To make the portrait of a city is a life work, and no one portrait suffices because the city is always changing. (Berenice Abbott)

The Legible City

Paris was, as Walter Benjamin has pointed out in his monumental but unfinished Arcades Project, the capital of the 19th century, and it was the first city to be called a metropolis by contemporaries (Stierle 282). The term ‘metropolis’ has become a metaphor and a myth owing to its long tradition in western culture. It circumscribes not so much a definite structure on a certain location with fixed dimensions, but rather the search and the desire for a special kind of urbanism (Zohlen 24). This makes the metropolis both a special object for scientific investigation and for political observation. It is because of this double epistemological impulse that theorists of urbanism like Michel de Certeau have divided the urban space in a transparent part, which is legible and governable on the one hand and an opaque part, which is not legible and not governable on the other. It is clear that the modern sciences and governments have made enormous efforts to reduce that opaque part.

For this reason it is no wonder that at the end of the 19th century the metropolis, in the eye of contemporary critics, had become fully investigated in many respects. As Maxime du Camp wrote with considerable regret in the first volume of his great survey about the French capital, Paris was “enregistré, catalogué, numeroté, surveillé, éclairé, nettoyé, dirigé, soigné, administré, jugé, emprisonné, enterré” (qtd. in Prendergast 2). Thus at first sight it seems that the urban space had become fully open for a panoptic view and hence also fully legible. This is very much the case with Paris. Under the rule of Napoleon III, Baron Haussmann realized his revisionist “vision of the modern city as unified, centred and fully legible, opened up as a safe and regulated space of leisure and pleasure to all its citizens” (8). But his radical demolition and rebuilding of the old quarters resulted in a monotonous urban landscape which deleted the old characteristics and visual identities of the various boroughs and thus, paradoxically, made the city less legible.

1 See Maxime du Camp. Paris, ses organes, ses fonctions et sa vie dans la deuxième moitié du XIXe siècle. 6 vol. Paris, 1883-98. The following quotation is from vol.1, 7.
As Siegfried Kracauer often observed during the 1920s, this monotony is very characteristic of the modern metropolis. For him, it is an effect of the increasing industrialization and urbanization in the western world: “The metropolis centres, which are also sites of glamour, resemble each other more and more. Their differences are fading.” \(^2\) As editorial journalist of the Frankfurtische Zeitung Kracauer also noticed such effects during his various visits to Paris in the late twenties. In short prose-miniatures he described the ambivalent and even conflicting implications of modernization for the millions of city dwellers. For instance, in the collection of international newspapers and magazines at the bookstalls that can be found at busy streets or corners in every metropolis in this world, he saw a striking metaphor of the increasing monotony of the modern cities that makes them less and less legible. In the already quoted text, Analyse eines Stadtplans (Analysis of a Map), he noted in 1928: “Out of the hurly-burly kiosks arise, tiny temples in which the publications of the whole world meet up. Despite the close bodily relations that these papers cultivate, their items of news are so unrelated that they give no news about themselves.” \(^3\)

Kracauer criticizes the fact that the news items reported by the papers are not connected – that is to say, although the newspapers and magazines are in close proximity on the shelves in the kiosk they do not constitute any coherent knowledge about the current world. Kracauer never tires of focussing on this blindness inside modernity – he is looking, always and everywhere, for signs that make the antagonistic developments of the metropolis more legible for him, more accessible for an understanding of life in a modern city. Such signs he finds, first of all, in visualizations that mirror the metropolis itself – for instance in a schema like a city map. In doing so he creates meaning about the metropolis through an image: this means, first, that in Kracauer’s descriptions the city is regarded as a schematic image and second, that one needs such a symbol to obtain some knowledge of it: “Broad thoroughfares lead from the Faubourgs to the splendour of the centre. But this is not the intended centre. The happiness allotted to external poverty is touched by other radiuses than the existing ones. But the streets must be walked towards the centre, for their emptiness is real today.” \(^4\)

\(^2\) „Die weltstädtischen Zentren, die auch die Orte des Glanzes sind, gleichen sich mehr und mehr einander an. Ihre Unterschiede vergehen” (5.1 403). All German quotes in this paper were translated by Caterina Novák.

\(^3\) „Aus dem Trubel erheben sich die Zeitungskioske, winzige Tempel, in denen die Publikationen der Welt sich ein Rendezvous geben. [...] Der engen körperlichen Beziehung ungeachtet, die von den Papieren gepflegt wird, sind ihre Nachrichten so äußer jeder Verbindung, dass sie ohne Nachricht über sich sind.” (5.1 403)

\(^4\) „Breite Straßen führen aus den Faubourgs in den Glanz der Mitte. Sie ist die gemeinte Mitte nicht. Das Glück, das der Armeligkeit draußen zugedacht ist, wird von anderen Radien ge-