

Fashioning the City

FASHIONING THE CITY

Paris, Fashion and the Media

Agnès Rocamora

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CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	vii
Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction	xiii
PART I	
1 Paris, France	3
2 Paris, Fashion City	24
3 Fashion Media Discourse	54
PART II	
4 Paris, <i>Capitale de la Mode</i>	65
5 <i>La Parisienne</i>	86
6 <i>Passante de Mode</i>	126
7 The Eiffel Tower in Fashion	156
Conclusion	185
Endnotes	189
Bibliography	218
Index	231

ILLUSTRATIONS

- | | | |
|-----|--|-----|
| 1 | 'Ça c'est Paris.' <i>L'Officiel</i> . October 2004. © L'Officiel | xii |
| 2.1 | John Singer Sargent. <i>In the Luxembourg Gardens</i> . 1879. Oil on Canvas, 65.7 x 92.4 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Pennsylvania. The John G. Johnson Collection, 1917 | 41 |
| 2.2 | 'Avenue du Bois de Boulogne; Max de Cazavent suivant ses amours, Paris, 15 Janvier 1911' ['Avenue du Bois de Boulogne; Max de Cazavent following his lovers, Paris, 15 January 1911']. Photograph by Jacques Henri Lartigue © Ministère de la Culture – France / AAJHL | 43 |
| 4.1 | The Fabric of Paris. 'Le Marais.' <i>Bag</i> . Issue 3. Summer 2004 | 82 |
| 4.2 | 'Green spring in Le Marais.' French <i>Elle</i> . 7 November 2005. © Elle | 82 |
| 5.1 | Claude Monet. <i>Camille</i> . 1866. Oil on Canvas, 231 x 151 cm. Kunsthalle Bremen. Germany | 87 |
| 5.2 | John Singer Sargent. <i>Madame X</i> (Madame Pierre Gautreau). 1883–4. Oil on Canvas, 208.6 x 109.9 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund, 1916 (16.53). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art | 88 |
| 5.3 | <i>Les Parisiennes</i> by Kiraz. Cover of the Artist's <i>Je Les Aime Comme Ça</i> [That's the way I like them], a collection of <i>Parisiennes</i> drawings. First Published in 2000. © 2000 Éditions Denoël, Paris, France | 88 |
| 5.4 | A stencil by Miss.Tic. Paris, 13 th arrondissement. 2007. Photograph Agnès Rocamora | 89 |
| 5.5 | Émile François Chatrousse. <i>Une Parisienne</i> . 1876. Plâtre patiné. Musée des Beaux Arts de la Ville de Paris, Petit Palais. © Petit Palais/Roger Viollet | 93 |

- 5.6 Charles-Alexandre Giron. *Femme aux Gants (La Parisienne)*. 1883. Oil on Canvas. Musée des Beaux Arts de la Ville de Paris, Petit Palais. © Petit Palais/Roger Viollet 93
- 5.7 Charles Carolus Duran. *Madame Edgar Stern*. 1889. Oil on Canvas. Musée des Beaux Arts de la Ville de Paris, Petit Palais. © Petit Palais/Roger Viollet 93
- 5.8 'La Parisienne. Ses 80 Looks.' *Vogue Paris*. August 2006. Photograph Mario Testino. © Vogue Paris 94
- 5.9 Some *Parisienne* looks. *Vogue Paris*. August 2006. Photograph Mario Testino. © Vogue Paris 104
- 5.10 Edouart Manet. *La Parisienne*. 1875. Oil on Canvas. © The National Museum of Fine Arts, Stockholm 108
- 5.11 *La Parisienne* is Paris. *Vogue Paris*. October 1998. © Vogue Paris 111
- 5.12 'Haute couture, L'Esprit Parisien.' *Vogue Paris*. September 1989. Photograph Peter Lindbergh. © Vogue Paris 111
- 5.13 'Paris, France.' 1999. Photograph Michael Ackerman. © Michael Ackerman/Agence Vu 113
- 5.14 'Nocturne Parisien.' *Vogue Paris*. August 2006. Photograph Mario Sorrenti. © Vogue Paris 115
- 5.15 'Nocturne Parisien.' *Vogue Paris*. August 2006. Photograph Mario Sorrenti. © Vogue Paris 116
- 5.16 Paris and the myth of love. *Vogue Paris*. May 1991. Photograph Christian Moser. © Vogue Paris 117
- 5.17 'Portraits de Femmes Rive Gauche vues par Vogue.' *Vogue Paris*. October 1995. © Vogue Paris 122
- 5.18 Vogue fashion dolls. *Vogue Paris*. September 1989. © Vogue Paris 123
- 6.1 *Passantes de mode. Numéro*. August 2006. Photograph Sofia Sanchez and Mauro Mongiello. © Numéro 128
- 6.2 *Passante Parisienne. L'Officiel*. September 1990. Photograph Peter Hönneman. © L'Officiel 138
- 6.3 'Une Fille à Paris.' *L'Officiel*. August 2005. Photograph Élina Kéchicheva. © L'Officiel 139
- 6.4 'Filature.' *Stiletto*. Spring/Summer 2005. Photograph Benoit Peverelli. © Stiletto 139
- 6.5 The street as catwalk. *Vogue Paris*. March 1991. Photograph Alistair Taylor-Young. © Vogue Paris 140
- 6.6 'Toutes en scènes.' *Vogue Paris*. March 1991. Photographs Claus Ohm, Piero Biasion. © Vogue Paris 140

6.7	The male gaze. French <i>Glamour</i> . April 2006. Photograph Peter Stanglmayr. © Glamour	146
6.8	'Fur Play.' <i>Vogue Paris</i> . September 1989. Photograph Wayne Maser. © Vogue Paris	148
6.9	'La Nouvelle Parisienne.' French <i>Elle</i> . January 2005. Photograph Alexia S. © Elle	153
6.10	'Extérieur, jour.' <i>Vogue Paris</i> . August 1992. Photograph William Garrett. © Vogue Paris	154
7.1	Robert Delaunay. 'Femme et la Tour.' 1925. © L&M Service B.V. The Hague 20080309	168
7.2	Robert Delaunay. 'La Ville de Paris.' 1910. © L&M Service B.V. The Hague 20080309	168
7.3	Lisa Fonssagrives on the Eiffel Tower wearing a Lucien Lelong dress. 1939. Photograph Erwin Blumenfeld. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2007	170
7.4	2007 advertisement for Repetto. © Repetto.	171
7.5	1997 advertisement for 'Paris', by Yves Saint Laurent. © Yves Saint Laurent/Gucci Group	171
7.6	2005 advertisement for the Salon International de La Lingerie, Interfilère. © Salon International de La Lingerie	173
7.7	The tower as a woman. <i>Vogue Paris</i> . September 1982. Photograph Arthur Elgort. © Vogue Paris	173
7.8	1995 advertisement for Jean-Paul Gaultier	174
7.9	2004 advertisement for Love in Paris, Nina Ricci. © Parfums Nina Ricci. All rights reserved. © Tour Eiffel – Illuminations Pierre Bideau	175
7.10	2005 advertisement for Yves Saint Laurent. © Yves Saint Laurent/Gucci Group	175
7.11	1992 advertisement for Dentelle de Calais. Reproduced with the kind permission of Fédération Française des Dentelles et Broderies	176
7.12	1990 advertisement for 'Paris', Yves Saint Laurent. © Yves Saint Laurent/Gucci Group	181
7.13	2006 advertisements for Charles Jourdan. Photograph Bettina Rheims. Agency: Wolkoff et Arnodin. Courtesy Wolkoff et Arnodin	182

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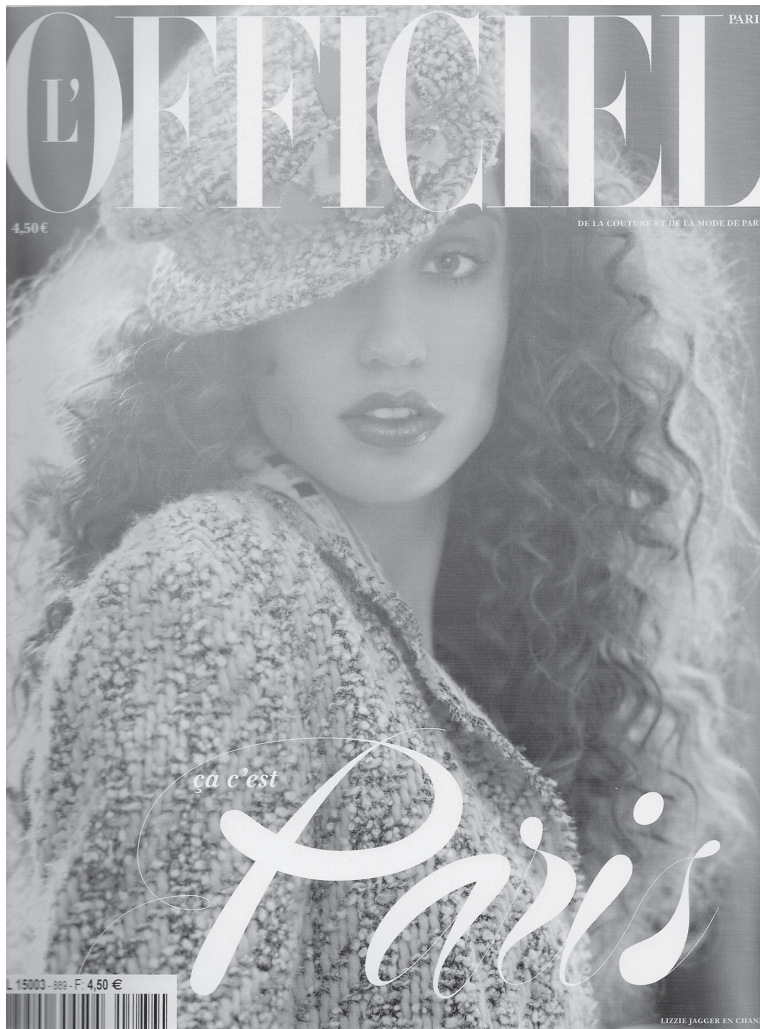


Fig. 1 'Ça c'est Paris.' *L'Officiel*. October 2004. © L'Officiel.

INTRODUCTION

The October 2004 cover of French fashion magazine *L'Officiel de la Couture et de la Mode de Paris* (hereafter *L'Officiel*) shows a beautiful woman wearing a Chanel jacket, her face partly hidden by a cap tilted to the side (see fig. 1). It is bereft of cover lines except for the proverbial 'Ça c'est Paris' ('that's Paris'), which French popular singer Mistinguett made famous with her eponymous 1927 song. 'Paris c'est une blonde', she sang, 'Qui plaît à tout le monde [. . .] Tous ceux qui la connaissent/Grisés par ses caresses/S'en vont mais reviennent toujours/Paris à ton amour!/Ça, c'est Paris! Ça c'est Paris' (Paris is a blonde/Everybody likes [. . .] All those who know her/Drunk on her caresses/Leave but always return/Here's to your love, Paris/That's Paris/That's Paris).¹

For *L'Officiel*, as for many authors and artists, as I will be discussing in this book, Paris is a woman, the 'ça' ('that') which the magazine enjoins us to contemplate, at once the femininity the model signifies and the woman she poses as – the *Parisienne* of *Last Tango in Paris*, we learn within – the model's curly locks echoed, on the cover, in the typeface of the word 'Paris' the better to link the attractive face with the city's name, and to name the beautiful woman Paris. But 'ça' is also that which lies behind the front page; that which a cover line, by definition, announces as included in the magazine: a world of luxury goods, glamorous haunts, and fashionable lifestyles, made all the more seductive by the flow of enticing images and words that will pass by the eyes of the readers as they flick through the pages of the magazine. 'Ça c'est Paris', *L'Officiel* is telling us, a Paris captured in its pages, contained in it, indeed a Paris reduced to fit within the borders of the glossy as if the magazine itself, 'ça', were Paris, and to open it was to enter the French capital. The city is no longer a material city of flesh and stones, but a textualized city, a city put into words and images, fashioned by the work of photographers, stylists and journalists.

This book focuses on such a Paris, the Paris of discourse and more specifically that of the contemporary French fashion press, which, like many paintings, novels and films on the French capital, have glamorized the city and sustained its mythical status, not least as a fashion city. For one of the main objects of discourse of the fashion media is the city, with many images and words devoted to key locations such as New York, London or Paris. However, whilst the cities of literature and the visual arts have long been a popular topic of enquiry,² with Paris in particular a key object of interrogation, scholars have largely failed to approach the cities of the fashion press, including the French capital. They have thus neglected one of Paris's central sites of representation. As a consequence, the sheer reach of the discursive field in which the meanings and values that have been attributed to Paris circulate has not fully been captured.

The neglect of the Paris of fashion media must also be seen in the light of the lack of attention, in academic studies of fashion, to the field of fashion journalism. Although fashion has become a central field of enquiry in social and cultural studies, the fashion media remain largely under-researched despite their sheer visibility and popularity in contemporary culture. However, the fashion press is central to the field of fashion, to the definition and consecration of its many agents and institutions, and although its significance has been repeatedly acknowledged,³ little is known about its discourse: about the objects it creates and represents, cities such as Paris included; about the values it conveys and is informed by; and about the way it operates *qua* discourse. Thus, although Paris has long been established as a dominant player in the global field of fashion, one of its most important institutions, the fashion media, has been given little attention, with the bulk of writings on Paris fashion devoted to its designers and past history.⁴

This book attends to these gaps in studies of the city, Paris and fashion, by focusing on French discourses on the French capital, and the fashion media in particular. Based on an original analysis of fashion writing and images in contemporary French fashion magazines and newspapers, *Fashioning the City* interrogates the 'Paris' of the fashion press to comment on the way it has contributed to the reproduction of the Paris myth and the consecration of the city in the 'geography of fashion'.⁵ In doing so the book sheds light on the dense network of French texts and ideas which French fashion media discourse is caught in, carrying through time visions of the French capital. For, as Caroline Evans argues, and it is a comment equally true of 'written fashion':⁶

Contemporary fashion images are bearers of meaning and, as such, stretch simultaneously back to the past and forward into the future. [...] they can generate new ideas and meanings and themselves carry discourse into the future, so that they take their place in a chain of meaning, or a relay of signifiers, rather than being an end product of linear history.⁷

This is particularly true of the discourse of the French fashion media on Paris, in which the values, concepts and images that inform both 'written fashion' and fashion images reach back to earlier times and earlier genres of discourse in their ways of seeing the city. The nineteenth century in particular, as I discuss in Part I, saw a proliferation of texts on Paris central to its construction as an object of desire, a site of prestige and a place of sartorial elegance and fashionable display. The contemporary French fashion press has supported this proliferation, carrying into the present day mythical visions of the city and further contributing to its celebration.

Thus *Fashioning the City* consists of two parts. Part I (chapters 1, 2 and 3) foregrounds some of the themes and ideas that have long run through discourses on Paris in the French fields of literature and the arts, and which, I show in Part II (chapters 4, 5, 6, 7), also inform representations of the city in the contemporary French fashion media. Although in the first part of the book I focus on French visions of the capital, in some instances I also comment on non-French texts, drawing attention to the broad reach of some of the recurring themes and images in discourses on Paris, a reach the international circulation of many of the French texts mentioned has also supported.

Thus, the book starts with a discussion of the rise and consecration of Paris as the capital of France and its celebration as a world-leading city (Chapter 1). In doing so it addresses a key topic in debates on French cultural life: the centralism of French culture, with the division Paris/the provinces and the dominance of the former over the latter. Comment is made on the material fashioning of the city and its staging as a site of prestige superior to the provinces, as well as on its putting into discourse in a wide range of texts that have supported the mythologizing of the capital and the split Paris/province.

In Chapter 2, attention is given more specifically to the making of Paris as a fashion city. The focus is on its geography of fashion and the spaces, sites and institutions that have emerged, both on the city's stage and in discursive constructions of the French capital, as key places for the production and consumption of fashion. Indeed, places such as the Parisian

boulevards which literary character Emma Bovary, for instance, fantasized about when, living in a small French provincial city, she 'bought a street map of Paris and with the tip of her finger, on the map, [. . .] shopped in the capital',⁸ were also real spaces of fashionable display to which artists and writers gave a symbolic dimension that cannot be split from the city as experienced in the flesh.

Thus in Chapter 2 as in Chapter 1 I discuss Paris as an entity at the junction of both real phenomenological space and of discourse, as a textualized city of literature, painting, photography and cinema that has fed into practices, in the same way that practices have fed into its representations. The discursive city is no less central to experience than the city one encounters when walking through its streets. It too impacts on ways of thinking, seeing and being. It too has potency: that of its highly visible presence in the 'mediascape'⁹ and the collective imaginary it nourishes. It is this presence I focus on when commenting on the Paris of the contemporary French fashion press.

In Chapter 2, the role of fashion in the cultural economy of cities is also discussed, which draws attention to the importance of the field of fashion in cities' quest for global hegemony, an idea I also comment on in Part II.

Chapter 3 concerns the notion of discourse. Through a critical engagement with the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, the chapter offers a definition of the terms 'fashion discourse' and 'fashion media discourse' that sets out the parameters for an understanding of the way media texts work to create value and meanings within a given field – fashion – and a given culture – the French.

In Part II, and to further engage with the idea of the 'symbolic production'¹⁰ of Paris and its putting into discourse, I turn to the contemporary French fashion media and unpack four key themes: the trope of 'Paris, *capitale de la mode*' (Chapter 4), the figure of 'la Parisienne' (the Parisian woman) (Chapter 5), the figure of 'la passante' (the female passer-by) (Chapter 6), and the Eiffel Tower. These have all been central to French discourses on the capital in literature and the visual arts, and are mobilized regularly by the contemporary French fashion media. The Parisian woman, and her frequent visualization in the figure of a Parisian passer-by, the Parisian *passante*, is presented as the apex of fashion. The incarnation of Paris, she is the model to follow, a visual and written metaphor, therefore, for the high symbolic value that has long been attributed to the French capital. Similarly, the Eiffel Tower often features in fashion images as a sign of Paris and Paris fashion, whilst the status of '*capitale de la mode*' is regularly attributed

to the French city. In the process, a certain discourse on fashion and the city is produced, and various values are attributed to the French capital; a certain 'Paris' is created. Thus critical attention is given to the significance of the French fashion media in the promoting of the French capital and its contributing to the centrality and high visibility, discussed in Part I, of the city in French life.

By attending to the discourse of the French fashion press on Paris, this book brings together four significant areas of research in social and cultural theory: fashion, the city, the media, and the Paris myth. Through its take on the theme of fashion and the metropolis, the book illuminates both the role of the fashion press in the construction of the city, and the way fashion and urban life are connected in such media. Through its interrogation of the discourse of the French fashion press on Paris it contributes to knowledge both on the discursive Paris and on Paris fashion and French culture. Finally, through its critical attention to the notion of discourse and the idea of discursive production, it sheds light on processes of media representation. In doing so it draws attention to the diversity of texts from various genres and historical times amongst which the values attributed a particular object – here Paris – in a particular textual space – the fashion media – and at a particular time – contemporary France – can circulate.

Part I

I

PARIS, FRANCE

Paris is both a material and a discursive reality, a city of buildings, streets and people, but whose physical tangibility has been the object of a multitude of words and images. Its creation is a product of these two realities. Through them it has arisen as a central site of social distinction, a space, both physical and imagined, attributed a superior value in the socio-cultural hierarchy of French and foreign cities, and a high degree of resonance in the collective landscape. Both a symbol and an inhabited geographical space, Paris has been placed at the center of the French nation, as I discuss in this chapter.

I first comment on the rise of Paris as the capital of France. I discuss the way this rise has been paralleled and supported by a pronounced centralism of French political, economic and cultural life, with Paris constructed as the site of prestige – at once a representative of the French nation but also above and superior to it. This has translated into an opposition Paris/*province* with the latter the devalued half of the relation. I then turn to the putting into discourse, in France, of the capital, to comment on the importance of the many texts, and genres of texts, that have participated in the construction of the Paris myth and the consecration of the city in the collective imaginary, a consecration that many non-French texts have also supported.

‘Paris, c’est la France’

In 250/225 BC a Celtic tribe called Parisii settled on what was later to be known as Paris’s Ile de la Cité. Named Lutecia in 54 BC, it was conquered in the same year by Julius Caesar, to become part of the Roman Empire.

In 300 AD 'Lutèce' took the name 'Paris', having spread in the meantime across the river Seine onto the Left Bank. In 508 Clovis, king of the Franks from 481 to 511, made Paris the capital of his kingdom. Merovingians (500–750s), Carolingians (754–987) and Capetians (987–1789) succeeded one another as rulers of the city until the 1789 Revolution.¹

The city's history has been punctuated by periods of growth and success, as in the years 1000 to 1300, which saw a flourishing trade on the right bank and a thriving scholarship – including the foundation of theology college La Sorbonne – on the left. It has also endured decline and setbacks, with recurring bouts of famine and violent episodes of social and political tensions culminating in the 1789 Revolution.² Paris was then reestablished as the governing heart of France, returning from Versailles. Indeed, King Louis XIV (*r.* 1643–1715) and his successors – Louis XV (*r.* 1715–74) and Louis XVI (*r.* 1774–92) – had been reluctant to embrace the city, preferring to reside outside its walls, fearful as they were of what they saw as the unavoidable decay generated by its steady growth.³ By the mid-eighteenth century Paris had nevertheless risen to fame to become a city distinguished for its significant size and its 'cultural modernity', the capital of letters and public opinion with the Palais Royal a key literary quarter.⁴ The growth of the city – which reached a population of 650,000 in 1789 – was accompanied by booming commercial and cultural activities.⁵ Intellectuals from around the world moved there, lending further weight to its status as literary capital; the 'Kingless Capital of Enlightenment' as Jones puts it.⁶

In 1789 the Revolution not only 'brought the capital back to Paris from Versailles',⁷ but also signaled the growing centralism of French culture: the concentration in the city of administrative, economic and cultural powers, which the recurring debates on the subject in French political life have still not found an answer to.⁸ Drawing on the work of Querrien, Prendergast notes that 'a capital is a political and cultural "centre", with the power and authority to dominate and protect a wider "territory"; to keep in place a "social hierarchy" and to "subjugate a population . . . to a common heritage"'.⁹ This comment is particularly true of France, where a strong centralism has long been a defining trait of the nation – a 'French specificity', as Deyon puts it.¹⁰

In the sixteenth century Montaigne had declared: 'I am French only through this great city [Paris] [. . .] the glory of France',¹¹ but the Revolution truly consecrated the dominant role of the capital in both the nation's everyday life and its imaginary. New at the time was the desire to turn France into a single being and nation whose greatness would reside in the

prestige attributed its capital, which thereby became 'the symbol of the agreement between the parts and the whole'.¹² France was reorganized into clearly defined departments, giving Paris better control over the French territory.¹³ From then on, and in spite of various projects towards decentralization, the political, administrative and cultural life of France would revolve around its Parisian center. As Corbin notes, 'by taking the Bastille, Parisians conquered the right to claim to guide the whole of France'.¹⁴

After the French Revolution the educational system, for instance, was centralized, with the most prestigious schools and universities all based in Paris.¹⁵ Moving there became a trajectory necessary to one's move up the socio-cultural hierarchy.¹⁶ During the first half of the twentieth century 50 per cent of all French students studied at the University of Paris.¹⁷ At the end of that century Parisian students were no longer a majority, but the Ile-de-France region, with Paris at its heart, still included a significant proportion of the French academic population as well as those working in the sciences – 30 and 55 per cent respectively.¹⁸ Today Parisian institutions still dominate the educational hierarchy, with elite schools such as Sciences-Po (Institut d'Etudes Politiques), HEC (Hautes Etudes Commerciales), the Ecole Normale or Polytechnique all based in, or on the outskirts of, Paris. Similarly, all powerful administrative and regulatory bodies such as the Conseil d'Etat, the Cour des Comptes and the Inspection des Finances are located in the French capital, and so are the headquarters of most major companies.¹⁹ Thus in the late twentieth century Paris hosted twice as many managers and engineers as the provinces,²⁰ an illustration of the 'imbalance' which, George observes, exists 'between functions of direction, reserved for the capital, and functions of execution, reserved for *la province*, a division characteristic of France compared to other European countries'.²¹

Moreover, during the second half of the nineteenth century a railway network was developed, centered on the capital and organized according to it.²² This network was just one instance of the growing centralization that took place at the time of the Second Empire.²³ The transport system, whether by car, train or plane, carried into the twentieth century the 'système étoilé' ('star-shaped system') inherited from royal roads and concentrated on Paris,²⁴ with the Ile-de-France region attracting, in the early 1990s, '90 per cent of State funds allocated to public transport'.²⁵ At the time it also absorbed '70 per cent of the expenditure of the ministry of culture'.²⁶

The strengthening of centralism that the Revolution heralded also signaled the subsuming of the nation by its capital. With the Revolution,

Paris emerged as that which was above local particularisms – the space for the expression, celebration and consecration of the nation,²⁷ as many spectacular Parisian stagings make clear.

In 1888, for instance, the French government instigated an event intended to celebrate the republican spirit by inviting all French mayors to an impressive banquet set in the capital.²⁸ The 1889 gathering led the newspaper *Le Temps* to state in August that year that ‘never since the 14th of July 1790 nor in any other country had such a spectacle been seen: the whole nation gathered together at the same place’.²⁹ More than 20,000 mayors attended the 1900 Grand Palais reception.³⁰ In 2000 the Senate hosted a similar banquet in Paris’s Luxembourg Gardens, bringing together French mayors and their spouses for the 14th of July celebration of the Republic.³¹

Ihl argues that the Third Republic banquets supported the legitimization of Paris as the ‘privileged site of assembly’, and this comment is equally true of the 2000 event.³² Indeed, the city is where the *République*, constructed as ‘one and undivided’, is celebrated and administered,³³ a unity and indivisibility *de facto* established as synonymous with a nation reduced to its capital. Thus Ihl argues that, like the festivities that had been taking place there on the 14th of July every year since 1880 – and are still taking place there, with the yearly Champs-Élysées parade systematically broadcast on French TV – the banquets signaled a dematerialization of Paris.³⁴ For such events have helped turn the French city, a material and empirical place, into a symbolic space of projection, in which a sense of nationhood is articulated.³⁵ Thus symbolized, Paris has emerged as transcending local particularisms; Ihl notes that its construction as the repository of the nation’s republican imaginary and identity has counterbalanced ‘attachment to the land’.³⁶

The material building of spectacular Parisian sites also testifies to the importance of the capital for the staging of the nation and the state, its assimilation to all things prestigious. This was already the case under King Philip II Augustus (*r.* 1180–1223), who in 1190 began the construction of the Louvre as a defensive building. In the late sixteenth century, and after it had become the official site of royal residence in the fourteenth century, Henry IV (*r.* 1589–1610) refurbished the palace, placing it at the heart of his project to display the nation and his power.³⁷ In the late seventeenth century Louis XIV did the same, giving the palace a new façade as well as initiating a series of projects to give the city more ‘monumentality’.³⁸

Under the reign of Napoleon III (1852–70) this strategy of spectacularization and inscription of the state in the material make-up of the city found a particularly impressive expression.³⁹ Napoleon III appropriated

the French capital as a means of strengthening his image and that of France, for example with the 1855 Exposition, an advertisement for the city's modernity and its excellence in the arts and trade and the industry.⁴⁰ However, his desire to display the city, and through it himself, as well as the state and the nation, took on a particularly spectacular and ambitious form with Baron Georges Haussmann, his Prefect of the Seine between 1853 and 1870. During this period, the Prefect presided over a major reconstruction of the city by replacing the many squalid, narrow streets and passageways of medieval Paris with large straight arteries of boulevards that were to give pedestrians vantage points on key Parisian monuments and buildings.⁴¹ *Places* (squares) would break the line of boulevards and constitute oases of health in the middle of the city.⁴² The congestion arising from densely packed streets would be eliminated, allowing for a fluid traffic of carriages.⁴³ A sewage system was also put into place to purify a city still marked by dirt and stench, and so were 15,000 gaslights illuminating streets lined by shops open until 10 p.m.⁴⁴ Paris was redefined to become a unified and unifying space,⁴⁵ one that could easily be grasped and made sense of 'at a glance'.⁴⁶ The building work continued well after Napoleon III's time, and was only completed after 1900.⁴⁷ '2.5 billions *franc-or*' had been spent by 1890, the equivalent at the time of the annual budget for the whole of France.⁴⁸

When Haussmann took on the redesigning and modernizing of Paris, large straight streets were already a feature of the capital. As Bernard observes, Haussmann's Paris was outlined in the seventeenth-century geography of the city.⁴⁹ At the time, *places* (such as the *Place des Vosges*, first named *Place Royale*), and broad, straight avenues such as the *Grand Boulevard* on the old city ramparts – 'boulevard' indeed comes from the German 'bolwerc', 'bulwark' or 'rampart'⁵⁰ – had already begun to be inscribed in the Parisian landscape.⁵¹ The Prefect, however, made wide arteries a more systematic and spectacular component of the city. One aim was to control possible revolutionary activities, keeping barricades at bay, and also allowing for a better defense of the capital in case of aggression. However, as many cultural commentators have noted, the Haussmannian reconstruction was not purely military and defensive in intention.⁵² Indeed, barricades certainly did not disappear from Paris. They were 'resurrected', Benjamin notes, 'during the Commune', stretching 'across the great boulevards, often reaching a height of two stories'.⁵³ Rather, central to the Emperor's project was also the wish to 'show off' the city⁵⁴ by offering the world a vision of the capital as modern, bourgeois, ordered and clean,

at peace with itself, indeed enjoying itself through the consumption of the many goods showcased in the boulevards' windows. Parisians and tourists were invited 'out of doors to take part in the vast pantomime of the imperial city'.⁵⁵ With Haussmann, as Hancock puts it, 'Paris itself was being staged as spectacle'.⁵⁶ Café terraces, boutiques, department stores and sumptuous façades were now supposed to take over barricades and scenes of insurrection in visions of the capital. The Parisian bourgeoisie openly displayed its wealth and luxurious lifestyle, whilst poor people were forced to move to the periphery of the city.⁵⁷ Haussmann's Paris became a template for France, the model to follow, with the streets of cities such as Lyon redesigned according to his vision of the capital.⁵⁸

Napoleon III's spectacularization of Paris and the state, and indeed a state associated with the Parisian territory, found an echo in twentieth-century France with four successive Fifth République presidents – Georges Pompidou, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, François Mitterand and Jacques Chirac – eager to leave their mark on the French landscape by way of various projects located in Paris. These projects have become known as *les grands travaux*, with the vast majority pertaining to the field of culture.⁵⁹ The rest of France has featured relatively little in this quest for personal, governmental and national prestige, with projects there often left to local initiatives.⁶⁰

Pompidou's presidency saw the creation of the Pompidou Center, commonly known as 'Beaubourg'. Its building, Short argues, was an answer to 'the perennial French need to play the role of cultural heavyweight', and a manifestation of France's appropriation of the field of culture to position itself as a leading country on the global map.⁶¹ Subsequent presidential projects, often located in Paris, have further reinforced the representative role of the capital on the global stage and sharpened its 'global edge'.⁶² Thus Giscard presided over the building of La Villette, the redevelopment of Orsay as a museum and the building of the Institut du Monde Arabe. With François Mitterand, the *grands travaux* found their most impressive and often controversial manifestations. Amongst them is the construction in the Louvre's Cour Napoleon of a glass pyramid designed by I.M. Pei and inaugurated in 1989. As for Chirac's *grands travaux* legacy, this is exemplified by the musée du quai Branly, opened in 2006.

Paris then, as Higonet notes, 'has always borne the mark of the state, be it royal, imperial, or republican', and more than in other countries, the state has become associated with the French capital, and the nation with Paris.⁶³ Thus, as Jones also observes, a large proportion of the French sites and