

Visuality in Pre-revolutionary Paris: Examining Louis Sebastien Mercier's *Tableau de Paris*

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Abstract

*This article aspires to survey the way in which Louis Sebastien Mercier used description in *Tableau de Paris* to make commentary on social theatre. A close reading of visuality, the gaze, and the representation of spectacle, warrants a renewed understanding in the ways in which Mercier's rhetoric uses visuality as a tool of pedagogy, a method of constructing personhood and citizenship. This tool helped Mercier bring to bear the issues of social inequality, class division, economic hardship, and class conflict that underpinned pre-revolutionary tensions. Examining the work through this unique lens helps us contextualize his philosophy with that of his contemporaries and understand the emerging public sphere where individuals interacted with all forms of spectacle, from theatre to public appearance.*

Keywords: Pre-revolutionary, Contemporaries, *Tableau de Paris*, Human diversity



Figure 1: Réverbères (Library of Congress)

Written in installments between 1782 and 1788 Mercier's *Tableau de Paris* is a grandiose work of prose which topographically and subjectively examines all echelons of Parisian society. As an Enlightened thinker, Mercier aimed to show the prerevolutionary city as it was a spark away from total chaos. Consisting of more than two thousand chapters, Mercier's ambitious *tableau of Paris*, designed to be a singular painting, was meant to realistically describe all details of daily life, providing a route perspective which situates the reader in the shoes of the observer. The above image lays bare the direct relationship between the physical space and the visual sphere, placing Mercier in the role a semiotician who translates to the reader all that he can see. As the street light, or *réverbère*, in the center of the above gravure suggests, the visual sphere expanded with the introduction of oil lanterns, ones which shed considerably much brighter light than their predecessor. As a result of illuminating previously unseen activities, the physical environment becomes entangled in the moral and political domain, where

the same lampposts become a popular place to hang aristocrats during the revolution (1789-1799).¹ Consequently, a close reading of the work uncovers the ways in which Mercier functions as commentator, cataloger of the urban space and master storyteller. Mercier was uniquely positioned to do this as he himself was born into the petite bourgeoisie, whose father worked as a skilled furbisher. This social station placed Mercier in the middle of society, where he could at once, be critical towards, and engaged with, the public at large.

As part of his focus on the visual and its interplay in society it is vital to analyze the role of theatre and spectacle, as it was quickly becoming more accessible to the general public and played a large part in the visual interaction of *tiers-état* and the bourgeoisie. Mercier was not the first thinker to experiment with this connection; during the Enlightenment era there was increased interest in and exploration of the human mind and body (Condillac, La Mettrie, Hume), natural history and human diversity (Comte de Buffon, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck), the evolution of human civilization, arts and culture, and political institutions (Rousseau, Montesquieu), and the existence of natural rights (Diderot). In this way the links between sense perceptions were explored along with many other facets of human functioning—speech, judgment, imagination, empathy—as well as their implication for morality and politics. As the empirical interest shifted toward the examination of the machinations of the human brain, a new interest emerged that questioned experience and emotion informed new and different ways of knowing.²

This led to the emergence of the idea of cultivating *sensibilité*, a notion which directly related the field of sentimental moral philosophy to sense perception, and became literary and philosophical movement.³ This interest in the physical senses contributed development of new genres and spheres of interest, one of which concentrated on the visual gaze that was held by the spectator, the excesses and functions of which were debated in the literary word by the likes of Abbé Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* and Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse*. Concurrently, on the scientific front, Denis Diderot's and Jean le Rond d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* followed this trend, featuring entries for *oeil*, *perception* and a lengthy treatise on *astrologie*.⁴ The interest in bodily and emotional mechanics further engendered scientific and philosophical study as well as innovations in art forms in which the rhetoric of which the visual sphere became a foundation, in particular, the theatre. Throughout the eighteenth-century, the urban theater-going public grew along with number and types of venues for taking in plays and operas (royal [Comédie Française], commercial, local and private).⁵ The general audiences, or *le grand public*, became an increasingly powerful arbiter of taste and commercial success of theatrical productions. As well, common people were represented in art (Jean Siméon Chardin) and on the stage (Beaumarchais, Diderot) without being subjects of mockery, as had been the practice on comedies by Molière and others. What is more, discussions of educating this general public through different means, including the theater became more frequent subjects of debate.

As a result, these cultural and philosophical shifts fostered changes in theaters as physical spaces. Theater entrances for the public were made more accessible as the forestage was pushed back by the mid-eighteenth century. Unlike the theatres of England, the larger area in the pit expanded to form the *parterre*, which remained a standing area until 1782.⁶ In this section, admission cost was equivalent of a days' salary⁷ for manual workers. Increased accessibility and proximity to the stage made the *parterre* a participatory space, especially for individuals who part of this *tiers-état*: the price of admission was all that was necessary to participate in the theatrical experience and by extension the larger discussion. The placement and participation of the *parterre* also fostered changes on the stage itself, loosening the grip of neoclassical doctrine regarding the three unities and the *bienséances* while encouraging more elaborate and frequent changes in set design.

These changes in the world of theater had political implications.⁸ In his commentary on the *parterre*, Jeffrey S. Ravel describes it as a space for congregation and assembly⁹ where, for the first time, the common folk dictated the outcome of the day, stating that the "spectators who stood in the *parterre*...influenced and were influenced by, efforts to redefine French political sovereignty in terms of the nation."¹⁰ Theaters became places to see and to be seen and spaces in which members of all three orders of French society could observe one another and

¹ Fierro, A., 2001.

² Condillac, E. B., Carr, G., & Carr, H. W., 1980.

³ As a result, there was an increase of scholarship and popularity in the sphere of intuitive knowledge. Accordingly, for the first time in literary and academic dialogue, the emotional response emerged as a sphere of knowledge that reconciled two seemingly opposite cognitive domains: passion and reason.

⁴ University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project, 2017.

⁵ Popkin; 1999, p.6

⁶ The Comédie-Française installed seats in the *parterre* 178 and the Comédie-Italienne on 1788, while the Paris Opera kept the *parterre* standing throughout the Revolution

⁷ Lagrave, H., *Le théâtre et le public à Paris de 1715 à 1750*. 1972.

⁸ Modern historians (Mona Ozouf, David Bell, Deana Goodman, and Daniel Gordon) have developed a hypothesis that shows how the creation of this new public sphere led to as development of an emergent "public opinion" one which the Old Regime considered dangerous.

⁹ Ravel, J., 1999. 10-11

¹⁰ Ibid.

track one another's reactions to the action on stage. Theater architecture reflected and furthered this practice with its horseshoe shape that allowed theater-goers to see each other as well as the main performance. Architects like Claude Nicolas Ledoux explicitly adopted this concept promoting their theatrical designs, claiming "In my playhouse, the spectator sees better while being better seen".¹¹

With the emergence of a broader audience, rejection of classicist rules, and the growing popularity of more accessible theatres, philosophers and writers alike expressed their opposing views on this seismic cultural shift. Rousseau, for example, aligned himself with other antitheatrical polemicists¹² while Diderot developed the idea of educating the masses by bringing realism to the main stage in the form of his *drame bourgeois*. It is important to note that this period was also marked by a transition in performance style, which evolved away from stilted neoclassical declamation on stage toward more realistic, emotive representation. Voltaire, for example, credited his favorite actors, like Henri Louis Cain, for the great successes of his tragedies.¹³

As a playwright writing in this dynamic theatrical milieu, Mercier fully understood the influence of visuality and the impact that spectacle has on the viewer. As a result, he viewed performance, or more importantly, dramatic stage presentation, as a unique way to reach and educate the masses on all spheres of human knowledge.¹⁴ From a point of ethical engagement, he advocated enthusiastically for the theatrical plot to be created as singular form of action¹⁵ that was easily followed by the spectator and accurately spoke to their experiences.¹⁶ As such, Mercier's interest in the impact and uses of visual spectacle was foundational for his approach to description.

An innovation in genre, this work brought together several characteristics that we have discussed. The educational power of theatrical performance is channeled into a text-based, narrative form through which general audiences can engage in realistic portrayals of—and socio-political questions relating to—life in Paris. The direct visual perception of a spectator watching theater is recreated in the reader's imagination. With each vignette Mercier thus intended to engage the reader's ethical imagination with the goal of engaging the public in critical questions. Much like spectators in the theater, the audience for this work would reserve the right to make their own judgements on the imaginary painting and visual relationships that he created. Mercier developed these by exploring these visual relationships with inclusion of the emergent working class, where the *tiers-état* became a participant in the action of the story.

The Role of Visuality in Characterizing Paris

Truly a picture of private manners in Paris, but presented on the dark side and a little darkened moreover. But there is so much truth in its ground work that it will be well worth your reading. You will then know Paris, (and probably the other large cities of Europe) as well as if you had been here years."- Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 1802¹⁷

As the quote above suggests, Mercier positions the reader as the decisive judge and viewer of the action being described, with Mercier acting as the ultimate moral commentator, political philosopher, and critic. Written on the eve of the revolution, Mercier penned the work as a successor to *Du théâtre* (1773) and to *L'An 2440* (1770), both of which were meant to commentate on social and philosophical dilemmas. As a result of having a gifted memory, Mercier's urban journal is able to frequently criticize the inequalities in Parisian society through the lens of an active citizen that scrutinizes its every detail; a flaneur role that he developed for himself.

Within this context of philosopher-citizen he aimed to reveal all the underlying layers beneath the pink-hued haziness and luxury of the capital city, which he characterized as an abyss into which the human species merges; that one is not free to leave, except under the permission of Argus Panoptes, a Greek multi-eyed giant.¹⁸ His goal was then to produce an authentic painting that shows the city for what it was, an image that was

¹¹ Quoted in Jacques Rittaud-Hutinet's *La Vision d'un futur: Ledoux et ses theatres* as referenced by Ravel, J., 1993 essay *Seating the Public* that focuses on the discussion of the Besançon theatre within the context of the parterre.

¹² Rousseau, J., & Scott, J. T., 2012.

¹³ Carlson, M.A. 1998. 87-113.

¹⁴ Brown, D, 2005.

¹⁵ Carlson, M. A. 2000, 158-159.

¹⁶ In this philosophical frame Mercier supported Diderot's new conception of the drame and critiqued the classical French tragédie as both non-natural and fruitless. Describing his advocating for theatre's modernization, Joanna Stalnaker¹⁶ notes that Mercier's critique of the three unities also had a broader aesthetic implication for his practice of description and role of descripteur. She writes that his global description unfolded over time, offered varying points of view and reconfigured the space along with the reader. I suggest that, while Stalnaker may be speaking of Mercier's work in the genre of descripteur, it is valuable to also see how visual elements contribute to the reading of the Tableau as a theatrical work, where Mercier's commentary forms the role of *chorus*. It is valuable to establish this point of view because so much of Mercier's gaze as the author lies around the notion of the observer, encouraging them to partake in his textual experiment with their imagination.

¹⁷ Jefferson, T. 1802 Source: The Jefferson Papers

¹⁸ Mercier, L. -S., 1783. T., "Grandeur démesurée de la Capitale". Tome I, Volume I, 8-9

sometimes invisible to its own occupants; “Many of its inhabitants are like outsiders in their own city...The things we see every day are not those we understand the best.”¹⁹ In this way his vignettes stand apart from other works of his time as they meticulously describe the colors, characters, and urban sounds to their minutiae, with him repeating to the reader that in the Parisian streets “all the senses are constantly stimulated...how can one’s mind remain inactive?”²⁰

Mercier’s objective became to recreate a single authentic image within the reader’s imagination, one which was a true recreation of his times and could be used for future study. As a result of this objective Mercier’s formation as an author and flaneur was specifically tied to his effort to meticulously depict all level of detail in day to day life; he intended to visually, through the use of specific language, lay bare the inequalities and striking contradictions in urban markets and trades found in Les Halles, Marchés, Bastille, and Le Faubourg Saint-Marcel, in which he saw of eight distinct social classes.

In order to develop his philosopher persona Mercier wanted to steer away from the trend of following the rigidity of classical antiquity in his writing and instead chose to veer towards the sphere of metaphysical thought, wanting to focus alternately on the intricacies of evidence found in the urban landscape, within personal experiences, and moments of visual *exchange*. His ultimate intention was to produce literary and theatrical works that lead the improvement of life for Parisians. This meant creating a schema that educated the reader with the vignettes flowing in and out of each other, creating similarity in patterns which ultimately force an inductive reasoning. In his own reflection, regarding the goal of this project he wrote;

Mon contemporain, mon compatriote, voilà l'individu que je dois spécialement connaître, parce que je dois communiquer avec lui, et que toutes les nuances de son caractère me deviennent par-là même infiniment précieuses....²¹

This statement forms the basis of his argument; if one is to understand his purpose then one can better recognize the intricacies of his writing process in the *Tableau* and dissect intentional and intuitive principles within the visual sphere. His focus on the importance of education and enlightenment of the general public was closely tied to the viewpoints of his contemporaries, largely parroting ideas from Rousseau, Diderot and Baron d'Holbach. However, in forming his own visual rhetoric he came to believe that a person’s surroundings had a specific influence on their morality and social well-being.

For this reason, everything in the *Tableau* carries political weight; one can notice the importance given to specific physical objects like street signs, graves, sanitation, pavement, carriages, flower pots, and monuments. Mercier described these objects in detail as he saw that they not only greatly influenced the Parisian’s citizen’s daily experience but also had the ability to alter their enculturation of a moral ideal and educate them in all matters of life’s truths.

He thus tied the action of seeing and imagining to the sensation feeling and experiencing. Mercier sets wanted to set the example through the advocacy of using one’s intuitive nature. This feeling was prescribed as a compass that could help one recognize right and wrong within the busy spectacle of city life. To better convey these messages Mercier chose to write his novels, reflections, plays and pamphlets in prose so that his ideas were clearly understood by all citizens; believing his works to be guiding lights that would offer the reader an opportunity for visual and moral examination. In this context, Mercier sought to emphasize the didactic form. As a result, the *Tableau* should be regarded as a prism; where viewership and visibility, within the entwined stories of its featured *personnages*, represent both observation and the act of being observed.

In consequence, the work places the reader in a world that paradoxically holds both enlightenment and artificiality. By and of itself, this type of analysis elicits a moral reading of power structure, where using the reader’s imagination, Mercier leads them on a peregrination where “everything should interest the attentive observer”²². As such, each detailed and unreserved observation completes a piece of the larger moral puzzle, not through a direct ethical and political criticism, but through a technique of opposing gazes, where Mercier purposely places the reader in a unique position of observer and arbiter.

In this way Mercier’s urban compendium transcends sociological barriers—it was able to combine the performative nature of the theatre with the discursive aspects of political culture. Authentically speaking, his attempt to recreate one single general painting of the vibrant figures of Paris separates his work from the 18th century critical conception of Aristotelian mimesis^{23,24} as well the movement that sought to sacrifice truthful

¹⁹ Mercier, L. -S., 1789. *T.*, “Préface”. Jeremy Popkin translation 23-28

²⁰ Mercier, L. -S., 1789. *T.*, “Coup d’œil général”. Jeremy Popkin translation 29-32

²¹ Mercier, L. -S., 1783, *T.*, “Préface”. Tome I, vij-xvj

²² Mercier, L. -S., 1789, *T.*, “Coup d’œil général”.J. Popkin translation. 29-32

²³ Henry Booke (*Universal Beauty*, 1735) , Henry Felton (*Dissertation on the Classics*, 1713)

²⁴ M. Kelly, 1999, “In 17th and early 18th century conceptions of aesthetics, mimesis is bound to the imitation of (empirical and idealized) nature. Aesthetic theory emphasized the relationship of mimesis to artistic expression and began to embrace interior, emotive, and subjective images and representations.”

representation in favor of beauty.²⁵ However, despite his seemingly divergent conversations towards the role of seeing and being seen, Mercier is acutely aware of the role of the viewer as a necessary participant in any instance of production and evolution, one which he also uses for his own advantage. To this end, his critique for the ethics of policy of the Old Regime was tied to his understanding of physical space, viewership, and how it relates to the treatment of the working class.

Conclusively, it is important to expand on the interdisciplinarity of pre-revolutionary discourse as it treated visuality and imagination. Underlining the plurality of arts and sciences, this discourse aligns itself with the universality of Enlightenment thought where the visual is inextricably tied to different fields. As Mercier separated theory and practice his debate for the ethics of policy of the Old Regime was tied with his understanding and representation of the revolutionary public. In using a gaze that is both critical and reconstructive, Mercier advocated for the agency of a new citizen; visual vocabulary is his way to give credence to and converse with, all echelons of social class. Rebuffing the rigidity of classical literary structure, Mercier's unique prose let him enter bluntly in the *ut pictura poesis* debate, creating a strong precedent for his contemporaries and future realists. In this way the *Tableau* is Mercier's hope that the reader will make good on their end of the contract; campaigning against inequalities, advocating for isonomy, economic parity, and urban reform.

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²⁵ Lawrence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*