



## Urban space, gaze, and flaneur: A critical reading of the photographs of

Vivian Maier

Srijani Dutta

Independent Researcher; Chandannagar, Hooghly, West Bengal, India

### Introduction

Vivian Maier is one of the critically acclaimed women photographers of America. Her works engage with the urban streets and human beings depicting the tales and relationships of different types. Her characters constantly make a critical and stimulating interaction with the urban spaces. Her women characters become the active gazer (s) along with the male characters. Consequently, her photographs capture the different shades and shadows of America. American literature is a broad umbrella that shelters many genres and sub-themes. Since the beginning of the civilization, literature has been maintaining an intricate crossover with visual arts. Literature broadly means poetry, drama, novel, stories etc. This essay tries to display how photography interweaves a melodious and inseparable bond with literature by focusing on the literariness of the photographs. This essay attempts to read the representation of the urban places, gaze, streets, human beings and their intricate symbiosis in the works of Vivian Maier's photography.

Photography is one of the activities or creative practices that people belonging to different ages, more or less, do either with sheer curiosity or with professional interest. It exemplifies itself to be a tool of technology that freezes time and motion. Photography is a process of capturing moments or documenting something as if one is counting one's breathing. The clicks of the camera show how the photographer breaks the scenario or time into pieces and makes a story out of it. Vivian Maier, the American soul is one of the pioneers in the field of street and portrait photography. She has documented or more specifically recorded the urban life with streets, buildings, pedestrians, vehicles etc. Most of her photographs mirror the intricacies of urbanity, movement of the city life and most importantly, she tries to interweave the relationship between the city and herself. Space and motion become the two primordial elements of her photography. Still life images become the narrative when it captures a story. In this essay, I will try to do a thematic study of her photographs by focusing on space, flaneur, and gaze.



### Reading flaneur, urbanity and gaze in her photographs:

Her photographs philosophize the city as a site of paradoxes. It showcases the flamboyant parts of the city as well as the underbelly of it. While doing so, she becomes the flaneur and her works also assert thoughts and opinions about the relationship between women gaze and city.

1. How does Vivian depict the city life in her photographs? In what way, does her work capture the space and streets of American urbanity?
2. How does she become the flaneuse and while doing so, how she represents women in her photographs?
3. What is her contribution to the field of photography and specifically in the theoretical understanding or the academic study of photography?
4. How does she interweave the relationship among city, street, women and gaze?

This essay attempts to give a descriptive, qualitative study of her photographs. The textual study of Vivian's works focusing on the theoretical understanding of space along with the concept of flaneur, representation of women and gaze construe Vivian's identity as a flaneuse. Flaneur is a stroller who walks and observes the city. The flaneur captures the light and shadow of the urban spaces and tries to unearth the interconnection between city and flaneur. The city/urban poets depict the various shades of the urban spaces in their works. Nissim Ezekiel has depicted the various shades of Bombay in his writings. William Blake has displayed the varied ways of 'seeing' London in his poems. Similarly, Vivian Maier has recorded the colours and cacophonies of American urbanity and places. Her photographs become the illustrated, visual documentation of busy America where the 'city' is always moving. In addition to this, I will also talk about the projection of gaze as the women in her works are photographed by a woman. In this regard, I will use the theoretical frameworks of Mulvey.

Laura Mulvey in her essay shows how the mainstream cinema, the visual text usually represents women as a sexual object and an object of desire and phantasy. In this regard, she has also talked about the alternative cinema, avant garde cinema that do not celebrate women as an erotic objects. Instead, they try to establish the alternative gaze and the different ways of seeing something. These photographs are taken by a female photographer. Therefore, we can find the 'gaze' or the perspective of the woman who represents the american city life. In the following photographs, we can see the representation of impoverished people, workers and at the same time, the street performers, father and son's conversation. Each person maintains different kind of relationship with the street and the urban life. In one picture, the focus is on

the street performer but the camera is placed from behind. Even, the old man carrying the newspaper is not looking straight to the eyes of the photographer. Her works are character driven, figurative and quite evocative in terms of its ability to produce meaning. In all of these images, she plays with passive and active gazes.



Her works reveal the shades of urbanity/ space,



representation of people especially women, interrelationship between individual and streets, motion and how all these things create the narrative/ story as a whole with the usage of technology. Through her photographs, the readers can learn about the society of that time like dresses of women, professions of men and women, their hobbies etc. Chicago, New York, Florida- all become the subject of her photographic study. Through the black and white monochromatic colours, she unearths the movement and stillness of the spaces. Women are mostly active, captured in library premises, reading newspapers, in the gardens etc. The woman in the last photograph is wearing a dark lipstick, probably red and eyeing back to the photographer. There is the exchange of gaze(s) but most of the time, the photographer and the photographed both are active and are exchanging

meaning and interaction.



Chicagoland, date unknown.



Self-portrait, New York, 1954.



Self-portrait, New York, 1953.



Self-portrait, date and location unknown.



New York Public Library, New York, c.  
1952.



New York, 1953.



New York, January 26, 1955.

Through the photograph of public library, she captures the motion and movement of the city. Through the image of a shoe shop, she shows the crowd, population and density of the city. This essay will elaborate the concept of flaneur and the relationship between the flaneur and



urbanity, specifically the relationship with women. It gets candid in her self-portraits where she is having an alternative gaze as well as dialogue with her reflection or shadow(s). In this case, she usually places her camera before the mirror and wants herself to be part of the city/picture.

Flaneur is the 20th concept mainly associated with city life, urbanity and walking. The flaneur is the one who strolls around the streets and maintains an aloof observation while roaming. But, the photographer initially roams and waits for the perfect moment or scene to capture. Therefore, the photographer transforms the aloof gaze into minute observation. It will also discuss how the photographer, in this case, Vivian herself becomes the flaneuse while walking, gazing and photographing. The interesting thing is that most of her women are doing something. They are 'looked at' and photographed by a female photographer. Thus, her photographs critically study the spaces like Chicago, New York and its relation with women, working class people etc. In one word, she photographs what urbanity means to her.

### Conclusion

Reading her photographs is like reading poems penned by Hart Crane, Whitman or T.S. Eliot. In Indian context, it will be the poems of Nissim Ezekiel, Arun Kolatkar. The basic trajectory and ethos of their works is to delve down into the skins of the city, urban life and give meaning to its grand body. A good number of articles, essays examine and analyse the themes of her photographs; record the stylistic comparison between Vivian Maier and Cartier Bresson or Vivian and Helen Levitt. Photography being a technological tool tries to mirror the physical sites that our eyes easily see. But, the question is- what is the role of technology in art or in the broad spectrum of our lives? The answer appears to be subjective but more or less, it bears the same connotation. It justifies itself to be a tool of documentation, preservation of the habits, culture of the particular space as we are living in the digital age. On the other hand, the reason behind taking pictures is to preserve and revisit. Therefore, her photographs become the tool of revisiting the parts of America in that particular time.

### References

#### *Primary texts:*

(2011) Vivian Maier: Street Photographer. Edited by John Maloof. PowerHouse Books.

Maloof, John. (2014) Vivian Maier: A Photographer Found. Harper Design.

<http://www.vivianmaier.com/gallery/self-portraits>

#### *Secondary Texts:*

Elkin, Lauren. (2016) *Flanueuse: Women walk the city in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice*



and London. Random House.

Freeman. Morgan. (2017) *The Photographer's Eyes*. Taylor & Francis.

Sontag. Susan. (1973) *On Photography*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Poe. Edgar. (1840) "The Man of the Crowd." *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*.

Mulvey. Laura. (1975) "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*. Volume 16, issue 3, pg 6-18

<https://share.google/5vto0iE9UtKhP4BXi>

Society Language Culture