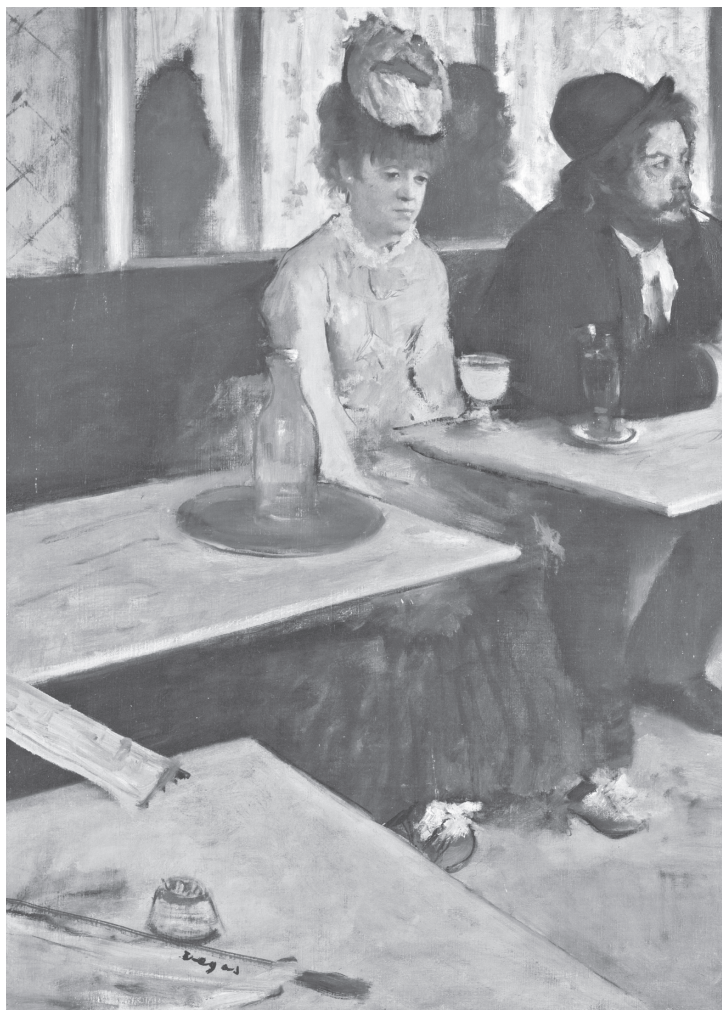


Figure 50. Degas, *L'Absinthe*

What makes the period still seem contemporary is precisely its fascination with such leisure and consumption, the primary activities at the center of so many global cities today. The imperial city made spaces for these activities and pushed those who had nothing to do but work to its margins. Impressionist paintings showed men and women picnicking, boating, flirting, at the opera, at the café, at a concert, at the ballet, and so on. Work was elsewhere—except for the sex workers, performers, and restaurant staff that made this all possible. The paintings seem now to embody the very idea of a city of light, with their bright colors and flickering brushstrokes.

One well-known piece of art history trivia is that the Impressionists were unpopular in their own time. It is less well remembered why. The name *Impressionist* was not a compliment. In traditional oil painting, artists made an “impression” of the scene they were going to render, a quick sketch that would serve as a guide in composing the finished work. So, for viewers of the time, the Impressionists were presenting unfinished sketches as proper painting. Just as some people today look at abstract painting or conceptual art and think that it’s not really art, so, too, did nineteenth-century critics see the now-loved paintings as being half-done at best. The Impressionist style has come to seem to depict the urban observation of the *flâneur*, catching a glimpse of what was going on out of the corner of his eye as the crowds and traffic hurry by.

The artists were well aware of what they were doing and claimed to be depicting color in accord with the

discoveries of nineteenth-century science. The implication was the traditional ways of painting no longer depicted the modern city effectively. The bright modern colors stem from another technical change. Traditionally, an artist would cover the entire canvas with a colored ground, whether red, gray, or brown. It was designed precisely to mute the force of the color in the actual painted scene. The Impressionists painted on white ground and so their work “pops” off the wall, recognizable from a distance. While an art critic of the day would have seen the color as being out of control, the work of degenerate bodies, we now see these paintings as the highpoint of modern beauty. What appeared hectic and world-changing in the nineteenth century is soothing and calming today.

By the same token, the arcades were the precursor to the ubiquitous malls that you can now see in global cities, from Johannesburg to Shanghai. The mall is a covered area for the purposes of consumption; it is more likely to be artificially than naturally lit. Some malls, like the one inside Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, go to great lengths to create a “natural” lighting effect that tricks the brain into thinking we are outside. Crowds flock to the “outside” seating within the mall to watch the “sunset” every two hours, while the “inside” seats are all deserted. Outdoor spaces like Times Square in New York and Causeway Bay in Hong Kong are now illuminated with these “natural” lights, giving the uncanny feeling of being in daylight at night. The city of light is now the global retail blueprint. A certain degree of luminosity seems to encourage and enable us to spend on things that we don’t really need.

If the once legendary cafés of Paris, each with its own character, have become the globally uniform pastiche Starbucks, the nineteenth-century dandy would nonetheless recognize them and the malls of which they are a part. The major addition has been the merger of the cinema with the mall, where multiscreen cinemas are one of the anchor businesses (Friedberg 1994). The work of watching the world, once the specialist task of the dandy/gawker/stroller, is now made available for us for \$10 in luxury seating with a holder for a vast sweetened drink. Unseen observation is just another commodity in the global city.

What was less visible in the city of light was that Paris was not just the capital of the nineteenth century. It was the capital of the French empire, from Africa to East Asia and the Caribbean. From the capital *N* that marks many buildings and bridges (*N* for Napoleon, the first emperor, also used by his nephew Napoleon III), to the Louvre, filled, then as now, with booty from imperial wars, for example Egyptian sarcophagi and Greek sculptures, and the ubiquitous sugared coffee grown in the colonies—Paris could not be understood except in the context of empire. And the Parisians knew it. In 1832, after the failed revolution of that year, later celebrated by Victor Hugo in *Les Misérables*, a French journalist observed:

Every factory owner lives in his factory like a colonial planter in the middle of his slaves, one against a hundred; the uprising is to be compared with the insurrection at Saint-Domingue [Haiti].⁷