

The *Flâneur* on the Bus:
Franz Hessel and Joseph Roth in Weimar Berlin

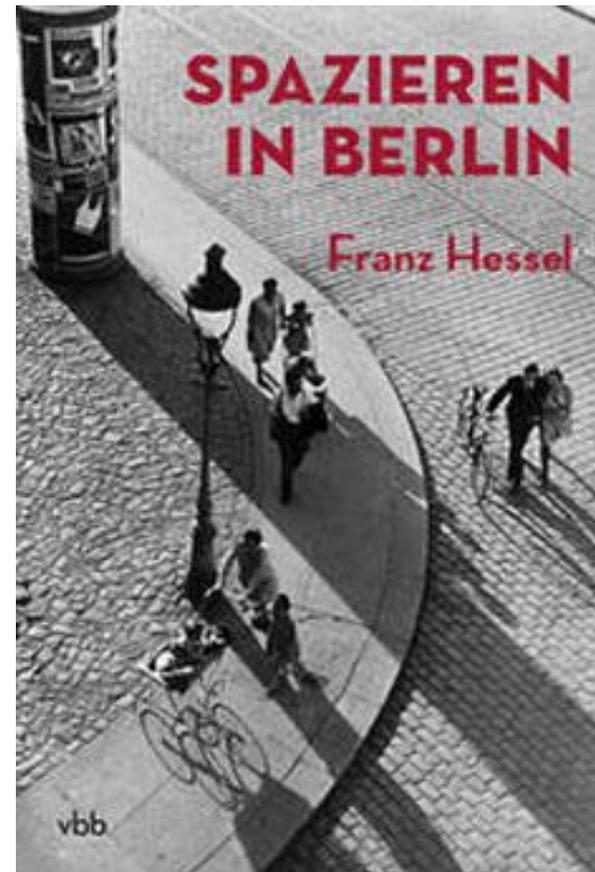


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Research Seminar in Comparative Literature and Culture

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Franz Hessel (1880-1941)



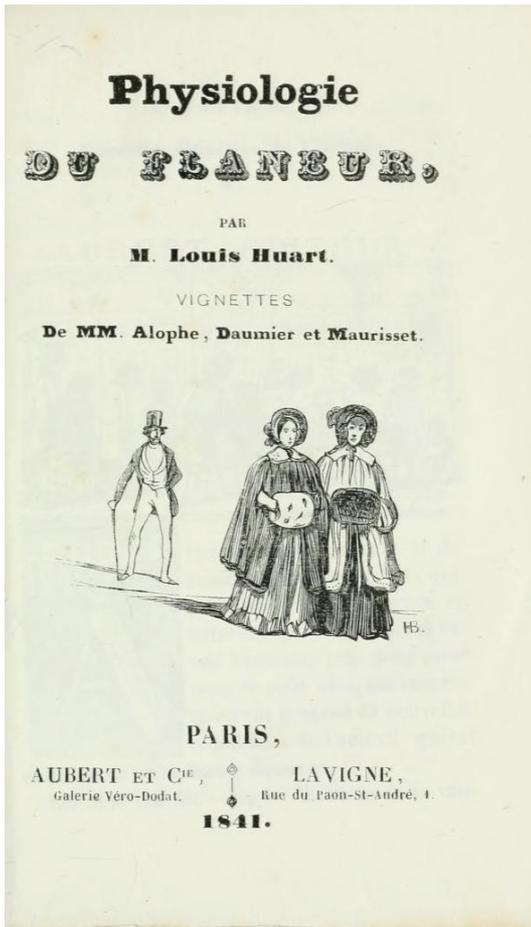
Joseph Roth (1894-1939)



A selection of Roth's journalism is available in English, including:

Joseph Roth, *What I Saw: Reports from Berlin 1920-33*, trans. Michael Hofmann (London: Granta, 2003)

Louis Huart, *Physiology of the Flâneur* (1841)



Charles Baudelaire (1821-67)



- ‘Not everyone can bathe in the multitudes: deriving pleasure from the crowd is an art; and he alone can do it who creates an orgy of vitality at the expense of the human race, he who’s been visited in his crib by a fairy who fills him with a taste for dressing up and disguise, a hatred of the home and a passion for travel.’
- (From ‘Crowds’)

Baudelaire

‘The crowd is his domain, just as the air is the bird's, and water that of the fish. His passion and his profession is to merge with the crowd. For the perfect idler, for the passionate observer it becomes an immense source of enjoyment to establish his dwelling in the throng, in the ebb and flow, the bustle, the fleeting and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel at home anywhere; to see the world, to be at the very centre of the world, and yet to be unseen of the world, such are some of the minor pleasures of those independent, intense and impartial spirits, who do not lend themselves easily to linguistic definitions.’ (‘The Painter of Modern Life’, III)

‘And so, walking or quickening his pace, he goes his way, forever in search. In search of what? We may rest assured that this man, such as I have described him, this solitary mortal endowed with an active imagination, always roaming the great desert of men, has a nobler aim than that of the pure idler, a more general aim, other than the fleeting pleasure of circumstance. He is looking for that indefinable something we may be allowed to call 'modernity', for want of a better term to express the idea in question. The aim for him is to extract from fashion the poetry that resides in its historical envelope, to distil the eternal from the transitory.’ (‘The Painter of Modern Life’, IV)

Walter Benjamin (1892-1940)



See:

Walter Benjamin, 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century', *Perspecta*, Vol. 12 (1969), pp. 163-172

Forms part of his unfinished project *Das Passagenwerk* (*The Arcades Project*):

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999)

The Arcade

- Right: Passage du Grand Cerf, Paris (2nd *arrondissement*). Opened 1825.
- ‘The crowd was the veil from behind which the familiar city as phantasmagoria beckoned to the flâneur. In it, the city was now landscape, now a room. And both of these went into the construction of the department store, which made use of flânerie itself in order to sell goods. The department store was the flâneur’s final coup.’
- Benjamin, from ‘Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century’



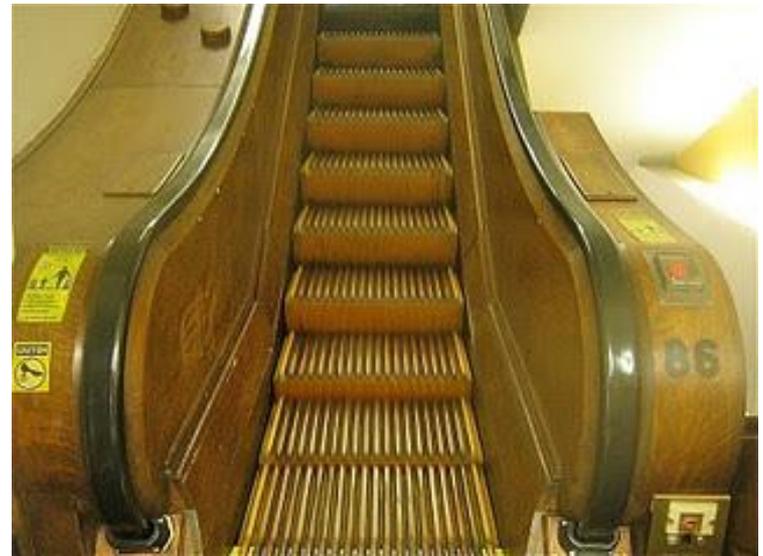
Department Stores



Above: Galeries de Lafayette, Paris;
Right: Wertheim, Berlin

From: Joseph Roth, 'The Very Large Department Store (1929)

- 'If the people themselves, having been borne aloft by the escalators, were still, even in their diminished mobility, recognizable as shoppers, then, by the time they got the the roof, they had reached such a degree of passivity that utterly equated them to merchandise. And even though they pay, still it seems as though they were paid for.'
- *What I Saw*, p. 122



From :Franz Hessel, 'Berlin's Boulevard'

- Tauentzienstraße and Kurfürstendamm have the high cultural mission of teaching Berliners to be *flâneurs*, assuming this urban pastime is still possible. Maybe it isn't too late. To be a *flâneur* is to read the street, seeing human faces, displays, show windows, café terraces, trains, cars, and trees as letters, of equal value, that together form words, sentences and pages in an ever-changing book. To do this properly, you can't have any particular destination or purpose in mind. And as there are, on the stretch between Wittenbergplatz and Halensee, so many ways to shop, eat, drink, or to go the theatre, the cinema or the cabaret, you can risk going for a stroll without a specific destination and open oneself up to unexpected visual adventures.

Kurfürstendamm, 1930s



From: Franz Hessel, 'The Suspicious Character'

- 'It's a particular pleasure to wander slowly along busy streets. The urgency of the passers by washes over one, as if one were bathing in the surf.'
- 'I'm always the object of suspicious glares whenever I try to stroll among busy people. I think they take me for a pickpocket.'
- 'The rushing, upright metropolitan girls, their mouths insatiably open, become aggressive when my gaze alights for longer than a moment upon their sailing shoulders and floating cheeks. Not that they have anything against being looked at. But the slow-motion gaze of a harmless observer unnerves them.'

From: Joseph Roth, 'Going for a walk' (1921)

- 'What I see, what I see. What I see is the day in all its absurdity and triviality.' (*What I Saw*, p. 23)
- 'Strolling around on a May morning, what do I care about the vast issues of world history as expressed in newspaper editorials? [...] The diminutive of the parts is more impressive than the monumentality of the whole. I no longer have any use for the sweeping gestures of heroes on the global stage. I'm going for a walk.' (pp. 24-5)
- 'What is heralded or touted can only be of little weight or consequence. And it seems to me there is nothing these days that is not heralded. Therein lies its greatness. Typography, to us, has become the arbiter of perspective and value. The most important, the less important, and the unimportant only *appear* to be important, less important, unimportant. It's their image that tells us their worth, not their being. [Nichts ist, alles heißt]' (p. 25)

Erich Kästner, 'Die Zeit fährt Auto' [The Age Drives a Car]

Die Zeit fährt Auto

Die Städte wachsen. Und die Kurse steigen.
Wenn jemand Geld hat, hat er auch Kredit.
Die Konten reden. Die Bilanzen schweigen.
Die Menschen sperren aus. Die Menschen streiken.
Der Globus dreht sich. Und wir drehn uns mit.

Die Zeit fährt Auto. Doch kein Mensch kann lenken.
Das Leben fliegt wie ein Gehört vorbei.
Minister sprechen oft vom Steuersenken.
Wer weiß, ob sie im Ernste daran denken?
Der Globus dreht sich und geht nicht entzwei.

[...]

The Age drives a car

The cities are growing. The rates are rising.
If you've got money, then you've got credit.
The accounts speak. The balance keeps quiet.
People exclude. People strike.
The globe turns. And we turn with it

The age drives a car. But nobody can steer.
[...]

From: Joseph Roth, 'Some reflections on Traffic' (1924)

- It seems to me that the use of streetcars is incompatible with the traffic levels of a metropolis. In an age of air travel they are the equivalent of post coaches. Generally the tracks they run on go down the middle of the street. If there happens to be another vehicle on the tracks, they're stuck behind it. They block the pedestrian's view so that he won't see a vehicle coming toward him on the other side of the street. They stand motionless, as though rigid with fear, for minutes on end, making a wall with little cracks in it through which it would be possible to force one's way, only one is wary of being swiped by a rapidly approaching car from the other side.' (*What I Saw*, pp. 99-100)

From: Joseph Roth, 'Some reflections on Traffic' (1929)

- 'Much of the trouble and irritation in daily public life is the fault of the public, in other words the undisciplined character of the postwar generation, the bitterness that erupts out of people. I will be so bold as to offer this theory: That a bus full of rancorous, quarrelsome, and aggressive passengers is bound sooner or later to have a collision. The mood of the passengers communicates itself to the driver. Everyone is fed up. No one offers his seat to a woman. Everyone is at odds with everyone else. People send one another furious looks. This one is taken for a Jew, that one for a "Bolshie". This lady's fur coat is provocatively expensive. The woman sitting next to her is not only furious – which one could understand – she makes no secret of her fury. A mildly intoxicated bowling team board the bus. They announce their political views at the tops of their voices, because that's the most provocative way.'
(*What I Saw*, pp, 101-2)

From: Franz Hessel, 'I must learn'

- 'It's not enough just to walk around. I have to conduct a kind of investigation into the place I call home [Heimatkunde treiben], to pay attention to the past and future of this city, a city that is always going somewhere [unterwegs], is always on the point of becoming something else. That's why it's so hard to discover, particularly for someone who lives here...'