

# Urban Spectacle and Spectatorship in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man of the Crowd"

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Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Man of the Crowd" delineates metropolitan visual experiences that relate to urban scenery and people. The anonymous first-person narrator, preoccupied with the social and psychological correlations between the city and wandering crowd, interprets his perception of the crowd as an inexhaustible spectacle. As the narrator experiences different phases of spectatorship, he ultimately realizes the inscrutability and impenetrability of the city through his observation of the old man of the crowd. This paper suggests that the narrator's failure in seeing and reading the old man of the crowd renders an uncanny effect of urban spectatorship.

**Keywords:** Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man of the Crowd", spectacle, spectatorship, the crowd, the uncanny

## Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Man of the Crowd" delineates metropolitan visual experiences that relate to modern urban scenery and people. The anonymous first-person narrator, preoccupied with the social and psychological correlations between the city and wandering crowd, interprets his perception of the crowd as an inexhaustible spectacle. As a spectator who sits by a coffee shop window, he endeavors to categorize various types of people to learn about the city. Later, he focuses on an old man in the midst of the crowd. The old man is about 65 to 70 years old, and the filth of the old man's clothes contrasts with their beautiful texture. This unusual contrast inspires the narrator to further examine the identity of the old man. Since the act of seeing designates an essential participation in the city, urban residents like the narrator bear witness to a capitalistic bustling city where the interplay of occurrences and experiences takes place. However, the way that the spectator sees the city and the crowd could be imbricated by ideological overtones and undertones in social discourses. Issues concerning the narrator and the old man need to be reevaluated: What is characteristic of the narrator's urban spectatorship? What is the effect of such spectatorship? How are the spectator and spectacles mediated in visual practices? Addressing these issues, this paper primarily employs Sigmund Freud's concept of "the uncanny" to uphold distinctive characteristics of urban spectatorship in "The Man of the Crowd".

## Phase 1: Observing the Crowd

The narrator as the spectator in the story experiences two phases of spectatorship in his observation of the urban crowd. First, the narrator observes *the crowd* in Phase 1. The narrator sits inside a coffee house adjacent to

a densely populated street and views all passersby in the street by using a panoramic gaze. In this vein of the seer and the seen, a form of spectatorship is built up as an indirect vision, which grants the seer's undeviating watching position and a segregated distance between the two. He enjoys gazing at people both near the coffee shop and far away: "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" (Poe, 2004, pp. 232-233). He then begins to categorize people in the crowd according to "figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance" (Poe, 2004, p. 233). In this situation, the narrator assumes "a posture of receptive passivity" since he seeks nothing more than "a stimulating spectacle to relieve his boredom" (Brand, 1991, p. 85). For instance, he recognizes indicators of class and occupation on the basis of physical appearance and identifies the upper clerks of prestigious firms on the basis of "the affectation of respectability", who "removed or settled their hats with both hands, and wore watches, with short gold chains of a substantial and ancient pattern" (Poe, 2004, p. 234). He also distinguishes some less genteel people, such as gamblers, according to "a certain sodden swarthy complexion, a filmy dimness of eye, and pallor and compression of lip" as well as "a guarded lowness of tone in conversation and a more than ordinary extension of the thumb in a direction at right angles with the fingers" (Poe, 2004, p. 234). Individuals from porters, sweepers, and monkey exhibitors to ragged artisans and ballad mongers appear as spectacles for the narrator and give him "an aching sensation to the eye" (Poe, 2004, p. 235).

There are two supplementary devices helpful to provide him with the pleasure of seeing and assure his interior undeviating position. The first device is the window. The window frames his vision and allows him to classify the passers-by from a vantage point. The window in the coffee house plays a significant part as "a magnifying glass", especially what Poe speaks of the bow window (Poe, 2004, p. 4). The bow window aims to "amplify the narrator's sense of enclosure within the coffeehouse even as he gazes into the street" (Sweeney, 2003, p. 5). This enclosure leaves him undisturbed in the process of gaze. The other device refers to the light on the street. As the night falls, the street light offers an even more glittering view of the crowd:

As the night deepened, so deepened to me the interest of the scene ... but the rays of the gas-lamps, feeble at first in their struggle with the dying day, had now at length gained ascendancy, and threw over every thing a fitful and garish luster. (Poe, 2004, p. 235)

The narrator thus becomes more and more absorbed in those nocturnal scenes:

The wild effects of the light enchained me to an examination of individual faces; and although the rapidity with which the world of light flitted before the window, prevented me from casting more than a glance upon each visage, still it seemed that, in my then peculiar mental state, I could frequently read, even in that brief interval of a glance, the history of long years. (Poe, 2004, p. 235)

The streetlight satisfies the narrator's desire in two ways: seeing the crowd and seeing the night crowd. The two categories of the crowd and the night crowd, which seem to present diverse faces of spectacles, cause similar visual experiences of pleasure. The two devices, the bow window and the streetlight, secure the spectator's detached position and distance from what he beholds, whether in the day or at night.

In Phase 1, the narrator has an undeviating viewing position and distance, which constitutes an indirect form of spectatorship between the narrator and the crowd, or the seer and the seen. For him, the crowd as spectacle

presents itself as a disguised form, to a certain degree, in which something is hidden. He may reason according to his empirical sense of the crowd: "everyone was, unencumbered by any factual knowledge, able to make out the profession, the character, the background, and the life-style of passers-by" (Benjamin, 1973, p. 39). The whole process of observing, deducting, and concluding is feasible. Metaphorically, he acts as an armchair detective at a distance, using his intelligence to judge, speculate on, and analyze all the characteristics of these urban residents. Behind his observation and deduction, the narrator seems to assume a separation between the appearance and substance of individuals. The presupposed separation of appearance and substance behind appearance grants his confidence of reason and analysis. Appearance, including facial expressions and clothing, conveys social status, which is conventionally conditioned and relegated to substance. On the basis of the disparity between appearance and substance, the appearances of individuals in the crowd convey their life history; and the narrator's crowd gazing provides him with insight about the individuals in the crowd.

### **Phase 2: Observing the Old Man of the Crowd**

Subsequently, the narrator observes *the old man of the crowd* in Phase 2. As the narrator takes regular glimpses into the crowd, he seems to lose his sober temper and devote his attention to the old man: "a countenance which at once arrested and absorbed my whole attention, on account of the absolute idiosyncrasy of its expression" (Poe, 2004, p. 235). He turns to be an active seeker who imagines to see more about the old man:

Then came a craving desire to keep the man in view—to know more of him. Hurriedly putting on an overcoat, and seizing my hat and cane, I made my way into the street, and pushed through the crowd in the direction which I had seen him take. (Poe, 2004, p. 236)

The short-distanced observation propels him to explore the old man's appearances and to follow him: "I had now a good opportunity of examining his person ... These observations heightened my curiosity, and I resolved to follow the stranger whithersoever he should go" (Poe, 2004, p. 236). He infers that the old man's appearance and manner are confusingly mismatched:

His clothes, generally, were filthy and ragged; but as he came, now and then, within the strong glare of a lamp, I perceived that his linen, although dirty, was of beautiful texture; and my vision deceived me, or, through a rent in a closely-buttoned and evidently second-handed roquelaire which enveloped him, I caught a glimpse both of a diamond and of a dagger. (Poe, 2004, p. 236)

Curiously, the old man enters many shops, purchases nothing, and views all the surrounding objects "with a wild and vacant stare" (Poe, 2004, p. 237). The narrator's pursuit of the old man continues through the whole evening and into the next day. Finally, unable to comprehend the old man's inconsistent appearance and wayward actions, the narrator is exhausted as he contemplates and asserts that the old man is "the type and genius of deep crime" and "the man of the crowd" who does not permit himself to be read (Poe, 2004, p. 239).

The old man's appearance interrupts the narrator's detached and form of spectatorship, whereas a distinctive mode of spectatorship regarding a direct anticipation in the crowd emerges. The spectator has thrown himself into the crowd, which means, he has lost his objective position and distance. In Phase 1, his position is originally affirmed by the fixed gaze through an aid of the window and the light. Even his observations turns from an "abstract and generalizing" view to specific "aggregate relations" of the passengers (Poe, 2004, p. 233), he still observes them from quite a distance. He is the man outside the crowd. Yet the act of following the old man

destroys such stabilized mode of spectatorship. His stable position is gone and the detached distance is dismissed since he now takes a risk of being seen and found. In other words, he has been turned into the spectacular object himself instead. He now belongs to the unpredictable crowd. His spectacular position and distance toward the crowd therefore undergo an intense transformation from stable to unstable, from passive to active, and from sedimentary to dynamic.

To elaborate the aforementioned two modes of spectatorship, two modes of spectacles in this tale must be further distinguished: *the crowd* and *the old man*. First of all, the crowd as spectacle is recognized as one consisting of a separation between appearance and its history. The spectacle is not simply "a collection of images" but also "a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (Debord, 1994, p. 12). From the pick-pockets or gamblers to professional street beggars, the narrator as spectator can easily recognize and comprehend their individual traits of class and occupation with respective appearances. As discussed above, the narrator presupposes a disparity between appearance and substance (or history) of the crowd, whose facial expressions and clothes convey social connotations conditioned traditionally. There is an imagined disparity of appearances and substance behind their appearances by the spectator. Appearances of spectacles will bring forth their underlying history consisting of complicated social relations. Premised on such imagined disparity, the spectator's gaze at the crowd seems remarkably effective.

However, as the spectator changes his spectacle from the crowd to the old man, the privileged assumption of division of appearance and substance is later challenged and collapsed. In Phase 2, unlike in Phase 1, the narrator turns out to be an active seeker who desires to determine the identity of the old man. The old man's countenance is the dramatic turning point that arouses the spectator's interest, which is accompanied by an unprecedented shock. The problem is: He is incapable of ascertaining detailed information about the old man regarding class, career, and personal affairs. The narrator's repeated observations increase his curiosity but simultaneously confuse him because he is unable to socially categorize the old man, then frustrating the narrator. The narrator initially assumes that the old man is readable but later perceives that the old man lacks "comfortable transparency" and thus is not readable (Brand, 1991, p. 88). His logical presupposition regarding the link between appearance and substance fails: The relationship between the old man's appearance and substance is too arbitrary to understand, or the old man's appearance is unconnected with his substance. His appearance is simply *the* appearance. Additionally, the narrator's objective perspective of the crowd is undermined when he enters the crowd to directly observe the old man. His gaze derived from such a segregation between appearance and substance is made vulnerable. The old man of the crowd henceforth offers a retrospection of possibility to explore the phenomenon of impenetrability of the city.

### **The Uncanny**

At last, the narrator quits following the old man. The narrator's conclusion, "this old man is the type and the genius of deep crime ... He is the man of the crowd", could be his justification of failed spectatorship which characterizes the incomprehensibility of the old man (Poe, 2004, p. 239). The hasty shift of spectacular position, the loss of spectacular distance, and the unexpected remolding of perceptions of spectacles—all of these constitute a specific effect of spectatorship—"the uncanny". Sigmund Freud explains the concept of "the uncanny" as "undoubtedly related to what is frightening—to what arouses dread and horror; equally certainly, too,

the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with what excites fear in general" (Freud, 1955, p. 219). Freud suggests that the emotions of the uncanny coexist with that of fear, and never as the positive ones, claiming "the uncanny" is "directly attached to the idea of being robbed of one's eyes, and hence, given his earlier finding, to the castration complex" (Cavell, 1988, p. 186). It is castration threat that the major fear is hidden and appearing as the uncanny. Freud's denial is that the acknowledgement of the existence of others is, "like a Freudian confession that philosophy and its constitution of otherness (in its existence and as its topic) is as fearful to him as castration is" (Cavell, 1988, p. 186). Cavell's comments on Freud shed light on "the uncanny" as an effect of urban spectatorship. In the story, it could be inferred a lack of enough textual evidences to prove the spectator's frightening feeling as the fear of castration threat. The frightening emotion derives from the "otherness", a universalized condition of the subject (the spectator) and the other (the old man). This gap copes with an entangled network of conflicts and interactions between the two sides. As the narrator claims, "I observed that he now took the course in which had gone the greater number of the audience-but, upon the whole, I was at a loss to comprehend the waywardness of his actions" (Poe, 2004, pp. 237-238). The practice of spectatorship does not offer the subject sufficient, profound information to comprehend or perceive the significance of the other. The subject's comprehension or perception of the other might have been imaginative and unilateral.

The meanings of "heimlich" and "unheimlich" need to be discussed concerning the frightening element of "the uncanny". The word "heimlich", Freud argues, "belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory, are yet very different: on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight" (Freud, 1955, pp. 224-225). Freud further contends, "This uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (Freud, 1955, p. 241). In this sense, the overwhelming and recurring effect of the "unfamiliar" in the "familiar" goes beyond one's predication and evokes "an emotional impulse" which relates itself to the repressed (Freud, 1955, p. 241). As the narrator describes the old man's countenance as an "absolute idiosyncrasy" of its expression, he has been separated from something familiar and led to the unfamiliar (Poe, 2004, p. 235). In the process of acts of seeing, the crowd as spectacle is likely "both means and end, subject and object" of the urban spectator (Byer, 1986, p. 228). If so, the spectator-spectacle relation is reevaluated by the spectacle as both the subject and the object. The reevaluation could have made the narrator's conscious "singularly aroused, startled, fascinated"; his mind is preoccupied with confusing and paradoxical meanings (Poe, 2004, p. 236).

Depicting the crowd and the old man as different modes of spectacles, Poe's story highlights the frightening element concerning the familiar and the unfamiliar as the uncanny effect of urban spectatorship. The narrator's perception of the old man comes to terms with an overwhelming fear generated by the familiar yet revealed as the unfamiliar. The unfamiliar is the source of the fear and furthermore, as Freud emphasizes, "one of the most successful devices for easily creating uncanny effects is to leave the reader in uncertainty" (Freud, 1955, p. 227). In the city, the urban spectators may encounter such spatial and social uncertainty which often stimulates what they have already been acquainted with. Transitions from expected to unexpected, from familiar to unfamiliar, and from certain to uncertain represent all the elements included in the activity of urban spectatorship that characterizes the spectator's social and psychological preoccupations.

### Conclusion

In summation, in the short story "The Man of the Crowd", the narrator's visual experiences and his confidence in the readability of the urban crowd are subverted. At the outset, the narrator is outside the crowd and observes the crowd in a detached, indifferent manner. However, the narrator loses his objective position when he follows the old man through the crowd. His former privileged position is gone and the distance, erased. In other words, the narrator, who was previously a spectator, then becomes a spectacle, a spectacular object at risk of being seen and discovered. After observing the old man in the crowd, the narrator's position in relation to the crowd is transformed from fixed to unfixed, stable to unstable, and passive to active. His assumption regarding the link between appearance and substance collapses. The narrator ultimately realizes the inscrutability and impenetrability of the city through his observation of the old man of the crowd. Such urban spectatorship concerns itself with the challenge of spectacular position, distance, and perceptions of spectacles. As the correlation between the spectator and the spectacle serves as a generic instability of the metropolis, it is truly an uncanny manifestation of urban spectatorship.

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