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Following the *flâneur*: a methodological and textual critique

My take on 'writing cities' will focus on Paris in the 19th century and mediated

depictions of the American urban landscape in the era around the end of World War II.

I'll be doing this by using the figure of the *flâneur* as a guide.

I will begin by introducing him, and, as I will detail, it is nearly always 'a him'.

Type 'flâneur' into an online dictionary and what comes up is: stroller, and then:

pejorative, colon, idler, loafer, lounger. Personally I'm not quite sure whether you can be

both a stroller and a lounger. As I have a certain fondness for this character I will give

him the benefit of the doubt and focus on the first definition: the flâneur as stroller, and

more specifically as stroller in an urban context.

If we tried to pin the flâneur down a little more, not an easy task since he is prone

to wandering, we could spot him from an identity parade of urban archetypes courtesy of

the following definition provided by sociologist Chris Jenks:

> The flâneur is the spectator and depicter of modern life, most specifically in relation to
> contemporary art and the sights of the city. The flâneur moves through space and among the
> people with a viscosity that both enables and privileges vision…The flâneur possesses a power, it
> walks at will, freely and seemingly without purpose, but simultaneously with an inquisitive
> wonder and an infinite capacity to absorb the activities of the collective, – often formulated as 'the
> crowd.'[1]

Now at times the *flâneur's* persona has been aligned with another paradigmatic leisured

figure from a slightly earlier era, the dandy, but this is misleading. The dandy's role was

to be extravagant (as Adam Ant in his homage understood all too well); his major

concern was to be seen, rather than to see. Dandyism is, according to George Walden,

"vanity, frivolity, hedonism, a preoccupation with externals."[2] By contrast, in order to

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[1] Chris Jenks, *Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), p.146.
[2] George Walden, *Who is a Dandy? Dandyism and the Regency Dandy George Brummell* (London: Gibson Square, 2002), p. 35.

carry out his vocation effectively the *flâneur* relies absolutely on anonymity. It is this clandestine nature that arguably enhances the *flâneur's* appeal for the social scientist: he becomes our eyes. He acquires empirical data by being there, by strolling, looking, hearing, smelling, feeling. It is the combination of these factors, allied to the eventual writing up of the data – often in the form of poetry, which defines a *flâneur*.

In a sense then the *flâneur* is more identifiable for what he does - engaging in the activity of *flânerie* - than for whom he is, or what he looks like. The *flâneur* is a conflation of a person, a metaphor, a way of seeing and a way of expressing. Focussing on the activity of *flânerie* another sociologist, Keith Tester, argues that, 'Flânerie is the observation of the fleeting and the transitory which is the other half of modernity to the permanent and central sense of self.'[3]

The flâneur observes this aspect of modernity by setting up a vantage point to view, with something akin to a totalizing gaze, the metropolis - that most geographically overt manifestation of modernity. In the late 1980s Michel De Certeau wrote of the thrilling yet near incomprehensible sensation of seeing Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center, 'Beneath the haze stirred up by the winds, the urban island, a sea in the middle of the sea…a wave of verticals. Its agitation is momentarily arrested by vision. A gigantic mass is immobilized before our eyes.'[4]

But when the *flâneur* emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century, such a perspective was not available. There was no distance to be found in cities that were expanding outwards and also encroaching in upon themselves and their inhabitants. It took a special skill, as possessed by the French poet Charles Baudelaire, widely attributed

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[3] Keith Tester, ed., *The flâneur* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 7.
[4] Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1988), p. 91.

with 'inventing' the figure of the *flâneur*, to extricate oneself, or one's fictional narrators, out of this scene, *and* to articulate in *words* what a helicopter panning shot now routinely does for us in pictures.

What is important here is the position (both literal and metaphoric) of the *flâneur* in relation to the metropolis, a point David Frisby raises by highlighting, 'marginality of the flâneur's location within the city (seeking asylum in the crowd) and within his class (marginal to the bourgeoisie and, downwardly mobile).'[5]

In being able to observe the city, *flâneur*s such as Baudelaire thus relied upon an inate ability of perspective and on their particular *social* vantage point. Of equal importance to the flâneur's development were more material circumstances inscribed in the urban fabric. Paris, home of Baudelaire for much of his life, was one of the first cities in the world were electric lamps were used, a minor fact, but one that made after-dark leisured strolling much safer (for men at least). Of even greater importance was that in the 15 years after 1822 (the year following Baudelaire's birth), approximately 30 pedestrian shopping arcades were created in Paris by the erection of glass roofs across inner city streets or passages.[6]

Walter Benjamin, the great chronicler of Baudelaire and the *flâneur* in general, highlighted that prior to this development it had been

> impossible to stroll about everywhere in the city. Before Haussmann, wide pavements were rare; the narrow ones afforded little protection from vehicles. Flânerie could hardly have assumed the importance it did without the arcades…It is in this world that the flâneur is at home; he provides the arcade…with its chronicler and philosopher.[7]

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[5] David Frisby, *Cityscape of Modernity,* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), p. 33.

[6] Walter Benjamin, 'Paris: capital of the nineteenth century' [1935] in Philip Kasinitiz, ed., *Metropolis: Centre and Symbol of Our Times* (London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 46-7.

[7] Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Vol. 4, 1938-1940* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press,. 2003), p. 19.

Benjamin, firmly believed that the *flâneur* was historically *specific* to the arcades of mid 19th century Paris and adopted an absolutism that suggested *flânerie* began with the construction of arcades in that city and ended with the development of the department stores towards the end of that century.

> Focussing on the end of this chronology Parkhurst-Ferguson reminds us, that:
> [A]lthough the department store is a logical outgrowth of the arcade, the new site alters flânerie almost beyond recognition. If the arcades offer the flâneur a privileged site, they do so because the space they offer is at once public and private. The flâneur in the arcade entertains a singular relationship to the city, one that is emblematic of his relationship to society at large: he is neither fully outside, on the street, nor altogether inside, in the shops…The space of commodification created by the department store radically modifies the individual's relationship to the city and to society, a space that abolishes the lines of demarcation distinguishing observer from observed.[8]

But I contend that although this dramatic rupture affects the practice of *flânerie* the impulse behind it has been resilient and more geographically dispersed than that suggested by Baudelaire and Benjamin. Geographer Rob Shields reminds us that aspects of *flânerie* were clearly expressed by antecedents to the great French poet, indeed he posits that the genealogy of *flânerie* dates from the democratization of Paris under the French Revolution: 'The *flâneur*, or street prowler and wanderer, is glorified in the work of Balzac and Alexandre Dumas, and only *later*, in a different tone, in the work of modernists such as Aragon and Baudelaire.'[9]

Yet more contentiously, one might dare to sketch a family tree of *flânerie* that extends beyond the self-referential and rarefied confines of French literature. By doing so we might then encounter Thomas De Quincey's autobiographical work, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater,* published in 1821, the year that Baudelaire (who later translated the book into French) was born.[10] It vividly depicts urban life among, but separate from,

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[8] Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, 'The *flâneur* on and off the streets of Paris' in Keith Tester, ed., *The flâneur*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 34-35.

[9] Rob Shields, 'Fancy footwork: Walter Benjamin's notes on *flânerie*' in Keith Tester, ed., *The flâneur*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 62.

[10] Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* [1821] (London: Penquin Classics, 2003).

the crowd, viewed from a similar downwardly mobile, leisured and drugged male perspective that Baudelaire later adopts.

Another tale set in London, this time fictional and written by an American, Edgar Allan Poe's 1840 short story *The Man of the Crowd*, was similarly a major influence on Baudelaire, and its significance was also stressed by Benjamin, which rather contradicted his insistence on the exclusivity of Paris in the formulation of the *flâneur*. Although, as Mike Savage reminds us, Benjamin's interest in the *flâneur*…was, 'not primarily concerned with delineating it as an actual social type which existed in specific urban historical settings, but as a theoretical, critical, counter to the idea of the mass.'[11] Issues that were addressed in much of Poe's work that he so admired.

Benjamin's project was principally a search a search for the signs, metaphors and illusions of modernity. His intention was not to form these 'traces' into a definitive linear historical narrative; rather, they were to remain as fragmentary glimpses of previous worlds able to be connected and reconnected in a range of ways to illuminate forgotten/alternative histories. Via the act of strolling the *flâneur* did not just observe urban life; but was, according to Benjamin, engaged in an 'archaeological' process of unearthing the myths and 'collective dreams' of modernity. When one looks at *flânerie* in this way, one can then posit an argument, as I will now, that despite encountering cultural and social differences beyond the glass-domed confines of the French capital the *flâneur* has been able to morph and exist in a variety of settings.

The flâneur has long since sauntered from the streets of Paris and at times has even changed gender in the process. Traditionally, the *flâneur* has been male. Throughout

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[11] Mike Savage, 'Walter Benjamin's Urban Thought' in Mike Crang & Nigel Thrift, eds., *Thinking Space* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 38.

history the city, in western societies, has tended to be a gender bounded space, women have traditionally had less opportunity to engage in indulgent practices such as late night urban strolling, principally due to gendered conventions concerning the expectation of looking after children, as well as safety concerns, concerns often propagated by men, and by male artists. When they were in cities it was for function rather than leisure. Elizabeth Wilson has pointed out though that women were sometimes present in public spaces in 19th century cities, but were often wearing some sort of disguise, which they had to do since, as Janet Wolff explains, there was no role as *flâneuse* available to women:[12] They could be prostitutes, widows, lesbians or murder victims but the 'respectable' woman could not stroll alone in the city.[13] In the present day the *flâneur's* gendered role is not so stable as it once was, but generally the city (particularly after dark) has not been a place equated with lone women. Rather cities have been seen as sites in which the male gaze (both heterosexual and homosexual) has dominated.

Given that lone women have had less access to the late night city, it is unsurprising that female artists and academics have been less engaged than their male counterparts in representing and analyzing appropriation of after-dark spaces. However, it is worth noting here that following Benjamin's work, which culminated in his unfinished *Arcades Project* in the 1930s, there were very few academic studies of the *flâneur* from *any* gendered perspective (male or female, straight or gay) until the mid-1990s, the academic community perhaps having been persuaded by the assertion, put forward by Michael Bull among others, that it *was* a figure specific to 19th century Paris, and about

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[12] Elizabeth Wilson 'The invisible *flâneur'*, in Sophie Watson and Katherine Gibson, eds., *Post-modern Cities and Spaces*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1995).

[13] Janet Wolff 'The invisible *flaneuse*: women and the literature of modernity', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 2 (3) (1985): 41. Cited in Deborah Stevenson, *Cities and Urban Cultures* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003), p. 66.

whom there was little more to say.[14] It is only in the last 15 years that spirited academic debate concerning *flânerie* and its relevance has restarted.

The period of abeyance in studies of the flâneur is surprising given that between Benjamin's writings and the recent renewal of interest, the public was regularly presented with what I believe were numerous updated manifestations of the *flâneur* in a variety of media. In literature, on canvas, in song, and on the big screen, the small screen, and, more recently, the cctv screen (as in Mike Davis' book on Los Angeles, *City of Quartz*), audiences have, consciously or otherwise, gazed on the city through the refracting lens of mediated variants of the *flâneur,* as I will now detail.[15]

In the two decades prior to World War II, and particularly in the 1920s, the popular image of the city was still one of expansion: upwards, outwards, onwards, a view given impetus by the Futurism art movement just before World War I (a cataclysm that for a while stalled such optimism). Futurism extolled industrialisation, speed, modernity and automation, 'virtues' expressed, and it must be said, critically questioned, in film maker Fritz Lang's 1927 vision of the future, *Metropolis.*

In the post-war period by contrast, an image began to be constructed of the city as a site for artful melancholia, as articulated earlier by Benjamin, Georg Simmel and Siegfried Kracauer, and with it came a new form of the *flâneur*. This *Zelig* like character had now long since left the Parisian arcades; he was now more likely to be found in a shabby office with a broken Venetian blind concealing the door, or sat behind the wheel of a Buick. His language had changed too, though this was hard to tell, since he was as a

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[14] Michael Bull, *Sounding Out the City: Personal Stereos and the Management of Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2000).

[15] Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage, 1992).

taciturn as ever, traversing the city through the pages and film frames of pulp fiction, sites

with a sheen of sophistication courtesy of an epithet taken from the old country: *noir*.

Out of the shadows of this sombre, after-hours Cold War urban setting a figure

who appears who can be seen as analogous to the 19th century *flâneur*, the private

investigator. This character possesses many of the traits of the *flâneur*; there is a sense

that they can see us, often camouflaged in black, lurking in the expressionistic shadows,

but we cannot see them; theirs is the all-seeing eye.

Film critic Paul Simpson asserts that when in the 1947 film *Out of the Past* Robert

Mitchum - playing the role of ex private investigator Jeff Bailey – 'stared out at the world

from under those heavy lids, there was a genuine sense of moral neutrality.'[16] By virtue of

his detached, marginal vantage point, he seems to be possessed of almost otherworldly

abilities. Christophe Den Tandt has taken up this omniscient characteristic, possessed by

stereotypical *noir* anti-heroes such as 'Sam Spade', penned by Dashiell Hammett, and

Raymond Chandler's 'Philip Marlowe', in order to show how something as fragmentary

as a city can be:

> [R]econstituted by the efforts of a protagonist who serves as a retotalizing device… Chandler or Hammett's protagonists are white male fantasies of empowerment, endowed with a quasi-miraculous license to exercise their skills wherever they please…[17]

This sense of the private detective possessing an all-seeing 'I' is also pursued by novelist

Paul Auster in *The New York Trilogy*, particularly in the first story, *City of Glass*.   As

well as being a work that addresses the links between author, character and reader, and

the use and mis-use of language, this story concerns itself with a close examination of the

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[16] Paul Simpson, 'Film Noir' in *The Rough Guide to Cult Movies*. (London: Rough Guides, 2001).

[17] Christophe Den Tandt, 'Down These (Gender-Divided and Ethnically Fractured) Mean Streets: The Urban Thriller in the Age of Multiculturalism and Minority Writing'. In GUST (written and edited by the Ghent Urban Studies Team): *The Urban Condition: Space, Community, and Self in the Contemporary Metropolis* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1999).

nature of identity in the city: how one lives with one's own identity, projects it, and interprets that of others. This is all told through a narrative that plays with the conventions of the pursuit thriller, in which the central character, Quinn, finds himself drawn to the voyeurism (one directed towards Manhattan and to the individual he is pursuing) of being a private detective:

> The detective is the one who looks, who listens, who moves through this morass of objects and events in search of the thought, the idea that will pull all these things together and make sense of them…The reader sees the world through the detective's eye, experiencing the proliferation of its details as if for the first time. He has become awake to the things around him, as if, because of the attentiveness he now brings to them, they might begin to carry a meaning other than the simple fact of their existence. Private eye. The term held a triple meaning for Quinn. Not only was it the letter 'I', standing for 'investigator', it was 'I' in the upper case, the tiny life-bud buried in the body of the breathing self. At the same time, it was the physical eye of the writer, the eye of the man who looks out from himself into the world and demands that the world reveal itself to him.[18]

Here we see the dialectic that connects the private detective and the *flâneur*. Although their apparent interest is in the crowd, fundamentally a more solipsistic and arguably narcissistic agenda is at work, one that is concerned with a sense of self and the feasibility of being able to forge any meaningful connections to one's external surroundings. The theme running through these works is a simultaneous attraction and repulsion, towards the desire to connect in the urban environment *and* the yearning for isolation.

Author and occasional philosopher, Alain de Botton, has recently taken up this last idea in his meditation on travelling, landscapes and art, *The Art of Travel*, in which he looks at the pronounced thematic similarities between Baudelaire and the American post-war landscape painter, Edward Hopper, whose work is indelibly associated with representations of isolation.[19]

The American painter discovered Baudelaire's poetry on a visit to Paris in 1906 and was instantly drawn to it, reading and reciting it throughout his life, "the attraction is

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[18] Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 8.

[19] Alain De Botton, *The Art of Travel* (London: Penquin, 2002).

not hard to understand: there was a shared interest in city life, modernity, and the solace of the night. When confronted with the lost looking figures that populate Hopper's work, we become quasi-*flâneur*s, as we gaze at the nameless faces and fill in their back stories; the what-ifs; the if-onlys, empathising, pitying, or shunning, according to mood, and to our own circumstances, inventing urban fantasies along the way. Part of the appeal of many of Hopper paintings, such as *Nighthawks* is that the isolation is made poignant and enticing. The vantage point allows us to be on the side of the outsider against the insiders.

When our imaginations inhabit these canvasses we invest the images with a certain reality and for a while perhaps even live this borrowed life. Perhaps it is most accurate to suggest that what the public, and possibly artists, increasingly seek, experience and articulate, is a mediated post-modern simulacrum of *flânerie*, a substitution of signs for the real.

However to conclude we should remember that the *flâneur* has *always* been principally a mythic, and in a sense mediated, figure, one possessing, as Rob Shields says, 'something of the quality of oral tradition and bizarre urban myth.'[20] *Flânerie* now still serves two principal functions, one, as Mike Featherstone states, as 'a way of reading urban texts, a methodology for uncovering the traces of social meaning embedded in the layered fabric of the city' and secondly, as a stance that helps one to cope with the shock and discontinuity experienced in the modern city.[21]

Such discontinuities show no sign of abating, and thus it is of little surprise that the impulse for *flânerie* shows no sign of receding; we now just encounter it in new ways,

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[20] Rob Shields, 'Fancy footwork: Walter Benjamin's notes on *flânerie*' in Keith Tester, ed., *The flâneur*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 63.

[21] Mike Featherstone, 'The *flâneur*, the city and virtual public life' in *Urban Studies*, 35(5-6) (1998): 909-25, p. 910. Cited in Deborah Stevenson, *Cities and Urban Cultures* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003), p. 63.

as highlighted by those involved in studies of the *cyberflâneur* a figure who, it has been claimed, is free 'in the mode of Baudelaire in 19th century Paris, to wander freely through the spaces of the cyber city listening in to other people's conversation, perhaps choosing to participate, maybe opting simply to observe,' an activity that begets the unsettling term 'lurking', that transports us to the shadows of 1850s Parisian arcades; and to being *a part of*, but forever *apart from*, the crowd.[22]

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[22] Deborah Stevenson, *Cities and Urban Cultures* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2003), p. 131.

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