Who can blame the flâneur for being a little footsore these days? During the last twenty years, critics have sent the urban horizontalist on a great variety of intellectual errands: from pacing out the waywardness of commodity capitalism at street-level to providing a pre-history of the society of the spectacle; from enacting censored historical narratives through involuntary spatial memory to embodying the modern condition of “transcendental homelessness”; from bestowing visibility and mobility on previously static and unseen figures to performing a horizontal syntax of everyday “tactics” that elude and even resist surveillance by the vertical power structures of the metropolis.

In this last instance, I am thinking specifically of Michel de Certeau’s essay “Walking in the City”, which does not address the flâneur per se but has nonetheless become a cardinal text in subsequent work on flânerie. The structural armature of Certeau’s essay is its well-known binarism of vertical versus horizontal, onto which axes a number of further oppositions get projected: skyscraper versus street, the disembodied voyeur and the pedestrian, paradigmatic versus syntagmatic, constative versus performative, a fantasy of total legibility and a less-than-legible text, the panoptic gaze and its partial evasion and subversion by the everyday microgestures of the mass. To be sure, Certeau’s essay has garnered a fair share of criticism for its rather stark, programmatic dichotomies, and for replicating the same God’s eye vantage it claims to revile in the theoretical distance at which it holds the very practices it seeks to celebrate. Yet one could say that the essay’s vertical-horizontal biaxialism is both limiting and captivating because it is so familiar, so entrenched in Western thinking about space, perspective, distance, and scale. The vertical, according to this familiar dichotomy, is the axis of totalizing overview, of a certain geometry of detachment and objectification, of seeing without being within the scene. The horizontal, by contrast, is the axis of habitation and incarnation, the plane within which life and narrative unfold haphazardly, and which is less legible for the viewer’s usual immersion in it. In One-Way Street, as a way of pondering the difference between copying out
a text and merely reading it, Benjamin offers a spatial and optical parable that invokes a binary geometry very similar to that of Certeau’s essay:

The power of the country road is different when one is walking along it from when one is flying over it by airplane. In the same way, the power of a text is different when it is read from when it is copied out. The airplane passenger sees only how the road pushes through the landscape, how it unfolds according to the same laws as the terrain surrounding it. Only he who walks the road on foot learns of the power it commands, and of how, from the very scenery that for the flier is only the unfurled plain, it calls forth distances, belvederes, clearings, prospects at each of its turns like a commander deploying soldiers at a front. Only the copied text thus commands the soul of him who is occupied with it, whereas the mere reader never discovers the new aspects of his inner self that are opened by the text, that road cut through the interior jungle forever closing behind it: because the reader follows the movement of his mind in the free flight of daydreaming, whereas the copier submits it to command.

This notion that the country road “commands the soul” of the walker differs, of course, from Certeau’s portrait of the urban pedestrian as a performance artist whose appropriations of urban space often flout the intentions of its planners and the interdictions of owners and legislators. But Benjamin’s privileging of the horizontal over the vertical, of walking through over looking down, resonates with Certeau’s essay, and looks forward to the attention Benjamin will subsequently pay to the flâneur as the native of the city street, the botanist on asphalt, the strolling commodity.

And yet for Benjamin, too, the city was crucially a vertical space. The Arcades Project explores not just the arcades but their subterranean doubles—the chthonic sewers and catacombs of Paris, the city’s vaults, dungeons, quarries, grottoes, cellars, defiles, springs, wells, and metros—whose portals led down to the historical sub-stratum of modernity. For the flâneur, Benjamin writes, “every street is precipitous. It leads downward—if not to the mythical Mothers, then into a past that can be all the more spellbinding because it is not his own, not private”. Thus he conceives of the city as both temporally and spatially stratified and excavable in the archive, and quotes Dumas on the rive gauche as “a hatchway leading from the surface to the depths”, opening the possibility that “one day the inhabitants of the Left Bank will awaken startled to discover the mysteries below” (AP 98). The arcades themselves, as The Arcades Project describes them, were partly distinguished

3 Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project, 417. Page numbers of this work will be cited parenthetically in the text.