

## The Struggle for Authentic Experience in a State of Convalescence

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The large masses that began to occupy the modern cities catalyzed the investigation of the singular man of the crowd amongst the group. Modern texts delve into the implications of the unavoidable bombardment of stimuli in this fast-paced world; the link between these stimuli and the ability (or inability) for an individual to internalize it suggests a connection between the conscious and unconscious mind. Charles Baudelaire delineates the struggle for consciousness in a world that doesn't give the mind a chance to internalize. He explains that the disconnect between environment and the analytical brain can be overcome through the childlike curiosity that incites "genius," an awareness that facilitates authentic experience. Edgar Allan Poe, in "The Man of the Crowd" represents the achievement of authentic experience through the eyes of a convalescent – like an ill man recovering, a man of the crowd is able to engage his consciousness to have a true experience in the city. Poe and Baudelaire, while taking different stances on the ability for the "man of the crowd" to reach a state of consciousness, all prove that there is a convalescent relationship between this consciousness and authentic experience. Ultimately, the ability to reach a state of authentic experience is especially essential in the internalization of art. Baudelaire conveys that the downside of mass-accessible art and overstimulation is that the aura disappears and doesn't allow for the experience of culture and traditions. Without the attainment of consciousness through curious convalescence, the authenticity of artwork or of life fail to exist while the masses are left unconscious of art they create or observe.

Charles Baudelaire, French poet and critic, investigates the "man of the crowd" in "The Painter of Modern Life." In the section "An artist, man of the world, man of crowds and child" he follows a character named "MG" whom he uses to represent the man of authentic experience. He suggests that an individual participating in an "authentic experience" remained "on the point of forgetting everything... [but] passionately wants to remember everything" (104). The average man of the crowd exists as one who does not internalize the information presented around him, instead "forgetting everything." For a man in the crowd such as "MG," the "everything" comprises the sights and sounds of the city around him – what Georg Simmel would describe as "stimuli." For Baudelaire, what separates a man as simply part of the crowd and the man participating in experience is *curiosity*. The link between curiosity and authentic experience lies within the passion behind one's inquisitiveness. He goes as far as to say that "curiosity may be considered the starting point of his genius" (104), because someone curious about his or her environment takes the time to make analytical observations about it, thus stimulating his or her mind. As seen in Poe, this "genius" through the stimulation of the brain is defined as "convalescence." Like an ill individual slowly recovering to health, this "genius" develops with one's desire "to remember everything."

The "man in the crowd" begins to reach a path of authentic experience when he assumes the position of the convalescent. Baudelaire parallels the curiosity of the convalescent to "a return to childhood" (104). Being that childhood is a stage where an individual is at his most inquisitive, the stimuli of the city are at its most internalized. For a grown individual to achieve this, he or she would be able to enter the "kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness," the "kaleidoscope" being the city, the source of fast-paced bombardment of stimuli. The difference between the child and the adult with this state of mind is the ability to be analytical. One cannot

be “endowed with consciousness” by simply being able to make keen observations. Baudelaire explains that

All the materials, stored higgledy-piggledy by memory, are classified, ordered, harmonized, and undergo that deliberate idealization, which is the product of a childlike perceptiveness, in other words a perceptiveness that is acute and magical by its very ingenuousness (106).

The process of putting these materials into a “harmonized” order allows the man of the crowd to come into convalescence, and therefore, authentic experience. Poe suggests that it takes a “sick” man to be well – the convalescent is the link between the blasé outlook and consciousness. The inhabitants of the city are all ill until curiosity brings him into the recovery state of being. The irony of needing to revert back to a mental state of “childlike perceptiveness” explains a difficulty the man of the crowd would experience when trying to break from the blasé outlook. It is ironic that the progression of a convalescent in this situation would be through the regression into a state of mind from childhood. The convalescent is then defined by an adult’s analytical maturity through a childlike frame of mind – one can only recover after re-attaining the perceptiveness of their youth lost through the many years of stimuli overload. As Baudelaire delves into the issues pertaining to the authenticity of art, he seems to suggest that children are best equipped [to produce or to appreciate] genuine and authentic works of art because they are imaginatively uninhibited and unaffected by overstimulation.

Evident in J.M. Baker’s article “Vacant Holidays: The Theological Remainder in Leopardi, Baudelaire, and Benjamin,” Baudelaire believed in the ability to induce experiential authenticity. Baker’s discusses this concept through Benjamin’s interpretation of Baudelaire, delineating the pervasive theme of “shock”:

In the essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Benjamin employs the word "shock" to emphasize the discontinuous, radically momentary character of modern city experience, a kind of experience alien to the world of Leskov. But discontinuity is not its unique value: shock experience is also shocking to the extent that it is static. Transfixing experience, shock gives to it an image-like fixity that it does not and cannot have otherwise. Its static character therefore paradoxically refers to the most fleeting temporality...In the utterly contingent choice of a single moment to rescue, Benjamin's shock experience is the analog to the photographic attempt to seize time in its pure instantaneity. (1210)

Baudelaire describes a man who is able to begin to internalize the stimuli of the city with an intense desire to do so. Benjamin picks up on the “shocking” experience of the city – not only is it a bombardment to the senses, but it has become so entrenched in modern culture that it has become “static.” He describes a paradox within the city in that the stimuli overload the senses and shock one into stagnation, evident in the metaphor of the city being a film whilst simultaneously being “photographic,” like a snapshot. The “shock” freezes one in a particular moment, capturing the moments in time that the man of the crowd finds himself in. Baudelaire explains that the reproducible artwork of the modern city, particularly film, is especially representative of the emerging lack of apperception. He describes film as ‘requiring no attention’, representative of the unwillingness and inability to have conscious perception of art, as well as the inability to create it. The masses are “distracted”, thus diminishing the authenticity and aura as the modern city is characterized by mechanical reproduction and disengaging art.

Similar to Baudelaire, Edgar Allan Poe portrays the journey of “the man of the crowd” through the eyes of a convalescent. “The Man of the Crowd” is told through the eyes of a

narrator who immerses himself in the stimuli of the crowd whilst recovering from illness. He explains that

For some months I had been ill in health, but was now convalescent, and, with returning strength, found myself in one of those happy moods which are so precisely the converse of ennui-moods of the keenest appetency, when the film from the mental vision departs-achlus os prin epeen- and the intellect, electrified, surpasses as greatly its everyday condition, as does the vivid yet candid reason of Leibnitz, the mad and flimsy rhetoric of Gorgias. Merely to breathe was enjoyment; and I derived positive pleasure even from many of the legitimate sources of pain. I felt a calm but inquisitive interest in every thing. With a cigar in my mouth and a newspaper in my lap, I had been amusing myself for the greater part of the afternoon, now in poring over advertisements, now in observing the promiscuous company in the room, and now in peering through the smoky panes into the street. (135)

He portrays himself as a man in a state of lucidity – in a mood “of keenest appetency,” he has an insatiable thirst for “the intellect” that “surpasses its everyday condition.” He insinuates that his given state of mind is particularly clairvoyant. Given that the nature of the city is one of intense, fleeting stimuli, evoked by “advertisements” seen “through the smoky panes into the street,” the amount of time one has to internalize his observations is also fleeting. But just as Baudelaire suggests, the man’s curiosity allows for analytical observation. He describes himself as having a “calm but inquisitive interest in everything” meaning that his recovery as a convalescent (on the level of one attempting to achieve authentic experience) begins with his genuine interest in his surroundings. The evidence of his authentic experience endures in the transition of his observations. They begin abstract and general, though as he becomes more ensconced within the city, he “descended to details, and regarded with minute interest the innumerable varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance.” His observations reflect his convalescence: just as he recovers into health, his awareness, and what Baudelaire would describe as childlike perceptiveness, grows stronger. The man’s attention to detail conveys that the process of attaining the conscious mind by perceiving the “kaleidoscope” of the city’s stimuli.

After establishing that a man of the crowd can indeed have an authentic experience, he uses the journey of another man in the crowd to portray the opposite phenomenon. As he describes the “hustle” of the city, an image emerges of a dense crowd simply bustling around, focusing on nothing other than reaching their destinations. Amidst this confusion, he spots and decides to follow a decrepit old man who captures his entire attention. As he describes their journey, he observes that the man only feels comfortable when he travels as part of a large group. There was a distinct “change in his demeanor” the farther from the crowd the man goes, paralleling the change in the narrator’s demeanor. The narrator feels deep dissatisfaction for the old man’s behavior:

He noticed me not, but resumed his solemn walk, while I, ceasing to follow, remained absorbed in contemplation. "The old man," I said at length, "is the type and the genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. He is the man of the crowd. It will be in vain to follow, for I shall learn no more of him, or of his deeds. ("Seven Tales" 153)

The narrator criticizes the old man's inability "to be alone," conveying a disdain for man of the crowd *needing* to be a man of the crowd. The phrase "genius of deep crime" is especially revealing: the "crime" that the old man has committed is that "he is the man of the crowd." Refusal to be alone insinuates a rejection of individuality, or unique thoughts from those of the masses. His crime extends to his numb reception of the stimuli around him, evident in his resistance to external perception and interpretation. He can visually recognize his surroundings, but does not internalize anything, instead only "looking at all objects with a wild and vacant stare."

This rejection of individuality results in the refusal of inability to be authentic – the modern inhabitant lives in an age where art (being film, photography and other transmissible art forms) is simply copying the original or requires no internalization. Therefore the aura, which is 'evident in the presence of the original and the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity' has been lost in the forgery of reproduction. There is a certain perceptiveness that is essential in the creation of an original, therefore authentic art piece. As the city has rendered its inhabitants devoid of the perception necessary to do so, what has resulted is the emergence of a mechanically reproduced art form. Baudelaire is especially preoccupied with this issue as he explains that the "aural element of the work of art is declining", and producing a space characterized by its inauthenticity.

The overwhelming stimuli of the urban metropolis have acted as a plague that infected the masses. The unavoidable "shock" of the unending bombardment to the senses has made it so that the mind of the individual is a barrier for the authentic experience of the environment. Charles Baudelaire and Edgar Allan Poe describe the detachment of the masses from the city and convey that it is necessary to bring the city dweller back into consciousness. This concept is represented through the metaphor of the convalescent, suggesting that the masses are all "sick" and must recover. For Baudelaire, the passion of curiosity begins the recovering individual into the path of "genius." For the man of the crowd to enter the city "kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness," he or she must revert back to a state of childlike perception and allow the mind to analytically participate with the city. Poe uses the convalescent metaphor to convey the conflict with consciousness – that one can achieve perception of the world to a certain degree, but there are certain aspects of the city that inhibit full clairvoyance. Though Baudelaire and Poe have differing theories as to the strategy for reaching convalescence, they both convey that authentic experience is reliant on this recovery. As one has fleeting moments of clarity, the experience is a rare moment of lucidity not afforded to the masses. Both authors allude to the relationship between this consciousness and reading. The authentic experience of analysis allows the convalescent to fully grasp the meaning behind written tradition. If recovery from the blasé illness is possible, neither Baudelaire nor Poe say, but it is evident that it has become undeniably entrenched in the lives of the masses and takes the effort on the individuals' part to cure themselves.

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