

Avenue De L'Observatoire: Organization in a Foggy Paris

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Late one Winter night, a Parisian drives along the Avenue de L'Observatoire. They are forced to continue down the avenue slowly because even their headlights are not powerful enough to reveal a clear path through the fog. Neither the street lamps or the trees can pierce this fog as it adds a film to every rough edge it touches, dulling each and every end point of objects within its reach. In Brassai's 1934 gelatin silver print entitled *Avenue De L'Observatoire*, Brassai captures this moment in time. By utilizing the infamous Parisian fog, Brassai created a work of art that both plays with the viewer's eye and emphasizes the idealization of lines, segmentation, and organization put in place by Georges-Eugène Haussmann during an era of destruction and modernization. Brassai reveals the relationship between the green space's sturdy Haussmannian elements and the fog, all the while encouraging the viewer to question traditional assumptions about Paris.

When first glancing at Brassai's photograph, the viewer's eye is automatically drawn to the car's headlights shining through the fog. This horizontal line creates a separation between the top half of the photograph, the green space, and the bottom half, the street; naturally, the eye wants to focus on the illuminated trees on the top half of the photograph rather than the dark street below. The straight line of the beam of light then persuades the eye to move from right to left and pause briefly in each of three segments of the photograph: the statue, the kiosk, and the bench. Each segment is divided by lines of trees and illuminated by further lines of street lamps; by choosing to photograph these lines at a diagonal angle, Brassai is able to show the division of the space, while emphasizing the continuation of the numerous types of lines in many directions. In total, there are seven variations of lines in the photograph including the car headlights' beam of light, the tree trunks, the bare branches of the trees, the park bench's pieces of plywood, the outline of the kiosk, the lamp posts, and the rows of trees and lamp posts that fade into the distance. Each element's line slices the photograph into sections and organizes it in a way that is pleasing to the eye. This is especially true with objects like the trees that reach the edges of the photograph. Viewers can even imagine the bench and kiosk's lines extending outwards because of how dark and solid their outlines appear in comparison to the grey fog. While in person, the scene would be divided only by the solid elements such as the trees and the street lamps, photography was able to capture the element that makes this photograph so unique: fleeting light.

The foggy lighting of the photograph adds a softness to Brassai's work that even the harsh lines of the tree branches are unable to escape. The Paris fog is draped over each element, and rather than focusing his camera for a precise photograph, Brassai chooses to emphasize the blurry effect of the weather and take advantage of its rare visual outcomes. Rather than a beam of light hitting one precise point in the photograph, each beam is able to spread outwards by bouncing off of the water particles in the air. The stretching light also fills the normally empty, dark spaces of the green space with a film of faint greys. As the light reaches into the empty spaces of the photograph, it

encourages the viewer’s eye to follow the lines of trees and lamp posts into the background, increasing the depth of the photograph; just as the fog has no boundaries or end destination, neither do the lines of trees or lamp posts as they appear to go on forever into the distance. Similar to the sharp tree branches being smoothed over in the dim mist, these continuous lines of posts and trunks are no longer visually precise as well. To achieve this fading effect in photography, the photographer must focus on a single point in the foreground.

As the focus sharpens, the elements in the background begin to appear fuzzy. Brassai did not need to focus his camera on a point in the foreground to achieve this effect because he simply relied on the visual effect of the fog that naturally caused the foreground to appear sharper than the background. Furthermore, thanks to continuous improvements to shutter speeds on cameras, Brassai had the opportunity to take this photograph at night and capture the prominent comparison between dark and light. In this photograph, however, the two extremes appear to blend together into a mist of grey, rather than simply black and white. Two areas in the photograph where absolute light and dark persist against the fog are the pitch-black road and the bright white headlights and lamp post lights; from these starting point extremes, the photograph then begins to fade into a foggy grey.

Through his photograph, Brassai depicts Paris as an overcast city in Winter that lacks a night life. Known for being a foggy city, it comes as no surprise that Brassai was able to capture Paris in such a mysterious, calm atmosphere. This constant fog affects the viewer’s experience with the photograph because it alters the mood of the scene, however. Rather than a lively, beautiful city to be explored as depicted in many paintings by artists such as Monet and Renoir, Paris appears to be sullen and quiet. Without any repeatedly depicted elements of Paris such as the Moulin Rouge windmill or the Eiffel Tower, it would be difficult for a viewer lacking geographical knowledge of Paris to identify the location shown in the photograph. The only element that Brassai leaves for potential identification of the location is the Michel Ney monument on the right, located in the 6th arrondissement of Paris; even this is so shrouded in fog that it is practically impossible to identify. This communicates to the viewer that Brassai did not in fact want to emphasize the precise location in Paris, but rather the *type* of location: the green space. Our focus is drawn to the organization of this space through straight, clean lines, rather than the scenery itself.

When the urban planner Georges-Eugène Haussmann was hired by Emperor Napoleon III, one of his primary interests was the creation of parks and green spaces throughout Paris. During the early to mid 19th century, Paris was “perceived as a dangerous, unhealthy, and frustratingly difficult place to inhabit”⁶⁹. In Haussmann’s opinion, wide roads such as the Avenue De L’Observatoire would bring fresh air into the city, and the green spaces would act as “lungs”, ventilating the clean air for the Paris population⁷⁰. While the green space pictured in Brassai’s photograph is not one of Haussmann’s larger developments such as the Luxembourg gardens or the Parc Monceau,⁷¹ small green spaces like this one act as important clean-air connections for pedestrians between streets and buildings. Without hesitation, Haussmann re- created all of Paris through his vision of straight lines and clear organization. Even small parts of Paris such as the green space pictured did not escape Haussmann’s attention. We see these effects of

⁶⁹ Colin Jones, *Paris: The Biography of a City* (New York, NY, Penguin Books, 2006), 304.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 309

⁷¹ Ibid., 313

Hausmannization in the orderly rows of trees and street lamps that line the green space. Similar to the maps of Paris created after Hausmannization, this photograph is segmented into simple squares and rectangles; for example, the center square with the kiosk is lined on all three sides by the car’s light shining through the fog and the two trees closest to the Avenue de L’Observatoire reaching towards the top of the photograph. Even the weather appears to be aiding Hausmann’s vision.

When looking at Brassai’s print and seeing the dense fog that sheathes the physical elements of the scene, the viewer’s eye naturally wants to find something concrete to settle on. While the dim glow within the fog is mystifying, the pattern of rows and lines that remain visible in the fog are what continue to draw the eye back in. If Brassai had altered the angle of his photograph by capturing the scene straight on from the front, he would have eliminated the majority of the depth of the photograph; from this angle, the emphasis is on the lines of trees and lamp posts that stretch into the background. In this fog, every element appears to continue onward forever because the fog hides all harsh, clear edges on objects. The tree branches slowly fade at the tips, never revealing their exact end point. The beams of light have no limit as they extend onto countless water particles and spread into dark areas of the photograph. There is no escaping this dissolving effect. Even Hausmann’s stiff organization is softened by the fog because the viewer is no longer able to clearly see the straight lines of trees and lamp posts; rather, we assume they continue into the background because the fog stretches the light of the lamp posts into the distance as well, creating more depth.

The fog also forces the viewer to make assumptions about the location within the photograph. Contrary to popular belief associated with countless impressionistic paintings, Paris is not always a lovely place filled to the brim with families and couples out for a stroll. Many onlookers would assume that this photograph is not in fact showing Paris because of the gloom and emptiness that it depicts. The only elements that viewers are able to use for identification are the weather, the well-organized green space, and the blurry Michel Fey monument. Brassai did not want the associated stereotypes of bright colors and crowds that come with recognizing Paris to keep the viewer from noticing the most important elements of the photograph: the fog’s effect on emphasizing *continuous* lines, segmentation, and organization within the scene. In many ways, the fog helps each line stretch on forever, as they slowly fade into a dim grey.