

BAUDELAIRE'S SNAPSHOTS OF THE CITY: THE MODERN EXPERIENCE IN FOCUS

*Viviane Ramos de Freitas**

ABSTRACT:

This work explores the photographic snapshot aspect of Charles Baudelaire's city poems in the section "Parisian Scenes" of *Flowers of Evil*. The text discusses Baudelaire's contention that photography is art's mortal enemy, and it draws the attention to the visual impulse of Baudelaire's urban poetry. The work, then, establishes a dialogic exchange with Walter Benjamin's analysis of the urban aesthetic experience, which associates Baudelaire's aesthetics with photography, in their opposition to the auratic aesthetics. Contrary to Benjamin, this work argues for the auratic character of Baudelaire's poetry. The work focuses on Baudelaire's activity as poet of the city, an engaged social observer whose poetry, facing the challenge of encompassing the contemporary scene, gradually becomes involved in a critical practice, opening up modern experience to greater scrutiny. In this way, Baudelaire claims the place of the individual within the metropolis and asserts the humanistic character of his poetry.

KEYWORDS: Auratic aesthetics; Modernity; Photography; Urban poetry.

On Photography, Beauty and Truth

Baudelaire's polemic against photography became famous through his essay "The Modern Public and Photography" in "The Salon of 1859". Situating the artist in the age of mechanical reproduction, Baudelaire views photography, a product of industrial progress, as art's "mortal enemy" (BAUDELAIRE, 1992a, p. 296). In an allusion to the overwhelming popularity of the medium, Baudelaire blames the 'stupidity of the masses'

* Doutoranda em Teorias e Crítica da Literatura e da Cultura (UFBA). Mestre em Literatura Inglesa pela University College London (Inglaterra). Mestre em Teorias e Crítica da Literatura e da Cultura (UFBA).

(BAUDELAIRE, 1992a, p. 296-97) for the potential threat posed by photography's influence over art, and asserts his belief that there is an irreconcilable conflict between poetry and progress:

Poetry and progress are two ambitious men that hate each other, with an instinctive hatred, and when they meet along a pathway one or other must give way. If photography is allowed to deputize for art in some of art's activities, it will not be long before it has supplanted or corrupted art altogether, thanks to the stupidity of the masses, its natural ally. (BAUDELAIRE, 1992a, p. 296-97)

In particular, Baudelaire attacks photography for encroaching on and devaluing the art of painting. He derides the fascination over photography's capacity of exactly reproducing reality and the predominance of the realist aesthetic at that moment, claiming that "the present-day credo" in the domain of painting and statuary is: "I believe that art is, and can only be, the exact reproduction of nature ... Thus if an industrial process could give us a result identical to nature, that would be absolute art". (BAUDELAIRE, 1992a, p. 295)

According to the poet's view, the realist aesthetic has no access to "the sphere of the intangible and the imaginary" (BAUDELAIRE, 1992a, p. 297), thus he rebukes the belief nurtured by the realists that the truth in the picture or in a work of art lies in its capacity to reproduce nature. In this perspective, Baudelaire begins and ends "The Modern Public and Photography" by suggesting a radical dualism between "the true" and "the beautiful" (BAUDELAIRE, 1992a, p. 294), asserting that "the taste for the true [...] oppresses and smothers the taste for the beautiful". This contention implies that, in seeking "the true", the realist aesthetic distances itself from "the beautiful", which, as indicated by the poet's vision in the context of the essay, cannot be sought in external reality itself. Rather, the beautiful is connected to "those things that are most ethereal and immaterial" (BAUDELAIRE, 1992a, p. 298), and is related to the expression of man's "soul" and "dreams":

More and more, as each day goes by, art is losing in self-respect, is prostrating itself before external reality, and the painter is becom-

ing more and more inclined to paint, not what he dreams, but what he sees. (BAUDELAIRE, 1992a, p. 297-98)

Baudelaire's scornful commentary on photography and his rejection of the realist aesthetic reveal his ambiguous attitude towards modernity. In his reading of "The Modern Public and Photography", Marshall Berman observes that the antagonisms between reality and beauty, at least in this context, propose an anti-materialist vision of art that is incompatible with the artist Baudelaire himself:

But one artist whom this vision whole leaves out, alas, is Baudelaire himself. For his poetic genius and achievement, as much as any poet before or after him, is bound up with a particular material reality: the everyday life—and night life—of the streets, cafés, cellars and garrets of Paris. Even his visions of transcendence are rooted in a concrete time and place. One thing that marks Baudelaire off radically from his romantic precursors, and from his symbolist and twentieth-century successors, is the way in which what he dreams is inspired by what he sees. (BERMAN, 1983, p. 141)

As remarked by Berman, visuality plays a crucial role in the Baudelairean aesthetics, since the poet takes his subject-matter from what he sees in nineteenth-century Paris. In this regard, it is worth noting that in *Les Fleurs du Mal* blindness is a symbol that carries negative connotations. In the poem "Les Aveugles" ["Blind Men"], in his "Parisian Scenes," Baudelaire's condemnation of the blind is revealing of his role as a poet concerned and involved with the material reality of the urban life, in other words, a poet deeply attentive to the 'scenes' of the contemporary city. It is worth looking more closely at this poem:

Consider them, my soul: how hideous!
Eerie as sleepwalkers, vaguely absurd
as dummies are—dummies that can walk,
blinking their useless lids at nothingness.
(BAUDELAIRE, 1982, p. 97)

In the sonnet's first quatrain, the words "hideous", "absurd", "dummies", "useless", "nothingness" portray the blind men as an aberration. The allusion to blindness as an anomaly becomes more evident in the first tercet, when the "infinite dark" and "eternal silence" attributed to blind is contrasted with the city noise. The blind men's aloofness is further emphasised by the correlation of blindness and deafness. In this sense, Baudelaire seems to signal that the blind men in the poem refuse to compensate their lack of vision with other senses, remaining blind, not only to the social environment but to their own experience:

What difference between their infinite dark
And the eternal silence? Round us all,
meanwhile, the city sings, and laughs, and screams
(BAUDELAIRE, 1982, p. 97)

The state of abstracted musing, daydreaming, implied by "in reverie", in the second quatrain, reinforces the blind men's distance and indifference. Above all, it is telling the fact that they seem to stare at something in the distance, holding their heads arrogantly high, facing up at the sky and never looking down to the pavement:

Their eyes are quenched, and yet they seem to stare
at something, somewhere, questioning the sky
and never bending their benighted heads
in reverie toward the cobblestones.
(BAUDELAIRE, 1982, p. 97)

The word "benighted" and the question in the last line of the sonnet, which highlights that the blind men's attention is focused on the sky, evidence not only their withdrawal from the present reality, but also their will to transcend the world. In this sense, the sonnet evokes both the Romantic ideal of transcendence and the Platonic conception of blindness as clairvoyance, a means of access to pure ideas and truth. Contrary to these views, Baudelaire mocks the blind men's "infinite dark" and disparages their refusal to look down to the cobblestones, in other words, to ground their experience in the imper-

fect world. In referring to blindness as inadequate and inappropriate in the modern world, Baudelaire is censuring those who turn their attention away from present life and reject reality. Ultimately, the poet criticises the blind men in the poem for seeking to transcend the world rather than to transform it.

Furthermore, “Les Aveugles” foregrounds the place assigned to visuality in the life of the modern city, a world marked by the primacy of sight. The poem seems to question the possibility to account for an experience of modernity for those deprived of vision. In this regard, the sonnet speaks to Baudelaire’s position as a poet of modernity, as Berman puts it, a poet bound up with the material reality of everyday life and who “is inspired by what he sees” (BERMAN, 1983, p. 141). By condemning the blind in his “Parisian Scenes”, Baudelaire emphasises the role of the modern artist as someone who must be able to see and to be committed to the reality around him. Entirely congruous with this view is the role of Baudelaire’s ideal modern artist, Constantin Guys, Baudelaire’s self-metaphor, in his essay “The Painter of Modern Life”.

In the essay, Baudelaire stresses Guys’s special attention towards the reality around him. He notes that Guys’s “curiosity may be considered the starting point of his genius” (BAUDELAIRE, 1992b, p. 397). The painter’s irresistible curiosity leads Baudelaire to compare him with the convalescent in Edgar Poe’s story, “The Man in the Crowd”. In the short story, Poe’s convalescent avidly watches the crowd passing by the café’s window before him, and he is capable of “identifying himself in thought with all the thoughts that are moving around him” (BAUDELAIRE, 1992b, p. 397). Likewise, Constantin Guys is compared to “a mirror as vast as this crowd; to a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness” (BAUDELAIRE, 1992b, p. 400). Moreover, like Poe’s convalescent, Guys is a “lover of life”, capable of identifying and empathising with the crowd around him.

Baudelaire’s articulation between his ideal modern artist and Poe’s character in “The Man in the Crowd” portrays the artist as someone who stands out from the crowd for having a special kind of attention towards the world around him, for his capacity of observation and criticism. On that basis, it is possible to establish a parallel between the

blind men in “Les Aveugles” and the big-city masses, the amorphous crowd of passersby. The passers-by in Poe’s story behave automatically and do not seem to have an individual perspective, rather, like the blind men in the poem, they fail to see, judge and question the reality around them.

“Le Soleil”, another poem in “Parisian Scenes”, reveals Baudelaire’s self-referential gestures of the “poet at work” (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 164), and also addresses the question of what it is to be a poet in the modern world. Here, again, the articulation between the poem and the “The Painter of Modern Life” offers insights into this question, as well as into the principles that underpinned the Baudelairean aesthetics.

The title of “Le Soleil” itself draws the attention to the visual impulse in the poet’s creative process. This idea is evinced by a passage in “The Painter of Modern Life”, in which Guys wakes up with “the sun beating vibrantly in his window” (BAUDELAIRE, 1992b, p. 400) and regrets the hours of sunlight he wasted by oversleeping, and the “endless numbers of things bathed in light that [he] could have seen and failed to!” “Le Soleil” not only foregrounds the central role of visibility but also reveals the principles of Baudelaire’s innovative aesthetics, forged in the heart of urban capitalism and engendered by his lived experience in the modern city. In this regard, the experience of moving in the crowd has an enormous impact in Baudelaire’s urban aesthetics.

The relation between the experience of the crowd and Baudelaire’s poetry is particularly emphasised by Benjamin, who argues that the crowd “is imprinted on [Baudelaire’s] creativity as a hidden figure” (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 165). Benjamin notes that even though the streets in “Le Soleil” are deserted, the crowd is present as a hidden configuration. He argues that the hidden configuration of the crowd is analogous to “the phantom crowd of words”. That is, Benjamin infers that in “Le Soleil” the experience of the shock with the crowd is not an object of discussion, it is not stated, but it affects the poet’s relation to language. Thus, the sudden reactions the city dweller experiences when moving in the throng, such as the blows he is exposed to, his effort to defend and assert himself when opening his path in the crowd, correspond, in “Le Soleil”, to the poet’s linguistic experience in his creative process. In the passage below, the poet presents himself

battling in the streets with language, stumbling over words and rhymes and colliding with verses:

I go, alone, to practice my curious fencing,
 In every corner smelling out the dodges of rhyme,
 Stumbling over words as over cobblestones,
 Colliding now and then with long-dreamed-of verses.
 (BAUDELAIRE apud BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 164)¹

The analogy between the figure of the poet and the fencer hints at the challenge faced by lyric poetry in the modern world. The poetic language is portrayed as something difficult to attain, which can be compared to goods taken by force in war, as suggested by the word “booty” used by Benjamin in: “the poet, in the deserted streets, wrests his poetic booty” (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 165). Benjamin also claims that the experience of the shock with the crowd had a decisive effect in Baudelaire’s lyric poetry, as though “[these shocks] caused words to collapse” (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 164). Hence the poet in “Le Soleil” is portrayed in a fight, striving to triumph over language, the same way the city dweller struggles to prevail in the crowd.

In “Le Soleil”, the sun’s impartiality is likened to the poet’s. Like the sun that illuminates all it touches, treating all the places equally, the poet takes an interest in everything he sees in the city, “visiting palace and hospital” (BAUDELAIRE, 1982, p. 88). Moreover, the sun is analogous to the poet as both have the power to ennoble the most banal or vile:

When, with a poet’s will, the sun descends
 into the cities like a king incognito,
 impartially visiting palace and hospital,
 the fate of all things vile is glorified.
 (BAUDELAIRE, 1982, p. 88)

¹ I opted for Benjamin’s translation of “Le Soleil”, instead of Richard Howard’s in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, because I am in dialogue with Benjamin’s analysis of the poem.

The concept of the poet as someone who is capable of “glorifying the vile” is fundamental in the Baudelairean aesthetics, which is known for its use of unexpected poetic sources, such as the underworld of the big city. With connection to this idea, it is telling the fact that in *Les Fleurs du mal*, as the title suggests, beauty is not associated with good, as in the Platonic sense, but related to evil. The idea of “glorifying the vile”, in other words, transforming the banal, the ugly, the repulsive, the everyday, into the beautiful, the marvellous, the intoxicating, is particularly related to Baudelaire’s position as a city poet. In this regard, it is relevant that Baudelaire’s ideal modern artist, Constantin Guys is a lover of city life who, like the poet in “Le Soleil”, “loves being incognito” (BAUDELAIRE, 1992b, p. 395) in order to mix with the crowd and collect the material for his art without being noticed: “The observer is a prince enjoying his incognito wherever he goes. The lover of life makes the whole world his family.” (BAUDELAIRE, 1992b, p. 400)

It is also worth noting that Guys is a “man of the world” (BAUDELAIRE, 1992b, p. 396), who is “by nature a great traveller and very cosmopolitan journalist”. It is, then, possible to establish a parallel between Guys’s art and the work of a photographer journalist. His “on-the-spot drawings from life” can be compared to photographs in which one can “read’ a detailed and daily account” of his travels. Most importantly, it is significant to observe that Guys’s sketches are not faithful copies of what he sees. On the contrary, Baudelaire admired his painter of modern life, because his artistic creation was mediated, not only by the artist’s eye, but also by his memory and imagination. In other words, Baudelaire praises his modern artist for his capacity to impart fresh life to reality, by recomposing, recreating it by memory and by using his imagination: “And things are born again on the paper, natural and more natural, beautiful and better than beautiful, strange and endowed with an enthusiastic life, like the soul of their creator.” (BAUDELAIRE, 1992b, p. 402)

Similarly, “Le Soleil” underscores the role of memory and imagination in the Baudelairean aesthetics. It is worth noting that the poet forges his verses by “colliding” his dreams with the urban reality. Moreover, the poetic artifice seems to prevail over nature, insofar as the poet’s imagination governs the sun. The “poet’s will” has the power to

make the sun descend and change the fate of all the things in the city, ennobling them. The god-like position of the poet in “Le Soleil” evidences the role of imagination in the Baudelairean aesthetics.

Likewise, in “The Queen of the Faculties”, Baudelaire gives imagination a quasi-religious dimension, by postulating that “[s]ince imagination created the world... [it] should govern the world” (BAUDELAIRE, 1992a, p. 299). The role of imagination can be summarised by the following passage: “the whole visible universe is nothing but a storehouse of images and signs, to which man’s imagination will assign a place and relative value; it is a kind of pasture for the imagination to digest and transform.” (BAUDELAIRE, 1992a, p. 306)

In sum, the role assigned to memory and imagination in “Le Soleil”, as well as in the poet’s critical writings cited so far in this work, enable us to conclude that, in Baudelaire, nature, the visible universe, is artificial, it is a recreation in which the poet provides his image. Consequently, beauty and truth are relative concepts, they are associated, not to the subject itself, but to the treatment given to it by the artist. Truth, thus, does not belong to the artist who makes faithful copies of nature, without engaging his imagination. Hence it makes sense that the poet attacks the medium that exactly reproduces reality. While it is possible to dispute Baudelaire’s claim about photography and argue for photography’s artistic status, for the purpose of this work it is more important to understand that, according to Baudelaire’s view, the work of art must bear the imprint of the artist’s soul, as he puts it, “[a] good picture [must be] faithful and worthy of the dreams that gave it birth” (BAUDELAIRE, 1992a, p. 305).

Photography, the shock aesthetics and the auratic experience

The photographic snapshot aspect of Baudelaire’s poetry in “Parisian Scenes” is especially manifest in “A une passante”. Seen in the light of a snapshot, the poem catches the moment that an anonymous woman dressed in mourning clothes moves across the poet’s field of vision in the crowd and disappears again into it, leaving the poet fascinat-

ed. In the poem, even the image of the instantaneous illumination for picture taking is literally provided, there was a flash of light then darkness:

A lightening-flash... then night!—O fleeting beauty
Whose glance all of a sudden gave me new birth,
Shall I see you again only in eternity?
(BAUDELAIRE apud BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 169)²

The position of the poet is similar to that of a photographer, trying to seize the “fleeting beauty”. “A une passante” reflects the poet’s desperate attempt to capture the image of the passing woman, who remains, like in a photograph, as a kind of ghost, only as an image, which the poem consecrates. It is interesting to note that “A une passante” is a sonnet, and as such it speaks of love, but in this case, a modern experience of love. The poet’s instantaneous love story lasted the brief moment in which he casts a glance at the passing woman, but its effects on the poet are immortalised by the sonnet. This Baudelairean snapshot captures for poetry “a love which only a city dweller experiences” (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 170), and hints at the ways in which “the transient, the fleeting, the contingent” (BAUDELAIRE, 1992b, p. 403) character of modern life penetrate to the deeper realms of the individual’s experience. In this sense, the sonnet allows a reflection on how the concepts of love and pleasure are affected by the experience of modernity, more specifically by the fragmentation of experience under the impact of shock in modern life.

The peculiar aspect of the love experienced by the poet in “A une passante” is the fact that the fleetingness that characterises the encounter of the poet with the passing woman, whom he thought he would have loved, endows this urban love experience with intensity and even perfection. As remarked by Benjamin,

The delight of the urban poet is love—not at first sight, but at last sight. It is a farewell forever which coincides in the poem with the

² I opted for Benjamin’s translation of “A une passante”, instead of Richard Howard’s in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, for the same reason stated before in the discussion of “Le Soleil”.

moment of enchantment. Thus the sonnet supplies the figure of shock, indeed, catastrophe. But the nature of the poet's emotions has been affected as well. (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 169)

As noted by Benjamin, the poet's experience of love is not thwarted, but enhanced by the ephemerality that marks the encounter. Nevertheless, there is a pleasure in holding on to this moment, and the sonnet, like a photograph, reflects the poet's attempt to bring the passing woman back to him, no longer evanescing into the crowd but fixed forever, eternalised in his verses. Like the passing woman, who is a widow in mourning, the poet cannot get over his loss and the sonnet consists in his effort to freeze her passage in order to retain it. In this respect the poem transmits, like a photograph, an irretrievable loss³.

Another possible association with photography lies in the repetition of the frozen image of the woman's passage, in the poet's attempt to "fix [the] event for an unlimited period time." (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 175) In this regard, he is fated to be caught in the same endless repetition that characterises the mechanical reproduction. Benjamin's reading of Baudelaire stresses the way in which his poetry indicates the impact of the mechanisms of industrial production over the city dwellers. In this sense, Benjamin singles out the advent of photography among the technological inventions that had the greatest consequences in modern life:

Of the countless movements of switching, inserting, pressing, and the like, the 'snapping' of the photographer has had the greatest consequences. A touch of the finger now sufficed to fix an event for an unlimited period of time. The camera gave the moment a posthumous shock, as it were. (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 174-175)

Benjamin analyses the distinctions made by Baudelaire between art and photography, and he expands it by asserting that, "photography is definitely implicated in the phenomenon of the decline of the aura." (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 187) According to his view,

³ The relation between photography and death is further explored by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida*.

the aura of a work of art is based upon its capacity to inspire an inexhaustible delight, and to “[reflect] back at us that of which our eyes will never have their fill”. On that basis, he claims that the advent of technical reproduction represented a crisis in the auratic experience. The use of photographic cameras and other analogous mechanical devices opened the possibility “for an event to be permanently recorded in terms of sound and sight” (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 187). The images created by photography are deprived of the uniqueness, the evocative and restorative qualities associated with the sacred, holy character of the auratic art. Rather, the possibility of mechanically reproducing endless copies from the photographic negative identifies these images with banality, a *lieu commun*, a cliché.

Furthermore, if “[t]o perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return” (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 188), there is another aspect of photography that distances it from the auratic experience, and that Benjamin perceived as “inhuman”: “What was inevitably felt to be inhuman, one might even say deadly, in daguerreotypy was the (prolonged) looking into the camera, since the camera records our likeness without returning our gaze.” (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 187-188)

Benjamin associates the Baudelairean aesthetics with photography, insofar as both represent a distance from the auratic experience. The poet’s aesthetics is famous for celebrating the “particular beauty,” (BAUDELAIRE, 1992b, p. 390) of modernity, which in “The Painter of Modern Life”, he defines as “the transient, the fleeting, the contingent” (BAUDELAIRE, 1992b, p. 403). However, in trying to encompass the fleeting, contingent elements of modernity, Benjamin claims that Baudelaire’s aesthetics grounds itself in the experience of shock, which he opposes to the auratic aesthetics.

Benjamin describes the experience of modernity as “an experience for which the shock experience has become the norm” (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 162) and he argues that, “Baudelaire placed the shock experience at the centre of his artistic work.” (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 163) Some of the motifs circumscribed in the Baudelairean aesthetics and examined by Benjamin, involve: “the increasing atrophy of experience” (2007, p. 159), the isolation of the individual (2007, p. 159), the shock in “the contact with the metropolitan

masses” (2007, p. 165), the “inhuman” character of the big-city crowds” (2007, p. 172), the aimless “perambulations of the flâneur” (2007, p. 172), the “mechanization” of life (2007, p. 174), the fragmentation of time and experience (2007, p. 181). For Benjamin, the inclusion of these phenomena in Baudelaire’s poetry implicated the “disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock.” (2007, p. 194)

Benjamin opposes the revelatory and humanistic qualities of the auratic art to the figures of shock, alienation, fragmentariness, dehumanisation, incorporated by Baudelaire’s poetry. Thus, in contrast with the sacred and unique character of auratic art, he identifies Baudelaire’s poetry with the cliché and banality that characterise its motifs. In his definition of aura, Benjamin implies that art is connected with beauty, integration, spiritual illumination, intimacy, humanisation, and he sees the dissipation of these qualities in the age of mechanical reproduction. Hence he distrusts the survival of lyric poetry in the modern world, asserting that, “*Les Fleurs du Mal* was the last lyric work that had a European repercussion” (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 192).

However, it is possible to contend Benjamin’s claim of the desintegration of the aura in the Baudelairean lyric poetry and argue for its auratic status. Baudelaire established a “historical theory of beauty in contrast to the theory of a unique and absolute beauty” (BAUDELAIRE, 1992b, p. 392), in which he advocates beauty’s double composition— an element that is “eternal” and a “circumstantial element” related to the “contemporaneity, fashion, morality, passion.” He exhorted the modern artist to recognise the epic side of modern life, “to see and know the heroism of our day” (BAUDELAIRE, 1992c, p. 106), and urged him to find the marvellous, the poetic and wonderful subjects in the everyday life: “Parisian life is rich in poetic and wonderful subjects. The marvellous envelops us and saturates us like the atmosphere; but we fail to see it.” (BAUDELAIRE, 1992c, p. 107)

In “The Universal Exhibition of 1855: The Fine Arts” Baudelaire states that, “beauty always has an element of strangeness.” (BAUDELAIRE, 1992d, p. 119) According to his view, the quality of strangeness or bizarre, essential to beauty, in a work of art is defined by its unique character, which is granted by the personal imprint of the artist.

Baudelaire regards any aesthetic that promotes the absence of individuality in a work of art as a “mortal danger to art itself” (BAUDELAIRE, 1992d, p. 119); the same accusation that was made against photography and the realist aesthetic in his “Salon of 1859”.

This concept of beauty connects us to the experience of the aura in the Baudelairean aesthetics. Although Baudelaire’s motifs might be regarded as banal or cliché, his theory of modern beauty, as mentioned earlier, advocates the presence in each object—even the most banal and familiar—of an abstract, symbolic nature. The beauty of a work of art, for Baudelaire, hinges on the artist’s capacity to make the eternal appear in the circumstantial, the marvellous in the familiar⁴. Thus, he wants the artist to confront his present reality and release its mysterious, strange, bizarre qualities. However, according to his view, the abstract hidden nature of the familiar objects can only be revealed insofar as it mirrors the artist’s soul.

The auratic character of Baudelaire’s poetry is connected with the spiritual dimension implied in his concept of modern beauty. The poet self-avowed desire to “illuminate things with [his] mind and cast its reflection on other minds”⁵ (BAUDELAIRE, 1992a, p. 307) speaks to the spiritual and emotional illumination associated with his lyric poetry. The auratic character of his poetry is, thus, related to its capacity to transmit the emotional, spiritual sense that the poet imprinted and that we, readers, are able to experience with an intense sense of recognition.

Conclusion

Baudelaire’s aesthetic principles were mainly drawn from mainstream Romanticism and, in many ways, the principles of the romantic and the modern aesthetics coincide. However, moving away from nature and focusing on the scenes of modern life demanded from Baudelaire an expansion of this modernity. The poet’s concept of “marvel-

⁴ The idea of the marvellous is fundamental to Surrealism. Louis Aragon’s *Paris Peasant* (1926) concludes by stating that: “The marvellous is the eruption of contradiction within the real.” (ARAGON, 1980, p. 217) The Surrealists found the marvellous in everyday life, in objects of art or in places, such as the arcades of old Paris.

⁵ Baudelaire, “The Salon of 1859”, p. 307.

lous” in “The Salon of 1846”, for instance, offers an interesting illustration of this effort of theoretical expansion. In “Of Landscape” the “marvellous” (BAUDELAIRE, 1992c, p. 95) is connected to the imagination, to the expression of the human soul and dreams, whereas towards the end of his ‘Salon of 1846’, in “Of the Heroism of Modern Life” the “marvellous” is related to “the poetic and wonderful subjects” that abound in the city life.

For the purpose of this work, the poet’s critical formulations that contemplate modern life, especially those in “The Painter of Modern Life”, provided the most fruitful articulations with the poet’s urban poetry, the centre of this work’s interest. However, the relation between Baudelaire’s poetry and his critical writings enables us to conclude that the open character of poetry favours Baudelaire-the-poet over Baudelaire-the-critic. In his commentary on photography, for instance, the contrasts he draws between reality and beauty reveal how his critical descriptions can be simplistic, as remarked by Marshall Berman, when compared to his poetry. This view does not undermine the importance of Baudelaire’s critical writings.

Contrary to my view, though, T.S Eliot contends that Baudelaire’s poems would “belong to a definite place of time” (ELIOT, 1975, p. 233) if it were not for the “help” provided by his “prose works, notes and diaries”. While I consider their contribution relevant, I believe that Baudelaire’s poetry does not depend on his critical and biographical writings to continue to live; on the contrary, it has a life of its own. *Le Fleurs du Mal* survives by itself as a continuous presence, an eternal becoming, especially because of what must remain indeterminate and open in the poetry.

This openness is particularly present in the poet’s snapshots of the city in “Parisian Scenes”, which are characterised by a curious, inquisitive, critical practice of a poet who seems to be writing in order to make sense of the world around him. It appears that the role of the poetic form in these city poems is to create a space of interaction with the reader, to engage him in a participatory activity, in which he responds to the experience retained in the scene, with his own associations, a spiritual or emotional response equivalent to that of the poet’s. This is also possible because, although these city poems reflect Baudelaire’s own physical, emotional, spiritual experience, they fundamentally speak to

the human condition, as it provides insights into man's weaknesses, defeats, his duality, his loneliness, his hopelessness.

It is probably this open, undefined character of Baudelaire's urban poetry, at the same time eternal and fugitive, which enabled it to resist the shocks that threatened the poetic "words to collapse" (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 164). As indicated by the image of the poet as a fencer in "Le Soleil", Baudelaire was aware that his "Parisian Scenes" had challenged the limits of poetry. His self-presentation as a poet in "Le Soleil" hints at his battle to salvage some form of experience from the disintegrating forces of modernity. The combat against these forces take place throughout his "Parisian Scenes", in which the fragmentary, unstable and the dissonant qualities of the modern world appear so accentuated.

Nevertheless, the poet seems to have triumphed over the conditions of experience that, as Benjamin claimed, threatened the survival of lyric poetry. Ultimately, the triumph of Baudelaire's urban poetry represents the assertion of the individual's place within the metropolis. Baudelaire's snapshots of the city capture for poetry moments of revulsion, desire, defeat, fascination, revealing the constant negotiation between inner and outer, demanded by the endless flow of experiences in the metropolis. That Baudelaire's poetry was capable of imbuing these moments with transcendence speaks to the humanistic, "auratic" character of his poetry.

OS FLASHES DA CIDADE PELAS LENTES DE BAUDELAIRE: A EXPERIÊNCIA MODERNA EM FOCO

RESUMO:

Este trabalho explora a relação entre fotografia e os poemas da cidade na seção "Cenas parisienses" de *Flores do Mal*. O texto discute a afirmação de Baudelaire de que a fotografia é inimiga mortal da arte, e chama a atenção para o impulso visual da poesia urbana de Baudelaire. O trabalho também estabelece um diálogo com a análise de Walter Benjamin sobre a experiência estética urbana, que associa a estética baudelaireana à fotografia, em oposição à estética aurática. Ao contrário de Benjamin, este trabalho defende o caráter aurático da poesia de Baudelaire. O texto destaca a atividade de Baudelaire como poeta da cidade, um observador social engajado, cuja poesia, encarando o desafio de abarcar a cena contemporânea, é gradualmente envolvida numa prática crítica, submetendo a experiência moderna a um exame minucioso. Dessa forma, Baudelaire reivindica o lugar do indivíduo na metrópole e afirma o caráter humanístico da sua poesia.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Estética aurática; Modernidade; Fotografia; Poesia urbana.

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