

Article

Eurydice at Euston?: Walter Benjamin and Marc Augé Go Underground

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Abstract: Taking as its point of departure Walter Benjamin's repeatedly unsuccessful attempt to give spatial form to his past, this paper suggests that it is perhaps the contemporary French anthropologist, Marc Augé, who provides the most appropriate envisioning of a 'map of memories' in his brief writings on the Parisian métro system. For Augé, the labyrinthine subway network constitutes nothing less than a 'memory machine' in which lines and station names serve as mnemonics, recalling long-forgotten childhood encounters and experiences. Mirroring the cityscape above, places themselves unexplored, unknown, the serried toponyms of the métro become an incantation summoning forth the shades of the past. As Augé points out, those stations that provide opportunities to change lines are felicitously termed 'correspondences', a Baudelairean term that fascinated Benjamin and informed his key historiographical notion of the 'dialectical image,' the intersection and mutual illumination of past and present moments. For me, Augé's highly suggestive reflections bring to mind my own memories of a London childhood around 1970. Looking at the London underground map today, I cannot but see the sites of many past meetings and partings, dots connected by lines forming complex figures, constellations of memory.

Keywords: Critical Theory; memory; Parisian metro; city

1. Introduction: Mappings

In his 1932 reflections 'Berlin Chronicle', Walter Benjamin recounts one particular afternoon in Paris "to which I owe insights into my life that came in a flash, with the force of an illumination" ([1], p. 614).

Ensconced in the fashionable Café des Deux Magots in Saint Germain-des-Prés, waiting “I forget for whom”, Benjamin recalls:

“I was struck by the idea of drawing a diagram of my life, and knew at the same moment exactly how it was to be done. With a very simple question I interrogated my past life, and the answers were inscribed, as if of their own accord, on a sheet of paper that I had with me. A year or two later, when I lost this sheet, I was inconsolable. I have never since been able to restore it as it arose before me then, resembling a series of family trees. Now, however, reconstructing its outline in thought without directly reproducing it, I would instead speak of a labyrinth. I am concerned here not with what is installed in the chamber at its enigmatic centre, ego or fate, but all the more with the many entrances leading into the interior. These entrances I call ‘primal acquaintances’; each of them is a graphic symbol of my acquaintance with a person ... But since most of them ... for their part open up new acquaintances, relations to new people, they branch off these corridors ... Whether cross-connections are finally established between these systems also depends on the intertwinements of our path through life ... (P)assageways that, always, even in the most diverse periods of life, guide us to the friend, the betrayer, the beloved, the pupil, or the master. This is what the sketch of my life revealed to me as it took shape before me on that Paris afternoon.” ([1], p. 615).

Manifest with the spontaneous structure of what Benjamin would later term a ‘dialectical image’,¹ and framed by a double forgetfulness (of his awaited companion, of the later whereabouts of the precious piece of paper), this remembrance of a moment of remembrance might be thought to fulfil an enduring wish expressed earlier in the text:

“I have long, indeed for many years, played with the idea of setting out the sphere of life—*bios*—graphically on a map. First I envisaged an ordinary map, but now I would incline to a general staff’s map of a city center, if such a thing existed...I have evolved a system of signs, and on the gray background of such maps they would make a colourful show if I clearly marked the houses of my friends and girlfriends, the assembly halls for various collectives, the hotel and brothel rooms that I knew for one night, the decisive benches in the Tiergarten, the ways to different schools and the graves I saw filled, the sites of prestigious cafes whose long forgotten names daily crossed our lips, the tennis courts where empty apartment blocks stand today...([1], pp. 596–597).

But these are different types of figures, the diagram and the map, prompted perhaps by rather different kinds of interrogation: the first is seemingly ‘genealogical’ in its concern with representing times past as so many openings and intersecting paths, as the tangled web of friends, acquaintances, colleagues and lovers, a lattice-work of relationships despite Benjamin’s own disavowal of the significance of people in his memories (“how slight a role is played in them by people” ([1], p. 614) he claims). Inscribed with colourful signs, the second focuses upon the sites and loci of youthful encounters and meetings, of once frequented, now forlorn places, of the spaces and architecture that framed “‘Lived Berlin’” ([1], p. 597) prior to the outbreak of war in 1914.

¹ Deeply indebted to the Proustian notion of the *mémoire involontaire*, Benjamin develops this concept of the dialectical image as the ephemeral conjuncture (or moment of mutual illumination) of past and present in his famous theses ‘On the Concept of History’ from 1940. See, especially, theses V and VII ([2], pp. 390–910). The theses were attempts to sketch the historiographical and epistemological foundations of the unwritten ‘Arcades Project’ [3].

Perhaps these are just alternative ways of representing the same labyrinthine.² In any case, I am led to wonder: if one was to superimpose the one upon the other, what kind of memory matrix or pattern of the past might result? For me, one possible answer is suggested by the work of the contemporary French social anthropologist, Marc Augé, whose writings have become increasingly preoccupied with the task of giving form to the manifold and momentary remembrances of his own Parisian past.³ In perhaps the most intriguing of these, Augé offers up to the reader both a diagram of linkages, connections and conjunctions and a motley map of locations, destinations and rendezvous, a network of lines and points, a figure that comes to serve him, too, as a mnemonic device: the Parisian métro map.

2. The ‘Memory Machine’

Just as Benjamin emphatically denies the ‘autobiographical’ status of his ‘autobiographical’ writings on Berlin from 1932,⁴ so Augé’s 1986 study, *Un ethnologue dans le métro*, (translated in 2002 simply as *In the Métro*) [6], is explicitly *not* an ethnography of the métro system as such,⁵ but rather, comprises a tripartite montage of highly idiosyncratic reflections and poetic musings on memory and otherness set in train, so to speak, by the Parisian métro system—its form, representation and delineation, its nomenclature and its everyday experience.⁶

² Or, perhaps, these two representations, one supposedly mislaid, the other only ever imagined, are ways of figuring the very impossibility of any such anamnestic cartography.

³ See also, for example, his conceptualisation of the work of memory itself in Augé (2004) [4] and the series of recollections prompted by movie-going and the classic Hollywood romance *Casablanca* in Augé (2009) [5].

⁴ Benjamin writes: “Reminiscences, even extensive ones, do not always amount to an autobiography. And these quite certainly do not, even for the Berlin years that I am exclusively concerned with here. For autobiography has to do with time, with sequence and what makes up the continuous flow of life. Here, I am talking of a space, of moments and discontinuities” ([1], p. 612).

⁵ Augé reiterates this point in his *Le Metro Revisité* (2008) [7], reflections written to mark the twentieth anniversary of the original 1986 study. Here, he insists: “je n’avais bien évidemment pas le projet de faire une ethnologie du métro. J’observais en ethnologue l’ethnologue que j’étais, l’ethnologue retour d’Afrique. Je l’observais dans le métro et je lui posais des questions. Il répondait comme il pouvait, avec des références et des mots d’ethnologue. J’essayais, en somme, de me mettre dans la peau d’un indigène, mais cet indigène un peu particulier c’était moi” {"obviously I did not set out to write an ethnology of the métro. I was observing, as ethnologist, the ethnologist that I was, the ethnologist back from Africa. I was observing him in the métro and asking him some questions. He was replying as best he could, with the references and words of the ethnologist. In short, I was trying to get into the skin of a native, but this slightly peculiar native was me"} ([7], pp. 13–14).

⁶ In *Dans le Métro*, “je me suis arrêté en chemin et contenté d’une auto-analyse ou, si l’on veut, d’une auto-fiction” {"I stopped short and contented myself with an auto-analysis or, if you prefer, an auto-fiction"} ([7], p. 26). More recently, in *Journal d’un SDF* (2011), Augé has reconfigured this notion of “auto-fiction” in which the authorial self plays a prismatic role, into a more imaginary formulation, that of “ethnofiction”: “Qu’est-ce qu’une ethnofiction? Un récit qui évoque un fait social à travers la subjectivité d’un individu particulier; mais puisqu’il ne s’agit ni d’une autobiographie ni d’une confession, il faut bien créer cet individu fictif ‘de toutes pièces’, c’est-à-dire à partir des mille et un détails observés dans la vie courante” {"What is an ethnofiction? An account which evokes a social fact through the subjectivity of a particular individual; but since it is neither an autobiography nor a confession it is necessary to create this fictional individual ‘in its entirety’, that is to say starting from the thousand and one details observed in their current life"} adding “je décris une situation individuelle et une subjectivité particulière, et je laisse le soin au lecteur

“It is”, he writes, “clearly a Parisian privilege to use the subway map as a reminder, as a memory machine, or a pocket mirror on which sometimes are reflected—and lost in a flash—the skylarks of the past” ([6], p. 4).

True, the first section, entitled ‘Memories’, opens with a single haunting figure from Augé’s own Parisian childhood around 1940; aged around five, he sees a grey-uniformed German soldier standing guard at the entrance way to the Maubert-Mutualité métro station. However, the focus of the book is much more imagining the work of memory *per se* than any particular remembered images. Augé is preoccupied with tracing the morphology or topography of memory and memorial practices, not forgetting the mundane habitus of the regular subway rider, the common commuter, as a kind of embodied remembering. Additionally, although his memories are unique in terms of content, their form is potentially shared by all of us modern metropolitans frequenting the subway system:

“Sometimes the chance happening of an itinerary (of a name, of a sensation) is enough for distracted travellers suddenly to discover that their inner geology and subterranean geography of the capital city meet at various points, where dazzling discoveries of coincidences promote recall of tiny and intimate tremors in the sedimentary layers of their memory.” ([6], p. 4).

In an act of mimetic reading that Benjamin would surely have applauded, Augé compares the lines of the métro map to a “lifeline”, specifically to the lines of the hand: the lines one takes, the lines one frequents, these are to be read like the patterns deciphered by palmistry, that is to say, by means as of a physiognomical reading as practised by the fortune- or story-teller. Additionally, while it is certainly true that the vicissitudes of life—new jobs, new homes, new friends, new lovers—have led him in many directions along unfamiliar tracks to unexplored neighbourhoods,⁷ the names of these various stations composing a kind of “curriculum vitae” ([6], p. 5), Augé recalls the importance and persistence of one particular itinerary:

“From Maubert to Vaneau”, he notes, “the habitual comings and goings of my childhood mapped out my territory, and the chance of existence (or some secret personal gravity) had it that the Gare d’Orléans-Austerlitz-Auteuil line, now extended to Boulogne, would always play in my life, in some way, a crucial role.” ([6], pp. 4–5).

Therefore, Augé passes time and again through the same sequence of stations, stops whose names he can still recite like an incantation, “like a prayer or a string of rosary beads” ([6], p. 6).

3. Stations of Memory

In this way Augé moves seamlessly between cartography and reading, between places and names, between the city experienced as a physical environment and the metropolis conceived and constituted

d’imaginer la totalité sociale qu’elle exprime à sa façon” {“I describe an individual situation and a particular subjectivity and I leave it to the reader to imagine the social totality which it expresses in its own way”} ([8], p. 8).

⁷ One is reminded here of Benjamin’s comments under the title ‘First Aid’ in *One Way Street*: “A highly convoluted neighbourhood, a network of streets I had avoided for years, was disentangled at a single stroke when one day a person dear to me moved there. It was as if a search light set up at this person’s window dissected the area with pencils of light” ([9], p. 461).

as a “linguistic cosmos” as Benjamin puts it in the ‘Arcades Project’.⁸ Indeed, as Benjamin makes clear elsewhere in *Convolute P*, ‘The Streets of Paris’, it is underground that names have a special resonance and significance:

“How names in the city, though, first become potent when they issue within the labyrinthine halls of the Métro. Troglodytic kingdoms—thus they hover on the horizon: Solférino, Italie, and Rome, Concorde and Nation. Difficult to believe that up above they all run out into one another, that under the open sky it all draws together” ([3], p. 519).

While on the surface, streets and neighbourhoods blur into one another, here, below ground, the names of stations retain their distinctiveness, their singularity, their pristine purity and precision. Thus it is, perhaps, that they become especially evocative. Augé writes:

“Certain subway stations are so associated with exact moments of my life, … that thinking about or meeting the name prompts me to page through my memories as if they were a photo album … Now it happens that I rarely go by Vaneau or Sèvres-Babylone without pausing to think about my grandparents who lived during the war at a point almost equidistant between the one stop and the other” ([6], p. 4).

The underground system reproduces, indeed mirrors, the toponyms of the cityscape above, forms a subterranean echo, or is it, following Augé and Benjamin, actually the other way around: do we encounter only the surface manifestations of turbulence and tremors at depth? Additionally, for many places through which, or rather, below which, we pass every day, this is indeed all we know of them: a point on a coloured line; a name emblazoned on a wall; a sign; a mosaic.⁹ This is the only trace we have of the unknown neighbourhood we may perhaps never see. Augé notes that certain stations remained for many years: “only names without any real content” ([6], p. 5). Only names? Such familiar, but unknown names allow for flights of imagination: as a child, Augé recalls, in one direction, “the unknown had begun at Duroc” ([6], p. 5), while in the other, the eponymous station Cardinal Lemoine prompts the ever unanswered question: “who could that cardinal have been?” ([6], p. 6).

For Augé, as for Benjamin, place names, the names of stations, become significant not only as spaces of regular passage or as sites of encounters, that is to say, as place-names imbued with individual meaning, but also as invocations of history: in particular, of course, as eponyms of the

⁸ The Surrealist’s love of language games and word plays should be stressed for both Benjamin’s arcades and Augé’s métro studies: while Louis Aragon’s 1926 *Paris Peasant* (1980) [10] provided the inspiration for the former, Raymond Queneau’s 1959 *Zazie dans le Metro* (2001) [11] is the presiding spirit for the latter.

⁹ Twenty years later, Augé emphasises this primacy of the subterranean cityscape: “Ces noms étaient ceux des rues, des carrefours ou des places que le métro desservait, mais dans mon esprit c’était l’inverse. Comme le prouvaient les plans du métro, c’était la guirlande multicolore des stations souterraines qui servait à nommer les moindres recoins de la capitale. Peu m’importait dès lors l’origine du nom: il désignait un lieu, connu ou inconnu, qu’il restituait instantanément à ma mémoire ou livrait à mon imagination. La poésie du métro, c’était d’abord la poésie des noms” {“These names were those of the streets, crossroads and squares that the metro served, but in my mind it was the opposite. As plans of the metro proved, it was the multi-coloured garland of underground stations which served to name the smallest nooks and crannies of the capital. From then on, the origin of the name meant little to me: it designated a place, known or unknown, which it instantaneously restored to my memory or delivered to my imagination. The poetry of the metro was first and foremost the poetry of names”} ([7], p. 73).

powerful, of the triumphant and of the French past as “la gloire”.¹⁰ Therefore, the battlefields of past military victories are mustered here: Solférino, Sébastopol, Balaclava, Wagram, Austerlitz, (only London, Augé notes, could have a Waterloo!). Thus, unsuspecting visitors from Austria and Russia are unwillingly treated to a whistle-stop tour of their own inglorious imperial defeats.¹¹ Additionally, Augé notes, too, how more recent political figures have had their own names added to certain station names: L’Etoile finds itself preceded by Charles de Gaulle in a “model of over-determination perfectly suited to spark the imagination of everyone and the memory of many” ([6], p. 21).¹²

Hence, Augé suggests that it is not only individual memories, but also collective ones, more specifically, generational memories, that are evoked by the subway ride (and are not Benjamin’s memories also generational ones, of a youthful generation that was about to exterminate itself on the battlefields of Flanders in defence of the very imperial system they otherwise chaffed rebelliously against?). Augé the anthropologist notes:

“So many stations, so many situations or persons recognised, retained, magnified. The train threads its way through our history at an accelerated speed; relentless, it commutes without fail and in both directions, among great people, and great moments, passing without delay from Gambetta to Louise Michel, from the Bastille to Etoile, or from the Stalingrad to Campo-Formio and back again. Taking the subway would thus mean, in a certain way, celebrating the cult of the ancestors. But obviously, this cult, if it exists, is unconscious; many station names say nothing to those who read or hear them, and those to whom they have something to say do not necessarily think of the thing when they pronounce the name” ([6], p. 18).

For the anthropologist of the contemporary city, the métro as a locus of memories, of official rituals and state commemorations, of contested and ever-contestable histories, as the subject of unforgettable old songs and the setting for half-remembered black-and-white movies, is anything but a “non-place” (“non-lieu”),¹³ one of those utterly bland and banal environments of social alienation, which,

¹⁰ Augé asks: “Comment aurions-nous pu ne pas croire que nous vivions au centre du monde, ce centre que le monde entier s’était mobilisé pour libérer et dont le métro constituait les artères, le cœur et les veines, puisque, de Bastille à Etoile, de Wagram à Austerlitz ou de Louvre à République, il ne cessait d’en célébrer quotidiennement la grandeur?” {“How could we not have believed that we were living at the centre of the world, this centre which the whole world had mobilized to liberate and of which the métro formed the arteries, the heart and the veins, since, from Bastille to Etoile, from Wagram to Austerlitz or from Louvre to République, it never ceased to celebrate daily its grandeur?”} ([7], pp. 34–35).

¹¹ One is reminded here of Jean Baudrillard’s mention in his *America* ([12], pp. 1–2) of the Mexican tour guides at El Alamo dutifully showing tourists around the monument of their own humiliation.

¹² All this contributing in no small part to what Augé later describes and decries as the “muséification de la capital” {“museumification of the capital”} ([7], p. 49).

¹³ Augé writes: “Il n’est pas un non-lieu, pour moi en tout cas, ni pour ceux qui y font régulièrement le même trajet. Ils y ont des souvenirs, des habitudes, y reconnaissent quelques visages et entretiennent avec l’espace de certaines stations une sorte d’intimité corporelle mesurable au rythme de la descente dans la volée d’escaliers, à la précision du geste qui introduit le ticket dans la fente du portillon d’accès ou à l’accélération de la marche quand se devine à l’oreille l’arrivée de la rame au bord du quai. Il n’est pas un non-lieu pour ceux qui, comme moi, continuent à le percevoir comme un élément essentiel du Paris *intra muros*, le Paris indissociable de son métro qu’ont célébré quelques chansons, quelques films et quelques textes dans l’après-guerre et les années 50” {“It is not a non-place, not for me in any case, nor for those who regularly make the same journey. They have their memories, their habits, they recognize faces there and maintain a sort of physical intimacy with the space in certain stations measurable by the rhythm of their descent of

according to Augé, increasingly predominate in the cityscapes of consumer capitalism and characterise the age of “supermodernity”(see Augé 1995, [13]).

4. Habits and Tactics

As a passenger on the métro, Benjamin notes, one is soon oblivious of life at the surface:

“Is there anyone”, he asks rhetorically, “who has not once been stunned, emerging from the Metro, into the open air, to step into brilliant sunlight? And yet the sun shone just as brightly a few minutes earlier, when he went down. So quickly has he forgotten the weather of the upper world. And as quickly the world in its turn will forget him. For who can say more of his own existence than that it has passed through the lives of two or three others as gently as the weather?” ([9], p. 484).

Perhaps in his zeal to make an existential point, Benjamin underestimates the change of habitat and habitus that descent into the underground involves. This domain has, as Augé points out, its own dressage and disciplines; indeed, with so many signs and instructions, one wonders what Benjamin might have made of such an abundance of injunctions and warnings if he had chosen the various signs and notices of the métro system, instead of the cityscape above, as the structuring nomenclature for a reconfigured and retitled ‘One-Way Street’; ‘mind the gap’ perhaps! The passenger is not only subject to constant official reminders and restrictions—enter here, exit there, change here, do not do this, do that—but must abide by the unwritten etiquette of the subway system itself: how close are you allowed to stand? Where do you direct your gaze to ensure that you grant your fellow passengers the civil inattention they expect? Is it ever permitted to break the silence? ([6], p. 29).

Augé insists that the métro involves a particular set of practices, knowledge and skills acquired through familiarity: positioning oneself on the platform so as to be nearest to the connection to the next line or to the right exit; judging precisely where on the platform the train doors are going to be when they open; skilfully inserting oneself into an already overcrowded carriage. In this way, the regular commuter gravitates to certain spots on the platforms, prefers certain exits, certain escalators to others, successfully grabs “the last folding seat with a mixture of discretion and swiftness that also marks the veteran subway rider” ([6], p. 7). For Augé, s/he is an expert exponent in the precise micro-manipulation of time, space and body, an artistry borne of repetition and remembrance: habit as absent-minded mastery. Augé notes:

“every day individuals borrow itineraries they have no choice but to follow, constrained by memories that are born of habit and that sometimes subvert it, brushing by unaware of, but sometimes having an inkling of, the history of others, taking paths plotted with a collective memory turned trivial, whose efficacy is perceived only occasionally and at a distance” ([6], p. 25).

The newcomer, the tourist, for example, has a rather different experience. Benjamin records in another context, and in relation to another mode of public transport, what it is like to be unfamiliar

flights of stairs, by the precision of the gesture which feeds the ticket into the slot at the automatic barrier, or by the acceleration of pace when the ear divines the arrival of a train at a platform. It is not a non-place for those who, like me, continue to perceive it as an essential element of Paris *intra muros*, of the Paris inseparable from its métro celebrated in songs, films and texts of the postwar era and the 1950s”} ([7], pp. 33–34).

with such things, a novice in the individual practices and collective rituals of metropolitan mass transit. In his reflections on his visit to Moscow, he notes the tremendous pushing and shoving that is involved in boarding the tram and the deft use of force needed to thread through the crowd to the exit when one wants to get off. The tramcar ride is, he realises, above all, a “tactical experience” ([1], p. 32) for which the experienced body, not the general staff’s city map, provides a way of squeezing past.

5. Correspondence and Rendezvous

In their shared concern with the métro and cityscape as linguistic cosmoses of naming, Augé and Benjamin cross paths appropriately in Charles Baudelaire and the enigmatic notion of the ‘correspondence,’ (the title of the fourth poem of *Les fleurs du mal*) [14] wherein one finds as the counterpart to Benjamin’s cityscape of conspiratorial slogans and watchwords, whispered passwords and echoes ([9], p. 462), an equally enchanted ‘forest of symbols’.

Augé points out to the Anglophone reader that the term ‘correspondence’ is used in the Parisian métro system to refer to stations where lines meet, that is to say, to interchanges: those “complicated knots that tie the lines to one another, knots of corridors and stairways with individuals coursing through them in every direction and giving the impression they know where they are going” ([6], p. 54). Augé expresses his own penchant for the Italian term: no longer ‘correspondences’ but ‘coincidences’. The ‘coincidence’ felicitously captures the seductive possibility of chance meetings and fateful encounters, making each moment the tantalising threshold of potentially momentous occurrences. Augé stresses this sense of anticipation:

“What helps us to perceive the tunnels of the changes between subway lines is precisely the moment—impalpable and uncertain to be sure—in which ordinary citizens shift from one system to another, the time of a trip that is outside of all systems, but shared among their warmest memories and their freshest anticipations, possibly preoccupied by what they have just left or what they are going to find, ready to change language as they change location, ready and prepared, prepared for what awaits them” ([6], p. 58).

This liminal notion of ‘coincidence’ as a Janus-faced moment combining anticipation and retrospection, corresponds not so much to Baudelaire’s ‘Correspondence’ poem, but rather to the sonnet ‘A une passante’ famously described by Benjamin as the invocation of modern urban love simultaneously at ‘first’ and ‘last sight’ ([2], p. 25).

Indeed, the metro system is for Augé, just as the cityscape in ‘One-Way Street’ is for Benjamin, a locus of potentiality and promise, of romantic and seductive encounters *en passante*, of an ephemeral and unrequited metropolitan erotics.¹⁴ Augé cites not Baudelaire, but Armand Camargue:

“She always gets off at Sèvres-Babylone
 And the lazy and felonious grace I admire is one
 When, pensive, for a moment she will advance
 Toward the turn of the corridor of her correspondence
 Before moving her feet with steps that dance
 Toward perverse pleasures I fancy by chance.” ([6], p. 58)

¹⁴ Benjamin’s concern here is not so much Paris as Riga, home to his beloved Asja Lacis. See the fragment ‘Ordnance’ ([9], p. 416).

As a mnemonic device, it is tempting here to think of the métro as a labyrinth. Additionally, one would not be wrong to do so, after all, both Benjamin and Augé are at times inclined to this view.¹⁵ Nor are we lacking in guiding spirits: for our Theseus and Ariadne of the underground, we need look no further than Orpheus and Eurydice: Orpheus, the very figure of redemption, ventures into the hidden depths for the sake of love and so very nearly leads his beloved back into the light of day, until impatience and an irresistible backward glance ensure that she is lost to him for ever. What could be a more apt metaphor for the tantalizing character of memory and indeed the impossibility of the *mémoire volontaire*? Benjamin, however, has little time for such mythological re-imaginings. In bitingly satirical mood, he observes that railway platforms have become “provincial stages” upon which one sees enacted the “stale comedy of farewell and reunion,” the playing out of that “timeworn Greek melodrama: Orpheus, Eurydice and Hermes at the station” ([3], p. 406). Such figures should make their long overdue exit. However, this theme, of an underground eroticism, of love at last sight, is one to which we will perhaps return by means of a different line.

6. Revisitations and the Spectre of the Self

In reaching a point of correspondence, one has the choice of continuing on or changing lines. Let us consider the first option; and then, finally, choose the second.

To persevere would bring us, of course, to Augé’s own *Le Métro Revisité*. Like the predecessor it commemorates, the title is both precise and easily misunderstood. ‘Revisited’ is a suggestive term, and indeed, this is very much a re-visitation, for there are certainly ghosts and hauntings here. It is certainly not a straightforward matter of ‘revisiting’ or returning to the Parisian métro system itself for, as Augé is at pains to stress from the very outset, he still does this every day (albeit now on a different line, the 12), just like countless other Parisians. The métro is not some remote community to which the social anthropologist has returned in a wistful mood after a twenty-year absence to lament the changes wrought by two decades of encroaching globalization. It is an integral part of his quotidian existence and, indeed, of his own identity, his very essence: “Je n’ai jamais cessé de prendre le métro, jamais cessé d’être un Parisien” {“I have never stopped taking the métro, never stopped being a Parisian”} ([7], p. 7).¹⁶

No, it is not the subway system to which Augé returns, but to his former memories as prompted by the métro, as captured and preserved by his own text, *Un ethnologue dans le métro*. This is quite a different thing, with its own rhythm, trajectory and convolution.

Rhythm: Augé understands his revisititation as a pause,¹⁷ as a station-stop in his *oeuvre*, which itself now appears to him as a line, as a sequence of lines and interconnections, as a kind of genealogy of

¹⁵ See, for example, [6], p. 59.

¹⁶ Later, as if there was any doubt as to the matter, Augé adds: “Parisien j’étais, parisien je demeure” {“Parisian I was, Parisian I remain”} ([7], p. 12).

¹⁷ Augé writes: “Vingt ans après, ce n’est donc pas d’un *retour* dans le métro, à proprement parler, qu’il peut s’agir ici, mais plutôt d’un arrêt, d’une pause, d’un coup d’œil rétrospectif pour essayer de faire le point, comme nous le faisons tous de temps à autre pour nous étonner, en termes nécessairement trop convenus, de la vitesse à laquelle le temps a passé ou nous interroger sur ce qui a bien pu se passer” {“Twenty years later, it is not strictly speaking a matter here of a *return* into the métro, but rather of a stop, a pause, a retrospective glance in an attempt to take one’s bearings, as we

works and projects, as entangled as a subway map of a system built without prior plan and still very much under construction. Indeed, it is not only his own writings that appear to him as so many stations in this network of correspondences and coincidences, but also those of others who have had the most profound impact upon his thought. Therefore, there is another map, a second figure, that not so much overlays, as interlaces with the first: and here, one finds, to be sure, the line Claude Levi-Strauss, along which is located a connection where one may change onto the line Marcel Mauss (and other diverse lines branch off this: “Lacan, Castoriadis, Verant ou {or} Althusser” ([7], p. 30). Augé thus traces a different figure from his text of 1986: then “le métro m’apparaissait comme une métaphore de la vie, j’y vois aussi aujourd’hui une métaphore de l’œuvre” {"the métro seemed to me a metaphor of life, today I also see it as a metaphor of the work"} ([7], p. 28). This metaphor extends beyond cartography and beyond the works of the ethnographer to the very rituals that constitute the subway habitus and the rhythmic act of writing, the painful process of literary production itself¹⁸ with its stops and restarts, its interruptions and returns, its incremental elaboration and transformation.¹⁹ Writing has its own subway staccato.

Trajectory: what is the destination of this revisit? In foregrounding the analogy between works/writing and the Parisian métro, Augé confronts the question: is the task to update what was written twenty years earlier, to bring it into line with the now, to extend and ‘modernize’ it in a way that would correspond to the transformations of the subway system itself? He does not shirk this challenge. In his revisit, there is ample evidence of Augé’s attentiveness to the new: to the technological changes that have brought driverless trains, swish new carriages, electronic information boards on platforms, automated barriers and ticket machines, ubiquitous surveillance cameras; to the topographical transformation of subway and city involving new lines now designated by numbers, not names, new connections and transfers and the extensions of services out into the Parisian *banlieue* and beyond, displacing the former centre of the city, now just a site of tourism and luxury consumption, and linking the emerging eccentric sites of work and residence (La Defense, the airports); to the ever-more diverse populations that crowd into the trains indicative of the multicultural society of France today;²⁰ and the reconfiguration of the subway habitus itself as newspapers and books give way to mobile phones, headphones and MP3s, laptops and tablets as the distractions of choice for new generations of passengers; to the proliferation of ‘free’ magazines cluttering the carriages and those sold by the new poor, the SDFs (‘sans domicile fixe’{‘no fixed abode’}), publications which all contain, in a cruel

all do from time to time, to marvel, in terms necessarily overly conventional, at the speed with which time has passed, or to ponder upon what might well have happened”} ([7], pp. 7–8).

¹⁸ Augé observes: “De ce point de vue, le métro parisien est une bonne métaphore de l’œuvre littéraire, ethnologique ou autre” {"From this vantage point, the Paris métro is a good metaphor for the literary, ethnological or other work"} ([7], p. 17).

¹⁹ Augé notes wryly: “dans le cas d’un auteur contemporain, il est plus délicat d’opérer la distinction entre répétition, évolution, contradiction, approximation ou rupture. L’œuvre est en cours d’élaboration et le dernier mot peut retentir sur ceux qui l’ont précédé” {"in the case of the contemporary author, it is more delicate to operate the distinction between repetition, evolution, contradiction, approximation or rupture. The work is in the process of elaboration and the last word can still affect those which preceded it"} ([7], p. 20).

²⁰ Augé notes: “la ‘France de la diversité’—expression qu’on utilise aujourd’hui pour désigner les Français d’origine extra-européenne—est surreprésentée dans le métro” {"multicultural France"—an expression used today to refer to French people of non-European origin—is over-represented in the métro"} ([7], p. 43).

irony not lost on Augé, the very same advertisements for luxury restaurants and weight loss programmes for holiday-makers.

Amid the fresh paint and new styled staff uniforms, Augé is not blind to the impact of neo-liberalism upon the métro, understood as the exacerbation and intensification of human destitution and alienation. This takes a number of forms: economically, “l’extension de la pauvreté extreme” {“the extension of extreme poverty”} ([7], p. 41), the proximity and spectacle of which more well-heeled passengers, though largely inured, still find uncomfortable: “Sous terre, dans l’espace étroit du wagon où il faut hausser la voix pour se faire entendre, les cruautés de la vie sociale crèvent les yeux, et les regards se détournent, gênés, exaspérés, un peu honteux” {“Under ground, in the narrow confines of the carriage, where you have to raise your voice to make yourself heard, the cruelties of social life stare you in the face and you avert your eyes, awkward, exasperated, a little ashamed”} ([7], p. 48); socially, there is the increasing sense of depersonalisation as, on the one hand, simple human encounters and exchanges are usurped by automated systems, pre-programmed announcements and mechanized controls,²¹ while on the other, the new mobile informational, communication and entertainment technologies so indispensable for the young create private electronic ‘bubbles’ for the avoidance of both boredom and others;²² and politically, there is the demise of what passes as public space itself as our actions and movements are subject to ever-greater scrutiny in the name of security.²³ To revisit the métro is to recognize the crises that beset the contemporary subject, the individual for whom the “timid” heresies of dress, piercings, tattoos and artificial hair colourings provide the semblance at least of individuality if not any genuine substance, see ([7], pp. 91–92).

Convolution: yes, the métro has undergone profound transformation over the years, and the same is true of our old fellow passenger, Augé himself. He puts this succinctly: “Ultime remarque: le monde change et je vieillis. Ces deux mouvements sont évidemment incommensurables, mais les mettre en

²¹ Augé nostalgically laments the breakdown of human contact and communication: “Le passager du métro a perdu au fil des ans toute occasion d’échanger quelques mots avec le conducteur, le vendeur de tickets, le poinçonneur, le chef de station ou le chef de train. Des écrans l’informent” {“Over the years, the métro passenger has lost every occasion to exchange a few words with the driver, the ticket seller, the conductor, the station-master or the train guard. Screens now inform him”} ([7], p. 68).

²² Augé writes: “La télé, l’ordinateur, les écouteurs, les baladeurs et le téléphone portable sont les instruments chaque jour plus élaborés de cette expulsion intime de soi qui caractérise l’individualité contemporaine” {“TV, computer, headphones, personal stereos and mobile phones are the ever more elaborate instruments of this intimate expulsion of the self which characterizes contemporary individuality”} ([7], p. 69).

²³ Against this securitization, Augé stresses the enduring significance of the métro as public space and the locus of everyday encounters with otherness and difference: “Car les transports publics sont aujourd’hui le lieu par excellence dans lequel la notion d’espace public garde un sens. C’est à l’intérieur des rames en mouvement et dans les stations où l’on change de ligne ou de moyen de transport que l’espace public affirme son existence de manière éventuellement contradictoire. L’espace public, si l’on entend par là l’espace concret où tout le monde croise tout le monde, mais aussi l’espace abstrait où se forme l’opinion publique, est identifié pour une large part à l’espace des transports publics” {“For public transport today is the locus par excellence in which the notion of public space still retains some sense. It is in the interior of moving trains and in the stations where people change lines or mode of transport that public space affirms its existence in a perhaps contradictory manner. Public space, if we understand by that not only the concrete space wherein everyone crosses everyone else, but also the abstract space where public opinion forms, is largely identified with the space of public transport”} ([7], pp. 61–62).

parallèle permet de s’interroger sur le sens et la réalité de ce que nous appelons contemporanéité” {“Final remark: the world is changing and I am ageing. These two movements are obviously incommensurable but to place them in parallel allows us to ask ourselves about the meaning and the reality of what we call contemporaneity”} ([7], p. 9). Nevertheless, while this social, political and economic critique of the present-day Parisian cityscape forms the centre-piece of Augé’s revisit, it is certainly not what is most important. To focus on these, albeit acute, insights would be to forget the importance and the complications of memory: “Ecrire,” Augé insists, “en effet, c’est faire une expérience ambivalente du temps” {“To write, in effect, is to have an ambivalent experience of time”} ([7], p. 21). Indeed, this return to an earlier work produces a complex textual ambiguity and personal duplication. If, in 1986, Augé constructs himself as an anthropological informant through an act of imaginative doubling, becoming the subject/object of enquiry as auto-fiction, in revisiting this book, there is a further, this time temporal, separation: not just the duality of researcher and researched, but these two complementary positions now perceived in retrospect through the lens of time, the then and the now, combining in a ‘double optic’. The author revisits not just his past, but his past as it appeared to him at a particular moment in the past, a former past, a past-past so to speak. In short: he revisits himself. Here, the significance of the word ‘revisit’ becomes apparent, for what is this curious doubling, but a kind of spectrality,²⁴ a kind of haunting? This haunting works both ways: what was in 1986 anticipates the now in its seeming inevitability; and the contemporary remembers the then, looking for that “tiny spark of contingency” ([1], p. 510) as Benjamin puts it in his ‘Little History of Photography’ in which the one (the then and there) speaks eloquently across time to the other (the here and now). Augé searches for the traces of himself, becomes his own ghost. In so doing, his realization, his “final remark”, is profoundly moving. Paradoxically, in revisiting *Un ethnologue dans le metro*, in creating this ‘double optic’, Augé now encounters the quotidian spaces of the subway, like a stranger who has not set foot underground for twenty years:

“Il retrouverait vite son métro, en somme, comme il nous arrive de retrouver, sous les traits vieillis d’un ami depuis longtemps perdu de vue, le sourire du gamin que nous avons connu” {“All in all, he would quickly rediscover his métro, just as we somehow rediscover in the altered features of a long-lost friend the smile of the lad we once knew”} ([7], p. 19).

This smiling child has a name: Marc Augé.

7. Epilogue: Constellations

If, as Theodor W. Adorno once said, “all reification is a forgetting”, then let us not forget the work and significance of memory for Augé. Let us, then, change lines and return, not to the disorienting figure of the labyrinth, peopled with the poetry and shades of lovers, but to the seemingly more prosaic notion of mapping. By way of conclusion, there is another Benjaminian figure I wish to invoke with the aid of a ‘memory machine’ of my own: the London underground map. As a Londoner, I am privileged to see in this famous diagram the many sites of my childhood and youth, my regular comings and goings, which I can still recount, following Augé, like an incantation: Walthamstow Central, Blackhorse Road, Tottenham Hale, Seven Sisters, Finsbury Park, Highbury and Islington,

²⁴ This term captures both the sense of visitation and vision.

Kings Cross, Euston, Warren Street, Oxford Street, Green Park, Victoria. For me, the unknown would begin at Pimlico; but, there was no Pimlico, not then. The original Victoria Line is my rosary bead. I see also a later change of lines (Leyton, Stratford, Mile End). I see the many stations that are just a name to me, but also those few coincidences and correspondences that are filled with memories of past encounters, of meetings, of assignations, of rendezvous, of quarrels, of partings, of reunions, of the at first sight and at last sight. Looking at the map today, revisiting London, the city I left just as *Un Ethnologue dans le metro* was first published in France 27 years ago, the whole thing seems curiously off-kilter, eccentric: there has been a shift to make space for whole new sections that go under the name of Docklands Light Railway. The Jubilee Line has curled back across the river to Stratford, now ennobled with the designation ‘International’. However, for all these changes, certain station names still conjure up moments, experiences, faces from the past. I can see these points now as if they were lit up on the map like the various way-stations of Lenin’s revolutionary journey illuminated by the touch of a button on a machine that Benjamin tinkers with during his wintry sojourn in Moscow ([1], p. 32). There used to be something similar on the London Underground, too—a button to show ‘you are here’ and your destination. I look at the tube map, and these sites stand out. Can you not see them? They are right before your eyes? So many little points of light that form not a curriculum vitae, but, rather, another bio-graphical figure, a spatial-temporal pattern of my past for mimetic reading: a constellation. As Benjamin reminds us: when one goes underground, how quickly one forgets the sky above!

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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