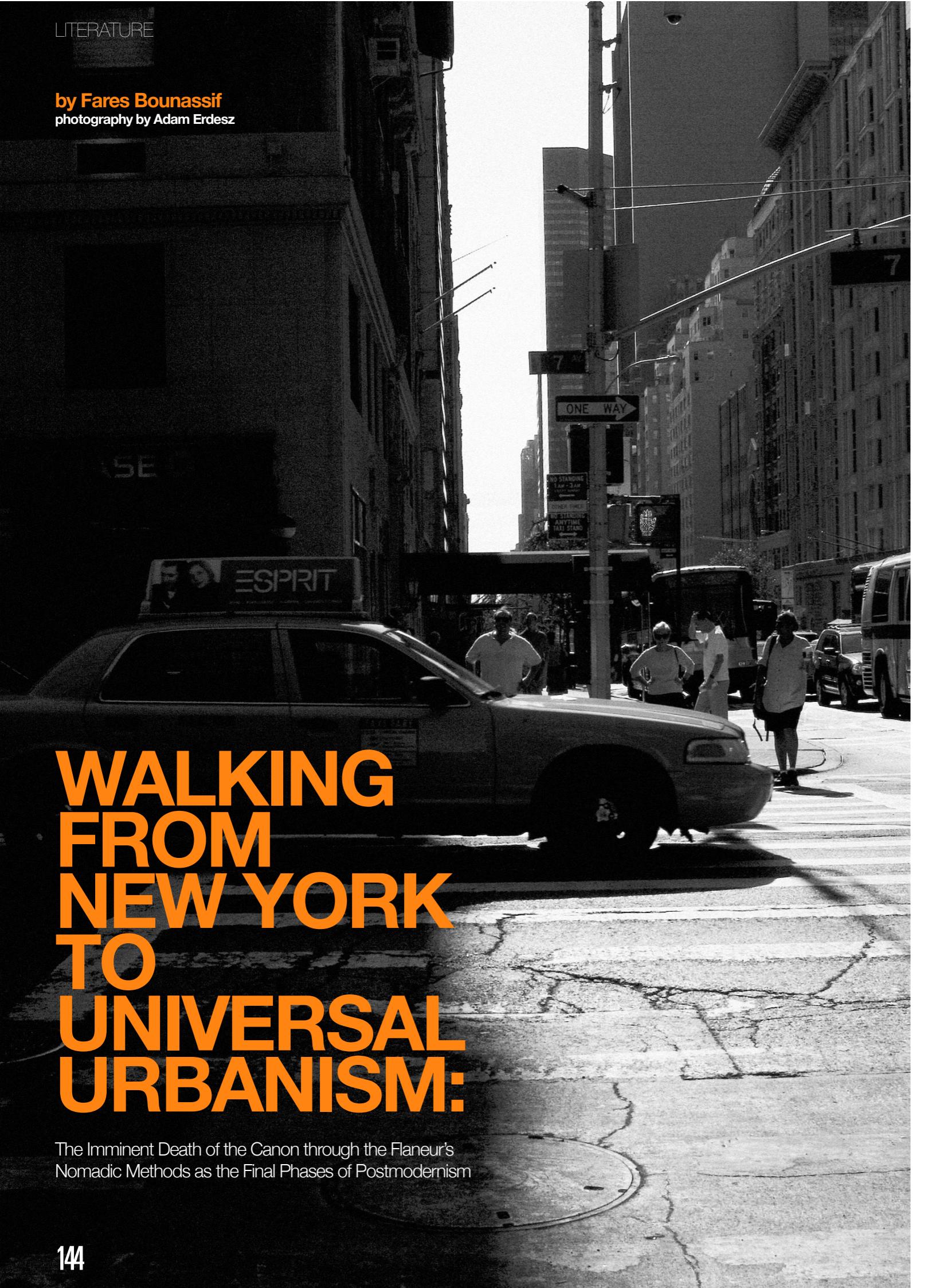


by Fares Bounassif
photography by Adam Erdesz

WALKING FROM NEW YORK TO UNIVERSAL URBANISM:

The Imminent Death of the Canon through the Flaneur's Nomadic Methods as the Final Phases of Postmodernism



Looking around us, both literally and metaphorically, we find that we live in a highly globalized, intensely populated world of metropolises. Even those that live in small towns are connected to the immense cosmopolitan social groups of the world: they read the same texts, or can, they absorb the same media, they speak a language used in at least one of the international urban centres, their communication and erudition comes from the same cultural mass that we can see with all clarity throughout the planet. The characteristics of these urban populations are the most interesting and essential elements of modernity, from which we can glean a complete (if absolutes are at all possible) understanding of the currency through which we function and exist.

We have, in the span of two centuries, lost our ability to be free, our right to privacy, through our need for safety, stability, accomplishment, and praise. They would tell you: gone are the days of premature deaths, to hell with unjust punishment, and nobody starves to death any more. They also ask you, in return, to conscientiously give them your freedoms through the verbal contract that supersedes the paper signed by their functional ancestors centuries ago: they have reclaimed your rights, but this time they have done it with your permission.

So, in turn, you walk through the streets of your urban sprawls, wasted and disillusioned, in search of a new truth, some sense of revelation that has been long lost after the many disappointments the institutions that are to offer you security and salvation have thrown your way. You search for a guide within the big cities, hopeful that one day such a beacon will rise from the dust that settles on sidewalks overnight. Your intellect tries to resist your innate, inane desire to stride for the truth, while constantly failing – until you become one of the many obscure, elusive truths that others follow in search of the same. You walk, constantly, in order to subconsciously create a culture of anti-panopticism that would, eventually, retrieve that emancipation that democracy and capitalism have long ago lost.

We troll the streets, moving from one place to the next, living as would a settled nomad, touching on this, tasting that, glimpsing the other, until we have briefly established a blurry, panoramic view of our immediate society, until we have momentarily forgone our attachments to our world and become a silent, invisible observer, as does Quinn by the end of

obscurity in a text? The little things that one would find redundant or irrelevant to a grand idea in a novel, the distractions in a text that would be considered insignificant by those that are attempting to find a signified as opposed to the multitude of signifiers: these are the Quinns of our literature and our world; these are the true pleasures of walking in the city.



Paul Auster's City of Glass, before his complete disappearance in that dark room in the Stillman apartment.

How could he manage to hide so well in that tiny alley, such that nobody would notice he was there; nobody seemed to even consider looking in his direction? Everybody saw him, thought him another of the many bums in the city, and moved on; somebody saw him, recognized him, but thought it impossible it was him and was too busy to check since time was important to them and wasting it questioning a man that could have, or have not, been the lonely, reclusive writer with no friends, Quinn; nobody noticed him, since they have no reason to stare into dark alleys. There are many likelihoods, each of which is equally vague and disappointing. How can we, the progressively nomadic, be blind to the most essential and real nomads of our own city, of our own texts?

For if Quinn was a thread in a book (is he not already?), would we have noticed him had he been as intentionally hidden as some particular

< We live in a highly globalized, intensely populated world of metropolises. >

It is gradually becoming untrue for us to say that we the urbanists do not notice these pleasures; it is becoming rather the norm for us to stroll around the streets of our cities, looking for a new idea and a modern thought. When we read, some of us have even learnt to read into the details, to take pleasure in the text itself rather than attempt to aspire for a greater truth. We now sit in a modern society, a postmodern urbanism that has destroyed prior conceptions. A ten year old will, today, question the validity of your statements due to that child's personal understanding and evaluation of a situation: some call this misbehaviour, others applaud it as a final release from the subjugation of the individual and the overpopulation of yes-men.

With the new culture of doubt, the recent rise of a culture of the intelligent, comes a new problem: the people have lost an iconic leadership of thought; they now have to rely on patterns of their own, a responsibility they are not familiar with and often not prepared for. Quinn walks through New York, trying to discover the hidden truth behind Stillman, eventually deciding there has to be one and hiding in the alley in wait of it to reveal itself. Except, it never does. He returns home, only to find he has no home. He eventually decides to settle in the Stillman apartments, in the darkest room of the house, waiting for his inevitable death. In essence, he gives up.

How does one make sense of this? Quinn feels betrayed. He relied on the authority of the canon that was the Stillman's, the historicity of the work of the detective, certain that there would be a light at the end of the tunnel. Instead, he ended up with a text of shallow thoughts and words, written in an untitled red notebook, carrying no real authority and almost no judgement or opinion throughout. This perplexed him, making him lose his identity as he poured more of himself into his subject. We can consider his persistent stubbornness to stick to old and tried methods similar to those of us that refuse to evolve; we see the most obvious example in the text that is created by Quinn in the Red notebook. Besides the obvious association of the colour of the notebook to the Marxist (or Communist) clash of the classes and the implied break in the status quo that is heavily seen throughout this text, there is a rhizomatic, nomadic, and simplistic character to the shallowness and nonjudgmental natures of the writings.

Quinn is faced with a fact that most of us find ourselves approaching every time we try to venture out of the System, each time we find original thought in the masses of conformity and simulations. You carry a thought out of the expected allowed boundaries, it becomes a dangerous, heretical simulacrum with no perceivable simulation. It scares you, since it is foreign to you. It isolates you, since nobody would be willing to understand - or maybe you would quite radically convince yourself that nobody would be, out of fear or lack of resolve to follow through. You, like Quinn, would position yourself in a room, seated in one position, becoming an artefact to be wondered about but not returned to. With this, we find a new death and a new resurrection. Quinn's ultimate death is inevitable, from the days he begins to lose himself in the case and the elder Stillman. Except, what was Stillman Sr. trying to accomplish, with his long, seemingly meaningless, walks around New York?

He had mapped out the letters of the Tower of Babel, and as such had disobeyed the order, broken the chains that had forced him away from his obsessive research and made sure that his message was delivered. He, possibly unknowingly, delivered his message through the Red notebook of his invisible stalker. In fact, Quinn had become so invisible that Stillman Sr. could genuinely claim not to remember nor recognize him at their second conversation, nor their third. It is presumed that Stillman is insane. It is pretended that Quinn was a master of disguise. It can even be claimed that Stillman was aware of his stalker.

Nevertheless, Stillman's purpose is fulfilled, a new mind is induced into the thought patterns of his own, and

he throws himself off the bridge, willing to end his life since everything had then been accomplished. He delivers to Quinn the new form of walking, the new ideas behind urbanism, and the new rebellions against the panopticon. Was Quinn not watching his every move? He could still neither understand his actions, nor stop them, nor find them illegal; through his walks Stillman would still be performing his research and his actions, although declared unwanted and illegitimate by his jailers, punishers, and peers.

The thoughts behind the entire text revolve around a postmodern, urbanist ideal that has, since that day, evolved into a much larger realm of thought, exploration, observationalism, and objectivity. The time for hiding in our homes and living a life of submissive centralization is gradually fading due, in large, to the little things we do.

< ...the people have lost an iconic leadership of thought... >



We use language that is not codified, through our slang and our broken grammars, to write texts that become eternal through their inexterminable creation; we expend our lives in non-systematic, unendorsed ways that tend to forgo all expectations and revoke any limitations, sometimes (oftentimes) to our detriment; we resist the system through the use of every possible tool offered us, by the creation of a system of littleness and detail that is irresistible and irrevocable, a program that is too fluid and too shallow for it to be anything but de-centred. Just like Quinn's centres eventually fall into disintegration, just like the world around him fades into nothingness, such do we, in our literature and our lives, propel ourselves, somewhat gradually, out of the spectrums of colours and into the values of greys. The idea is simple.

According to Foucault, the efficiency of disciplinary procedures had to somehow evolve to become the prison, to phase out the spectacle, to create the panopticon. We, as citizens, have now found our own form of discipline, as part of the Foucaudian idea of the efficient evolution of punishment. We have been trained to observe right from wrong according to our governmentally instilled morals that when a government falls out of place, we become the disciplinarian, taking matters of justice into our own hands. We have consistently developed so that we now become the only government necessary, hence revoking the right of government from those we had already placed in authority. Through post-structuralist activity, we have enabled ourselves to re-emancipate our lives and minds by regaining control of our regulatory capacities. We have turned the punishment around, albeit initially to our disadvantage. Quinn's attack on himself, his self-imposed imprisonment in that dark room due to his insistence that he had failed to complete the task conferred to him, is a clear indicator of the scope and the success of the panoptic at invading our consciousness. This rationale, although seemingly illogical, has become the true line of consciousness in our day. Except, and finally, this image is cracking and the mirror hidden

behind the simulation has found its way into the lives of many through the quintessential rhizome: the interconnectedness of the globalized world, the modernization of communication and interrelation. The panoptic, the controlled, the media, and the powers have perfected their system; the freedom and emancipation that the system was claiming for itself it has begun to profess onto the people it had stolen it from, making it a final causation for the de-centralization of the canon.

For, if City of Glass offers any grand idea, it is the desperation that is present among us to reveal to ourselves the unreliability of the canon of our lives. For every study and vocation, we can find a canon that has somehow affected it and carried it into modernity. To claim that these canons are all without fault is to presume that some humans are perfect: in essence, every canon has become reviewable, modifiable, and replaceable, but no canon is removable. As such, we are required, and have gradually begun, to create a canon as fluid and accepting as ourselves, in our most postmodern perception and post-structural activity. As the postmodernist brings an end to herself, she begins to see the formation of a new human intellectual identity that is more widely visible and overall clearly presentable to the masses: a nomadic activity of thought and behaviour that has let go of the tree in order to observe the ingenuity of the rhizome, forging connections with others through a technological medium that is both its panopticon and its emancipation. What postmodernism eventually succeeded in doing seems to be not to destroy positivism, but to disfigure it so that it has now become synonymous with the postmodern manifesto of canon-free, de-centred, uncontrolled, pleasure of the text formulated by a writer, not an author. ■

Further Reading:

- Auster, Paul (1987). *The New York Trilogy*. London, UK: Faber and Faber Limited.
- Foucault, Michel (1978). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan. United States: Pantheon Books.
- de Certeau, Michel (1984). *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, Berkeley: University of California Press.