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Invader, a flâneur in a real and imaginary space

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Abstract

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In the realm of contemporary urban art, the work of French artist Invader holds a unique position. Known for his pixelated mosaics inspired by the video game "Space Invaders," his artworks are dispersed across the globe, often in unexpected locations. This sociological study aims to analyze the impact of Invader's art on public space, imagination, and cultural nostalgia. How does this "invasion" art redefine the way we interact with our urban and digital environments? By employing sociological theories on symbolic interaction of virtual and real space of, this research explores the social significance of this art form within a globalized context.

Keywords

Nostalgia | Imaginary | Digital Game | Street Art | Invader

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Game is not Over!
Invader, 2014

Invader is a French urban artist known for his unique mosaic works inspired by the iconic 1978 video game *Space Invaders*. His art, often referred to as an "invasion," involves the placement of pixelated, mosaic representations of 8-bit video game characters in public spaces around the world. These works typically appear on walls in cities and are carefully chosen to blend into the urban environment while surprising and engaging passersby. Invader's pieces are small, colourful, and strategically placed in unexpected locations, creating a playful yet thought-provoking interaction with the city landscape. Invader defines his work as an invasion of both physical and cultural spaces. He views himself as a "hacker" of public space, subverting traditional ideas of where art should be displayed by placing his pixelated mosaics in unexpected urban locations:

> I define myself as an UFA, an Unidentified Free Artist. I chose Invader as my pseudonym and I always appear behind a mask. As such, I can visit my own exhibitions without any visitors knowing who I really am even if I stand a few steps away from them (Invader, 2014).

Invader's work fits into a tradition of street art that seeks to redefine public space. To understand this aspect, we rely on the theory of the production of space (Lefebvre, 1974). By placing his mosaics on the walls of cities, Invader disrupts spatial relations and creates new forms of interaction with city dwellers. Additionally, we draw from Erving Goffman's (Goffman, 1973) symbolic interactionism to analyse the reactions of passersby to these works. The mosaics serve as visual signs that engage viewers, inviting them into a silent dialogue with the art.

The particularity of Invader's art is his appropriation of urban space without prior authorization. Through this illegal or unsanctioned occupation, Invader blurs the boundaries between art and transgression. Are his works legitimate forms of art or violations of social and legal codes? For some, the mosaics are valued artistic expressions; for others, they are simply acts of vandalism. This dual status raises questions about the legitimacy of art in public spaces and reflects a tension between dominant and subversive cultures.

1. Street Art and Public Space: Where imagination Meets the Body

Invader's mosaics are inspired by the pixelated visuals of early video games. He uses small square tiles, often ceramic, to mimic the look of 8-bit graphics. His most recognizable works are the "space invaders" characters, but he has also incorporated other well-known pop culture icons, such as Pac-Man and Mario, into his work.

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Invader's app, called *Flash Invaders*, is a mobile application that turns the experience of viewing his art into a global game. It allows users to engage with his mosaics in a fun and interactive way, combining the physical and digital worlds.

1.1 A Worldwide "Invasion"

Space Invaders was designed and programmed by Toshihiro Nishikado for Taito Japan in 1978. The same year, it was also licensed to Midway for production in the United States, and two years later, it was released on the Atari 2600 home system.

Space Invaders helped action games become the dominant genre in arcades and on consoles (Whittaker, 2004: 129). Its worldwide success created a demand for a wide variety of science fiction games (Kunkel, 1982: 35-45), inspiring the development of contemporary art. Invader began his artistic project in Paris in 1998 in this context of digital art as a new form of expression, with the goal of "invading" the urban space through *Space Invaders* (Invader, 2004)[1]. Each piece is carefully cataloged and tracked, and Invader often releases maps showing the locations of his works in Paris, turning the viewing of his art into a type of "treasure hunt" for his followers. His project also emphasizes the "transitory" nature of street art, as many of his works are removed or destroyed over time, making the experience of finding them fleeting. Invaders initially worked with small ceramic tiles to mimic the pixelated graphics of video game. His pieces were typically around 30cm x 30cm in size, making them discreet but noticeable in the urban environment. These mosaics appeared on walls, bridges, and other parts of the city, transforming mundane spaces into visual playgrounds.

> The game was created in the early days of using technology for entertainment and leisure. They have this really pixelated appearance that makes them ideal subjects for mosaic. I find that the older games are more conceptual and inventive than the ones being made for the mass market today, which focus on hyper-realistic scenarios (...). Space invaders are a symbol of a turning-point: there is the world before them and the world after (Invader, 2003: 14).

In the early 2000s, Invader expanded his concept into a global "invasion," taking his mosaics to countries all over the world. He began placing his mosaics on more diverse surfaces, including famous landmarks, remote locations, and even the depths of the sea, where he placed a work near a coral reef. This expansion demonstrates Invader's interest in integrating his art not only in traditional urban spaces but also in environments that challenge the boundaries of where art can exist (Lazarides Gallery, 2009: 17). Since then, his mosaics have appeared in over 80 cities across the globe, including New York, London, Tokyo, and Los Angeles (fig. 1). Each "invasion" was meticulously planned, and he tracked his works using maps, assigning each mosaic a unique code.

[1] According to Invader, the invasion is led by Invader, an enigmatic character whose identity, motivations and the time of beginning are unknown.

During this phase, Invader started to integrate technology with his art. His app, *Flash Invaders*, launched in 2014, encouraged fans to hunt down his mosaics globally. In recent years (Boukercha, 2021), Invader has moved beyond just video game characters to create mosaics inspired by famous artworks and global pop culture icons[2]. This digital extension of his work reflects a shift toward more interactive, participatory art, where viewers become active players in an urban scavenger hunt. His works became more methodical and organized. He developed detailed maps of his installations, making his project more systematic and easier for fans to engage with. Invader's drift takes up Baudelairean flânerie but gives it a different meaning.

Baudelaire notably celebrated in the modern city what gives an artist the opportunity to practice their art while enjoying a pleasant and effortless coexistence within a multifaceted crowd.

> For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate observer, it is an immense pleasure to make one's home in the crowd, in the ever-changing, in movement, in the fleeting and the infinite. To be outside of one's home, yet feel at home everywhere; to see the world, to be at the center of the world, and yet remain hidden from the world—these are just some of the subtle pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial spirits, which language can only clumsily define. The observer is a *prince* who enjoys his incognito everywhere (Baudelaire, 1885: 64).

The concept of detournement (Debord, 1967) is what will allow this new art to offer volumes and forms already seen elsewhere, taken out of their original context to physically represent, in the inhabited space, a playful expression that would grant access to a new kind of freedom. The spectacle refers to the collection of artistic and media interventions through which culture is reduced to the art of captivating the masses. By taking these digital, commercialized symbols out of their original context, the world of gaming, and placing them in public, physical spaces, Invader alters their meaning. These symbols, once part of mass entertainment, now take on unusual, bizarre and critical roles in urban spaces.

[2] For example: Mona Lisa, Michael Jackson, Beatles and Pacman.

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FIG. 1 – *Map of Space Invaders* (https://www.space-invaders.com/world/)

1.2 Breaking the Wall

Walls are designed to function 'not only as physical barriers but also as devices to exclude both the visual and the aural' (Davies, 2017). Contemporary street art, or graffiti, has come increasingly to be used by practitioners to foreground the structural and state violence that is inscribed into, and perpetuated by, the infrastructural layouts the twenty-first century's increasingly global cities, most visibly in the recent proliferation of wall construction (Emanuela, 2020: 6). As a physical assault on the wall that is, not always but often, an illegal act, street art bears a 'spontaneous, rupturing quality' (Lennon, 2014: 241) that, like rhizomatic USFs more generally, 'open up possibility and new fields of urban engagement' (Daskalaki., Mould, 2013: 2). For Invader, the construction of walls has proliferated in response to destabilizing global dynamics. "Because that's where people are, and they are the ones that space invaders have come to observe." The artist says:

> I like to put the invaders in strategic positions, where a lot of people will see them, and on the flip side I enjoy putting them in more secret, almost confidential, spots. (Invader, 2003: 20-25).

Memory and transformation are integral features of creative explorations which find in urban places the ideal context to spread their socio-cultural message. Erving Goffman is known for his work (Goffman, 1973) on self-presentation and the theatrical metaphor. He views social interactions as performances in which each individual plays a role depending on the situation. The mosaics function as "visual performances" in the urban space. Like an actor, the creator places his works within a specific setting, the wall, which becomes the stage. He plays with invisibility and anonymity while provoking reactions and interactions from the public, in other words, the spectators. A visual art with a strong communicative power that originates from the place and to this it is addressed as soon as it is conceived and produced,

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entrusting to time the power of its message (Di Luggo., Zerlenga, 2020: 2). Invader's works on walls serve as a form of urban intervention, challenging the idea of who controls public spaces. By placing his art without permission, he reclaims parts of the city that might otherwise be dominated by advertisements, commercial entities, or state institutions. This act blurs the boundaries between public and private space, turning walls into canvases for personal expression and public engagement.

Observers are free as well as compelled to find their very own approach to what they see and to situate themselves in space and time (Henckel., Könecke., Thomaier, 2013: 189). Henri Lefebvre asserts (Lefebvre, 1974) that urban space is not merely a static framework, but is constantly produced and reproduced through social, political, and economic interactions. Invader's use of walls to create art can be seen as a powerful and innovative form of urban expression. His work challenges traditional notions of public space and the role of art within it. The right to the city is an idea and a slogan that was first proposed by Henri Lefebvre (Lefebvre, 1968) and Lefebvre thus considers the intervention of inhabitants as an essential component of spatial production:

> The transformation of society presupposes a collective ownership and management of space founded on the permanent participation of the "interested parties," with their multiple, varied and even contradictory interests. It thus also presupposes confrontation. (...) On the horizon, then, at the furthest edge of the possible, it is a matter of producing the space of the human species—the collective (generic) work of the species—to create (produce) a planet-wide space as the social foundation of a transformed everyday life (Lefebvre, 1974).

Urban environments are inherently fragmented, composed of people, buildings, and experiences that are constantly shifting and evolving. Invader's mosaics, placed randomly on walls in different cities, mirror the fragmented and ever-changing nature of city life. Artists contest the abandonment and dis-use of cityscapes due to the anonymity, grayness, and ugliness of urban space (Visconti, Sherry, Borghini, Anderson, 2010: 520):

> I'm not trying to have a relationship with the people, but with the city. The city is not only made up of people, of buildings, but of relationships between people and buildings, between people and wall, between the eyes of the people and our poetry (Ludovico, street artist of the group h5n1, North Italy; Visconti, Sherry, Borghini, Anderson, 2010: 520).

The wall serves as a medium; it can be both strong and resilient, yet also fragile. The fact that Invader's mosaics can be easily damaged reflects the vulnerability of art in the public sphere. Unlike works in a museum that are protected and preserved, street art is exposed to the elements, to human interaction, and to the unpredictability of the environment. This vulnerability adds meaning to his work, as it

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represents the fleeting nature of artistic expression in public spaces. The fragility of Invader's art as a reflection of the dangers and vulnerability of city streets.

His mosaics, made of small, easily damaged tiles, can symbolize the transient and unpredictable nature of urban environments. The street art practices transforming them highlight the difficulty in representing what public space is or should be, that is, of an ideology of public space (Polanyi, 1958).

1.3 Physical and Digital Interaction

Flash Invaders is an innovative mobile application created by the street artist in 2014, designed to enhance the experience of engaging with his iconic mosaic artworks around the world (fig. 2). Below are its main features and the interactions it fosters both online and offline. Users can "hunt" for Invader's mosaics in urban environments. The app uses geolocation to guide players to the locations of the artworks, encouraging exploration and engagement with the city. When users find a mosaic, they can "flash" it by taking a photo using the app. This action registers the discovery and adds it to the user's personal gallery within the app. Players can share their findings on social media platforms, creating a community around the art and allowing players to showcase their achievements. This sharing can also include tagging Invader and the specific locations.

FIG. 2 – *Flash Invader App* (Source: Google App Store)

The gamification of art discovery, through scoring and competition, encourages social interaction among players. Participants often compete on leaderboards or share their scores and achievements, which can strengthen social ties and create friendly competition. This gamified approach can make art more accessible and enjoyable for a broader audience. Using the *Flash Invaders* app requires users to move through physical spaces, actively searching for Invader's mosaics. When users successfully capture a mosaic, they receive immediate digital feedback (points, visual

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acknowledgment) that can enhance their emotional response. This feedback can amplify the joy or satisfaction derived from the physical act of discovery. They can "express their subjective conceptions of beauty, emotion or some other aesthetic ideal" and simultaneously "formulate beliefs about the nature of reality and values regarding desirable states of reality" (Hirschman, 1983: 46).

The movement transforms the viewer from a passive observer to an active participant, embodying the experience of exploring their environment. The act of "hunting" for mosaics involves not only the visual search but also physical movement — walking, bending, and navigating urban landscapes. This kinesthetic interaction deepens the connection between the individual and the artwork, making it a bodily experience. The real-time gaming engagement fosters a relation between the body in motion and the digital recognition of the action.

Bourdieu's concept of the field refers to the social space in which various forms of capital are exchanged, while habitus refers to the ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions people acquire based on their life experiences and social position (Bourdieu, 1998). The symbol of art is placed in unexpected urban locations, invite viewers to stop and reflect on the intersection between art, technology, and nostalgia. By engaging with this art, individuals are momentarily pulled out of their daily routines, altering their relationship with public spaces.

2. Urban Nostalgia: The Timeless Appeal of Retro Art

Nostalgia has historically been conceptualized as pathological maladaptation to the present reality and as trepidation of the future (Sedikides et al., 2008; Sedikides, Wildschut, Baden, 2004). In nostalgia, "the past is lost. The future can never be realized. All is empty. All is lost" (Kleiner, 1977: 472). The nostalgia for the late 20th century carries a sense of longing for a simpler and more carefree time. This period saw major cultural, technological, and social changes, such as the rise of personal computers, the spread of gaming consoles, the advent of the internet, and the boom of pop culture. Researchers have taken a past time's turn, most notably those who concentrate on cultural contexts and concepts (Aaron, Strike, 2004).

Music, movies, motor cars, magazines, museums and monarchies have all been painstakingly investigated, as has retro TV, food, literature, poetry, photography, perfume, smartphone apps, computer gaming and more besides (Hamilton., et al, 2014). Invader's art directly references 1980s video game culture, with his mosaics depicting characters from iconic games *Space Invaders*, a key symbol of that era's technology and entertainment. Both works trigger nostalgic feelings for a time when digital technology and pop culture were rapidly evolving.

2.1 Collective Memory and Connection

It is a well-known fact that the video game industry has its origin in the US in the form of arcade games. The first computer game, "Space War", was developed by

Steve Russell at MIT lab in 1961, using DEC's new interactive mini-computer, PDP-10 (Sheff, Eddy, 1999: 133-134). In Japan, video games represent interactions between hardware manufacturing and software publishing, the significance of which remains ambiguous (Aoyama, Izushi, 2003: 424). In the context of the development of computer games in the 1980s, video games indeed connected people worldwide.

The emergence of video games during this period created a shared cultural experience that transcended geographical boundaries. Gamers from different countries and backgrounds could bond over their favorite titles, nurturing a sense of community and shared nostalgia.

Nostalgia becomes a utopian environmental and social programme (Davies, 2010: 264). Despite technological limitations, early games felt groundbreaking and playing them again can be a celebration of how far technology and art have come. These retro-games represent a temporal-spatial environment when entertainment was less complicated, and their "replayability"[3] brings a sense of comfort and happiness, not necessarily to escape but to reconnect with positive emotions:

> Nostalgia fostered social connectedness, which subsequently lifted self-esteem, which then heightened optimism. Put otherwise, the self-esteem lifts that participants experienced stemmed from an enhanced sense of social connectedness that was derived from nostalgic reverie; this self-esteem lift, in turns, raised optimism (Cheung., al, 2013: 1490).

As for Invader, his art can be seen as a reflection of this shared cultural experience. By incorporating pixel art inspired by video games, he taps into the nostalgia associated with that era, creating a dialogue between street art and the collective memories of those who grew up playing these games, especially *Space Invaders.* The nostalgic childhood trope includes everything associated with childhood such as children, children's games, and toys (Salmose, 2018: 332). The example of how the allusion to childhood is effective in evoking nostalgia can be found in Invader's work. Mosaics, as a form of fragmented art, represent the hazy memories people have of the past. Just as a mosaic is made up of various small pieces that come together to form a larger image, human memories are often composed of fragmented recollections, emotions, and experiences that can be difficult to piece together (Papiu, Suciu, 2017). This symbolism emphasizes the complexity and imperfection of memory, suggesting that our understanding of the past is considered as a collection of disjointed and blurry images rather than a clear narrative.

2.2 2024: Flâneur in a Space Odyssey, imaginary of past and future

Invader has paid tribute to *2001: A Space Odyssey* in his work. One of his notable pieces in Paris features a mosaic inspired by the monolith from the film, a key symbol representing human evolution, transformation, and the unknown (fig.3). This homage aligns with Invader's interest in space, science fiction, and the blending of

[3] The quality in a video game, music recording, etc. of being suitable for or worth playing more than once.

digital and physical worlds. The protagonist in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Dave Bowman, goes through a journey that involves evolution, discovery, and the mysterious power of the monolith. Invader, through his use of pixel art, also engages in a type of journey—by placing retro, arcade-inspired works across the earth. His art changes the space it inhabits, offering new layers of meaning, from playful nostalgia to social commentary.

Nietzsche's idea of the child as the final stage of transformation symbolizes playful creativity and freedom from rigid norms. Invader's choice represents a return to a childlike sense of wonder and play. What *2001: A Space Odyssey* aims to convey is that the millions of years of human evolution and development resemble a grand and epic journey, full of perils but also the joy of exploration and discovery. In the end, humanity will be able to glimpse the deepest mysteries of the universe and, through that, achieve rebirth. Invader's works invite viewers to interact with their surroundings in a different way, much like a child might see a world full of potential and adventure. This playful, almost rebellious spirit reflects Nietzsche's ideal of overcoming the seriousness of old values and embracing a more free-spirited, artistic approach to life.

In the film, the universe is portrayed as indifferent, quiet, and cold. In contrast, the streets in street art, like Invader's work, represent a different kind of duality: they are bustling yet indifferent. Streets are alive with activity, full of human interaction and noise, but they can also be cold in their anonymity. Street art interacts with this environment, brightening or challenging the urban space, but the streets themselves remain largely indifferent to the artwork, much like the vast, uncaring universe in the film.

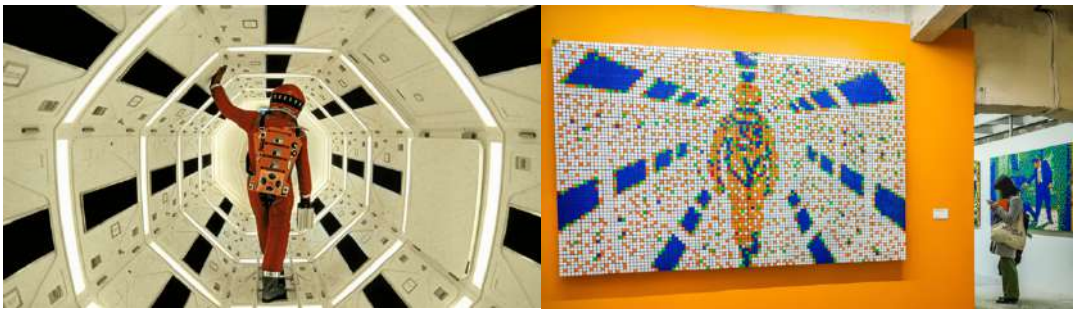

FIG. 3 – Scenario of *2001: A Space Odyssey* VS Invader's art of exhibition *A Space Station* (Source: Sortirapairs.com)

French anthropologist Gilbert Durand divides the structures of the human process of imagination into two main regimes, diurnal and nocturnal (Durand, 1969). According to the author, it is possible to find symbols and myths associated with the two regimes of the imagination in all human cultures, past and present, as each structure is associated with the universal archetypes of meaning that are the essence of the experience that man makes in the world. "Man builds his relationship with the world through some processes of sense building, making use of archetypes, symbols and myths as part of subjective experience and social life: this is the imaginary."

(Grassi, 2013: 194) Invader blends past digital aesthetics with modern street art, making it feel as if the characters from the 1980s "invade" the present world. Both blur the lines between eras, allowing the past to intrude upon the present.

Invader's use of pixel art evokes nostalgia for early gaming and sci-fi film, which has its own set of archetypal characters — the hero, the villain, the quest: The primary archetype behind *Space Invader* is the concept of the alien or "other" coming from beyond human understanding, viewed as a threat or some characters that must be confronted. Secondly, in the original game, the player steps into the role of the hero or defender, an archetype in which individuals take action to protect their community or planet from external danger. Carl Jung describes (Jung, 1928) the archetype as "a figure, whether it be daemon, man, or process, that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested." The archetypal fear of machines, robots, or artificial life forms taking over plays a part in the art's concept. Science fiction creates a space "where we can dream these ideas and, in some ways, even try them out." (Merrick, 2009) "Confronting a grotesque reality, paradoxically, necessitates a robust charge into the realm of fantasy. In order to be what we see, we must first create those visions and archetypes — fantasy is an ideal place to do this (Cross, K. A, 2012)." Art of game, and especially street art of game, is an act of constant "becoming" that allows for self-conscious social reconstruction in post-modern time.

The hero-villain dynamic in classic narratives (like in *Space Invaders*) is clearly defined (Young, 2020), but street art and Invader's approach complicate this dichotomy. Expert players are perfectly familiar with the most popular archetypes, and they often design new archetypes to counter them (Mora., et al, 2022). By using the imagery of the "invader," the artist blurs the lines between the protector (hero) and intruder (villain). In a way, his art challenges urban monotony, positioning the invader as a force of good or fun — *an artistic hero*, if you will, transforming cold, lifeless walls into canvases of creativity.

2.3 Mediatization of Community and Art

For street artists, the city is a colossal canvas playground where blank or semi-blank surfaces are regarded as highly prized commodities for artists (Gonçalves, Milani, 2022). The changing semantic and thus ideological labeling of graffiti and street art from *illegal* to *sanctioned* to *commissioned* to *auctioned* also represents its changing symbolic, market and thus economic value (Reyburn, 2021). Researchers have also taken note about street art in the mass media that extend beyond its changing symbolic and thus economic and market value (Ricardo, Zaimakis, Pavoni, 2021). This is no longer about aesthetics, but about social, cultural, political, and thus ideological messages surrounding race and minoritized communities (with regards to Black Lives Matter) and about erasure, censorship and the future of art and culture on the Internet.

A steep rise in street art's popularity has occurred in parallel with the development and uptake of camera-equipped mobile communication devices and

social media—technologies of the "media city" (McQuire, 2008) that have shifted how people experience and interact with urban space. This has affected the process of discovering art as an in situ experience while also penning up massive new audiences to encounter and exchange images of an artwork (Polson, 2024). The book *@Invaderwashere 10 years of Instagram* has been conceived as a time capsule that will be available for consultation when Instagram, smartphones or even the Internet have disappeared, replaced by other technologies. Then we will be able to flip through this "Instabook," a record of ten years of an artist's activity on the great social network of an era (fig 4). Using the Instagram app, users can take photos or short videos, edit them, add searchable hashtags, share them publicly or privately, explore other posts based on common hashtags, geolocation, or specific profile names, and add comments to one's own posts or those of others. Because of its networked, visual, and geolocative affordances, Instagram has become an archive for informal and semiprofessional documentation of street art (MacDowall, de Souza, 2018).

FIG. 4 – *Pages of Book @Invaderwashere* (Source: Instagram *Invaderwasthere*)

Some arguments show that Instagram uniquely illustrates that the ability to use digital technologies to share images of the city is changing the way urban residents interact with each other and their environments (Boy J, Uitermark, 2017). Invader's core concept of "invading" public spaces continues into the digital realm. On Instagram, he documents his creations in various cities, inviting audiences along for the journey. Invader's work resonates with people who feel a sense of nostalgia for retro-games and street art culture. It possible to automate the interpretation of images as indistinguishable from human interpretations? This provocation stimulates the search for possible technical solutions that can be extended to the social fabric (Cabrera, Diago, 2023). By using hashtag, he connects with fans globally, building a community that appreciates his art regardless of physical location. This community

becomes a part of the experience, sharing and discussing his work, which adds depth and layers to the "invasion" narrative.

Another example is *Animal Crossing*, it offers a non-violent, cooperative space that reflects an idealized version of community life. Invader's choice to bring his art into this game aligns with the game's ethos of shared creativity and harmony, contrasting with the often-chaotic urban spaces where his street art typically appears. The game started as a stand-alone experience and then, because of its multiplayer and social components, became an opportunity to discuss important topics and develop a more mature take on digital consumption and exposure (Gandolfi, 2021). This utopian setting lets players enjoy his art in an imaginative environment. Unlike public streets, which can be unpredictable and impermanent, *Animal Crossing* offers a stable and welcoming space where art can exist without the risk of vandalism (Blanco-Fernández, Moreno, 2023). *Animal Crossing* aesthetic is inherently nostalgic and comforting for many players, similar to the nostalgic appeal of Invader's 8-bit-inspired mosaics. Both the game and his art evoke memories of simpler times allowing fans to connect with his work on an emotional level.

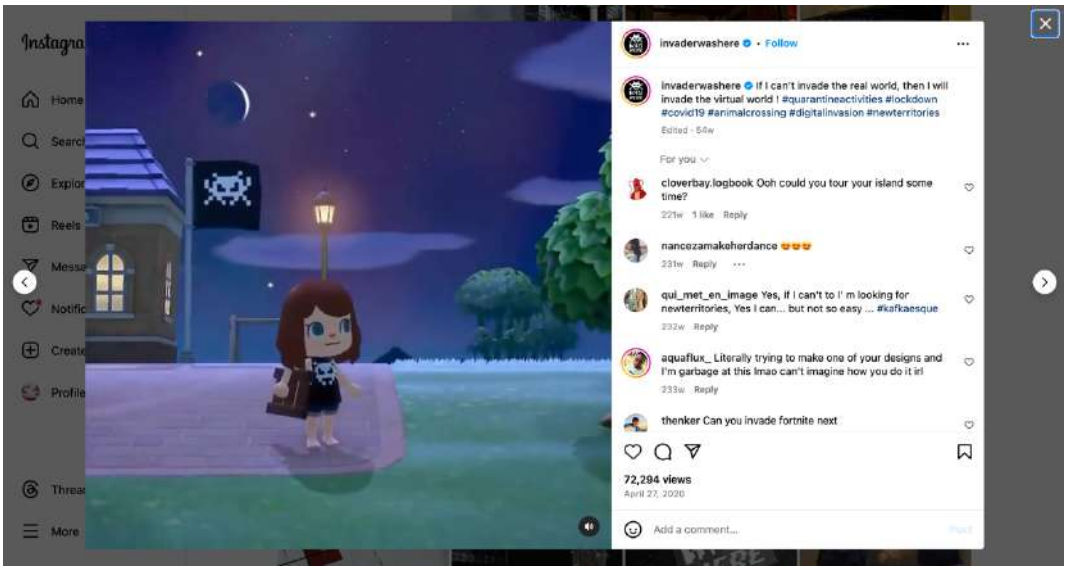

FIG. 5 – *Invasion in the game Animal Crossing* (Source: Instagram *Invaderwasthere*)

3. Walking Through Code: Re-reading Invader Through Benjamin's Flânerie

In the last two decades, the proliferation of street art in uban spaces has challenged traditional boundaries between public and private, visibility and earasure, permanence and ephemerality. Among the most emblematic figures of this city artistic movement is Invader, known for his installations from retro video games. By

situation Invader's innervations within the conceptual frameworks of the flaneur of Benjamin, the act of encountering a hidden and subtly embedded piece into the built environment, invokes the kind of bodily navigation Benjamin described in his explorations of Parisian arcades. Drawing on Benjamin's reflections on memory, trace ad optical unconscious, this article explores how Invader's urban interventions transform city space into a site of mediated experience where nostalgia and perception are inextricable entangled.

The street art practice can be interpreted as a contemporary embodiment of the figure of the *flâneur*, as theorized by Walter Benjamin in the *The Arcades Project*. The *flaneur* is not merely a passive urban stroller but a reflective observer who engages with the city through tactile experiences. In Benjamin's words, "The street becomes a dwelling for the flaneur; he is as much at home among the facades of houses as a citizen is in his four walls" (Benjamin, 1927; 1940; 2002). These pixelated images operate in what Benjamin call the optical unconscious, like revealing patterns, textures and surfaces in the city that are normally overlooked. As the theorist describes, "Photography reveals in this material the physiognomic aspects, image worlds, which dwell in the smallest things – meaningful yet covert enough to find a hiding place in waking dreams" (idem). The artist's acts similarly: it interrupts the visual field with small and coded fragments that function as portals into both digital culture and physical space.

3.1.Flânerie and the Dialectics of Perception in Paris

No city better exemplifies the kind of sensory overload required by Benhamin's perceptual apparatus (Somaini, 2016) than Paris. Enchanted and overwhelmed by the intoxicating stimuli of the French capital, Benjamin surrendered himself to the pleasures of *flânerie* – the magic of exhibitions, of marketplaces (*Jahrmärkte*), and of the crowd that this urban art of wandering even began to threaten the primacy of reading and scholarly study in his life.

Flânerie, of course, is not a special way of walking (*Spazieren*) which could be comparable to Rousseau's solitary reveries. Rather, this form is a distinctly urban, even aristocratic art form, as a leisurely habit associated with dandy-poets like Baudelaire. In the sense Benjamin adopts, *flânerie* involves aesthetic encounters with the city and its crowds (never "the masses"), it is a social ritual that staged the self in stylized relation to the environment in the modern city. If the Seine's quays and their famed secondhand booksellers charmed Benjamin, it was the arcades, the covered passages of Paris that truly captivated his imagination. These arcades, half-forgotten but still materially present, struck Benjamin as sites of magical disorientation: places filled with curious objects, the ruins of consumer history, the former residences of fairies. They embodied a dreamlike world by modernity's advance, as the warm flicker of gaslight gave way to the cold illumination of electricity. In this light, it becomes fruitful to return to Benjamin's own writings on flânerie, not only as a metaphor of urban experience, but as a condition rooted in specific spatial and

historical contexts. Benjamin's Paris offers a model of urban enchantment that finds surprising resonance in Invader's constellations.

Like the bouquinistes lining the Seine, Invader's work does not announce itself loudly but waits to be discovered through chance or intentional wandering. In this sense, Invader does not only position himself as a kind of clandestine flaneur, moving anonymously through the city to leave subtle visual interventions, but he also activates the viewer as a flaneur that someone who learns to read the city anew, not through maps and signs alone, but through visual fragments that trigger memory, nostalgia and playful curiosity.

The *flâneur* is nothing more than a "profanely illuminated type," a figure illuminated by the secular world. He shares this typological space with figures such as the reader, the thinker, the loiterer, the opium smoker, the dreamer, and the drunkard. The *flâneur* moves through the streets but remains fundamentally an outsider. His attitude toward the crowd is marked by indifference. He moves in a direction contrary to theirs, observing them closely while simultaneously maintaining a sense of distance and friction.

Giorgio Agamben (1992, 2009) argues that contemporaneity involves a particular relationship with one's own time, one that is both attached to and distanced from it. More precisely, it is a relationship that engages with the present through a form of disjunction or anachronism. A person who is completely in tune with their era, fully immersed in every aspect of it, is not truly contemporary. This is because such a person is incapable of observing the present with clarity. They cannot hold their gaze on the present, since they are already absorbed by it.

Agamben emphasizes the importance of maintaining distance. Only by doing so is it possible to sustain a fixed gaze on the present. This distance prevents one from being consumed or swept away by the current of the times. It also guards against becoming a mere embodiment of the fashionable. For Agamben, the truly contemporary figure resembles Benjamin's *flâneur* or Brecht's spectator, both of whom relate to what they see through a structure of rupture rather than immersion. In Nietzsche's terms, such a person is untimely. Only by becoming disjointed from one's time can one acquire the position necessary to observe it attentively. This trajectory can be traced from Brecht's estranged mode of viewing theater to Benjamin's estranged way of seeing the city, and finally to Agamben's concept of seeing the present through estrangement. To observe the present in this way, with both proximity and distance, is what it means to be contemporary.

What connects the *flâneur* and Invader, then, is not merely the shared geography of Paris but a shared mode of engaging with urban space which foregrounds distance, irony, and rupture. Both figures reveal the city not as a neutral background but as a contested terrain, shaped by competing logics of visibility, control, and resistance. In this way, Invader can be seen as a contemporary *flâneur*, albeit one who replaces passive observation with symbolic intervention. His presence, much like Benjamin's wanderer or Brecht's estranged spectator, exemplifies a critical stance toward the present, one that is both embedded within and detached from the spatial politics of the contemporary city.

3.2 Now-Time and the Messianic Trace in Invader's Work

Benjamin's conception (1968a) of historical time is further articulated through his image of the *Angelus Novus*, a figure who faces the wreckage of the past while being involuntarily propelled into the future by the storm of what is called progress. In this figure, history does not unfold as a continuous and linear narrative, but as a sequence of ruptures, crises, and unresolved debris. In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Benjamin (1968b) challenges the historicist notion of temporal progression and instead proposes that the past must be seized in fragmented form at moments of danger. For him, history becomes visible not through continuity but through interruption. It is composed of remnants and flashes that, when brought into relation with the present, form what he calls a dialectical image. This image does not merely represent the past but reveals a moment of truth in which the past and the present enter into a critical constellation.

Invader's artistic interventions resonate with this temporality. His pixelated mosaics do not simply recall the aesthetics of early digital culture but reactivate them within contemporary urban space. These fragments from the past do not function as nostalgic ornaments; rather, they operate as visual disruptions that draw attention to the layering of time within the modern city. In doing so, they interrupt the seamless flow of contemporary consumer space and insert into it signs of temporal disjunction. Viewers are invited not only to recognize a familiar visual code but also to confront its displacement and recontextualization. This act of reactivation reflects what Benjamin calls a "weak messianic power," the capacity to rescue forgotten or marginalized elements of the past and return them to the present, not as relics but as sites of latent meaning. In this way, Invader's work participates in a critical temporality that challenges the smooth continuity of modern historical consciousness and opens space for reflection, dislocation, and re-signification.

3.3 Aura in the Age of Pixel Repetition and Street Art

Walter Benjamin argued that technological reproduction leads to the decline of the "aura" of the artwork—the unique presence and authority tied to its authenticity and singularity. In the age of mechanical reproduction, artworks lose their "here and now," becoming detached from tradition, ritual, and a specific spatial-temporal context (Hansen, 2008). However, Invader's artistic practice complicates this narrative by reintroducing a form of aura through the deliberate spatial and cultural positioning of his pixel mosaics. Although these mosaics are technically reproducible and derive from early video game imagery—an inherently mass-produced and widely circulated visual language—their dispersion across specific urban sites creates unique encounters for viewers. In this way, Invader's work participates in a critical temporality that challenges the smooth continuity of modern historical consciousness and opens space for reflection, dislocation, and re-signification.

The location-specificity transforms Invader's mosaics into quasi-originals whose meaning depends on the context, discovery, and interaction with the urban

environment (Conty, 2013). This situational uniqueness echoes Benjamin's observation that aura is not solely an inherent property of the artwork but is also generated through its embeddedness in rituals and social practices. Invader's works function as visual interruptions in the cityscape, inviting viewers to participate in a ritualistic experience that resembles Benjamin's notion of aura. The act of seeking out, documenting, and "collecting" these mosaics—often facilitated by maps and online communities—creates a shared social practice that endows these reproduced images with renewed authenticity.

This ritualized engagement is reminiscent of a modern pilgrimage, where the aura is not based on the physical originality of the object but on the temporal and social experience surrounding its encounter. Through this reconfiguration, Invader's art highlights how aura can persist and even be revitalized in the age of technological reproduction, suggesting a dialectical relationship between mass production and individual, situated experience (Isenberg, 2001). His work thus challenges the notion that reproduction inevitably leads to aura's demise; instead, it reveals the potential for reproduced images to acquire new forms of significance through context-specific interaction and communal meaning-making.

Street art, as a mode of artistic intervention embedded within public urban spaces, shares a particular affinity with Benjamin's notion of aura. The site-specificity and ephemerality of street art intensify its "here and now," producing moments of chance encounter that cannot be fully replicated or commodified. Invader's pixel mosaics, placed in diverse and sometimes unexpected locations, invite viewers into acts of discovery and exploration. This process of accidental or intentional "finding" reactivates the artwork's singular presence, thus fostering a renewed aura grounded in the physical context and the lived experience of the city.

The public and participatory nature of street art further amplifies this effect. Unlike traditional gallery works that are enclosed and mediated through institutional frameworks, street art exists in the shared social realm. Its aura is co-constructed by the interaction between artwork, environment, and audience, especially as viewers engage in social practices such as photographing, mapping, and sharing images online. These communal rituals echo Benjamin's understanding of aura as a social and ritual phenomenon, rather than merely an intrinsic quality of the object. Consequently, Invader's mosaics transform from mere reproductions into culturally charged icons that embody both the mass-produced visual language of digital culture and the unique, localized experience of urban life.

Furthermore, Invader's practice raises important questions about the commodification of urban space and cultural memory. By embedding pixelated mosaics reminiscent of early digital culture into contemporary streetscapes, Invader connects the past and present in a way that reactivates collective nostalgia while simultaneously critiquing the homogenizing forces of globalization. This temporal layering echoes Benjamin's idea that history is composed of fragments and flashes that can be redeemed in the present (Lacoste, 2003). Invader's mosaics serve as dialectical images that simultaneously embody and disrupt dominant narratives of

urban modernity, offering moments of reflection on the relationship between technology, memory, and authenticity.

Conclusion

The city is often conceptualized as a "growth machine" driven by the interests of a land-based elite comprising private investors and politically influential actors (Molotch, 1976). Although streets might be considered among the most egalitarian, democratic, and inclusive urban spaces, urban space itself is never neutral (Lefebvre, 1991; Harvey, 2006), and city walls are rarely truly public (Chang, 2018). Street artists, as cultural intermediaries, are keenly aware of their complex role within these processes. They often express ambivalence by celebrating the expanding urban canvas and increasing opportunities brought by urban growth, while simultaneously criticizing its negative consequences, including the privatization and commercialization of public spaces, class stratification, and the displacement of local communities (Anderson, Borg, Ohlsson, 2007; Romero, 2018).

Within this context, Invader's art navigates the interplay between digital nostalgia and urban transformation. Through his mosaics, the artist invites audiences to engage with both real and imagined spaces, provoking reflections on community and cultural memory. Although originating in public spaces, Invader's work is also extended through social media and digital platforms, fostering a virtual community and amplifying his message beyond the street. This digital extension mitigates the inherent impermanence of street art, maintaining the accessibility and visibility of his work in ways that transcend physical constraints.

Ultimately, Invader's artistic identity embodies a new form of flâneur, navigating and bridging real and virtual realms. His practice creates a dynamic dialogue between past and future, while fostering community across diverse spatial and temporal dimensions. This dual existence underscores the evolving nature of urban artistic interventions in the digital age, reflecting broader transformations in the politics of urban space, cultural production, and collective memory.

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