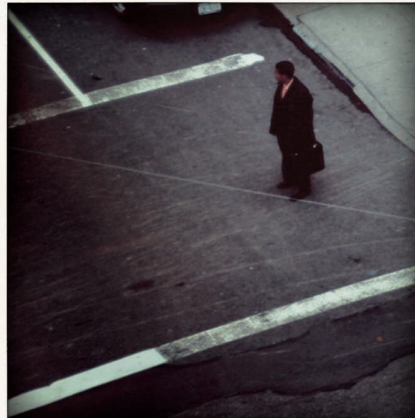


Critical Perspectives on the European Mediasphere



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Dragons and Arcades: Towards a Discursive Construction of the *Flâneur*

Ilija Tomanić Trivundža

While one may dream of the flâneur, and even attempt to practise flânerie sporadically, we are as unlikely to meet a flâneur on the street as we are likely to see a dragon fly past.

Rob Shields (1994) *Fancy footwork: Walter Benjamin's Notes on Flânerie.*

1. INTRODUCTION

A detached observer, a poet, a shopping mall rat. A hero of modernity, a “fallen” public man, a barefoot amateur sociologist. A dandy, a reporter, a police informer. A sandwich man. A man. A woman. A child-like figure. An incognito prince, a man of the crowd. An ironic critic of modernity, its secret spectator, an idle stroller. A producer of texts. A prototypical consumer, a werewolf at large, a commodity. A criminal, a detective, a personification of urban modernity. A dialectical subject, a mystery-solver, a mystery himself. A literary figure, an urban myth.

At a brief glance, defining the figure of the solitary urban stroller-observer that first appeared on the streets of 19th-century Paris seems a rather bewildering task, and the temptation to leave the *flâneur* pinned down in the dusty cabinet of 19th-century curiosities would probably prevail, were it not for Walter Benjamin's insistence on the *flâneur's* privileged position in our understanding of modernity.

The usual starting-point for defining the *flâneur* is Walter Benjamin's (re) articulation of Baudelaire's hero of modernity (1863/1995), an incognito observer, a solitary (male) loiterer who strolls the streets and later the arcades of Paris, engaged in an act of passionate observation of the fast-paced spectacle of urban, capitalist modernity (Benjamin, 1999; 1939/2007). In this articulation, the *flâneur* appears as a symbol of modernity, at first act-

ing as its critical observer, only to become its victim, and eventually, its agent, whose cynical detachment has fallen prey to the overarching commoditisation of everyday life. The *flâneur* is thus seen essentially as a by-gone figure who “comes and goes with the [19th] century, moving on, and then off, the streets of Paris” (Parkhurst Ferguson, 1994: 39).

However, conceptualising the *flâneur* as a concrete historical phenomenon provides little help in explaining the continuing allure of the *flâneur* in the present. Quite the contrary, the iconic status the *flâneur* has acquired within contemporary social sciences over the past four decades has not depended on the *flâneur*'s socio-historical specificity but rather on his universal character, on the *flâneur*'s ability to serve as an articulation point of our understanding of modernity, of the issues concerning the changing notions of identity, subjectivity, observation, perception, knowledge acquisition and art production, set against the fast-changing backdrop of the urbanisation, industrialisation, technologisation, bureaucratisation and commoditisation of society. However, the popularisation of the concept came at a price, as the *flâneur* became “a generalized symbol of urban experience and cultural modernity [...] the contemporary critical discussions have produced as many images of the *flâneur* as there are the conceptions of the modern” (Gluck, 2003: 53).

Another major reason for the *flâneur*'s continuing conceptual elusiveness is his often unacknowledged multimodality: the writings on the *flâneur* seem to conflate three distinctive, yet rarely distinguished positions. On one level, the *flâneur* appears as a recognisable geo-historical phenomenon. As Victor Hugo put it in *Les Misérables* – “to wander is human, to *flâner* is Parisian”. On the second level, the *flâneur* is treated as an analytical concept. Rather than insisting on the *flâneur*, this position focuses instead on *flânerie* as a practice of observation that transgresses both the geographical and historical conditions of 19th-century Paris. More than to Hugo, this position is attuned to that of Honoré de Balzac, who in the *Physiologie du Mariage* wrote that “To *flâner* is a science; it is the gastronomy of the eye.” *Flânerie* is thus a particular mode of perception. Unlike the previous two, the third position does not treat the *flâneur* as an actual entity, but moves the concept into a metaphorical dimension. Instead of a social practice, *flânerie* becomes a method of (social) scientific investigation. Thus, for example, the *flâneur* in *The Arcades Project* is seen as Benjamin's description of a methodological approach (e.g. Frisby, 1994: 82; Buck-Morss, 1991) which focuses on the investigation of the surface and the mundane in order to reveal the hidden “deeper, underlying social forces of the present and its

obscured links to the past and future." (Ganeva, 2008: 31) Consequently, the *flâneur* becomes a metaphor not so much of a modern artist as of a modern intellectual/social scientist, who studies modernity in its mundane and superficial, popular manifestations.

2. DISCOURSING THE FLÂNEUR

The *flâneur* has always been primarily a discursive construction. The *flâneur* originally acquired popular acclaim through literary and journalistic texts and was later resurrected in the fermenting and discursive field of social sciences. But as noted above, the *flâneur* became a projection screen for continuing reflections on the "nature and implications of the conditions of modernity and post-modernity" (Tester, 1994: 1) which brought about a bewildering array of conceptualisations. However, this in itself by no means reduces the value of the *flâneur* as an analytical concept. It merely outlines the *flâneur* as a textbook example of a 'floating signifier', whose meaning is determined within a discourse through the interconnection of a series of 'privileged discursive elements' or 'nodal points' whose function is to provide a partial fixation of the meaning of a concept within a specific discourse. (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, cf. Carpentier 2010)

This chapter offers a way of coming to terms with the elusive nature of the *flâneur*, by outlining the four 'privileged discursive elements' of the *flâneur* – 'gaze', 'knowledge production', 'textual production' and 'time' – any of which has the capacity to act as a nodal point within a specific discourse and thus to structure the definition of the *flâneur*. This further enables the shift in focus of inquiry, which is no longer on the sociological subject (the *flâneur*) but primarily on the social practice – on *flânerie* as a practice of observation. This discursive deconstruction (or reconstruction) of *flânerie* is not an attempt to deny the *flâneur*'s existence 'in' history but rather a way of securing the *flâneur*'s existence 'across' history. And while this is not an attempt to tease out the 'true' or 'original' *flâneur*, it does offer a blueprint for the detection of 'grounded' uses of the concept.

2.1 THE GAZE

The central activity that defines *flânerie* is observation. It is a specific kind of observation that combines "the aimlessness of strolling, and the reflectiveness of the gaze" (Wolff, 2008: 21, original emphasis). *Flânerie* is thus not merely a form of subsuming to, or indulging in, the spectacle of modernity, but a dialectical project of coming to terms with modernity, while

maintaining a critical overtone. The *flâneur* is often described as a kind of urban semiotician who reads the city as if it were a book, someone who embraces the fleeting semiotics of modernity and indulges in the search for its signs. As Franz Hessel put it:

Flânerie is a kind of reading of the street, in which faces, shop front, shop windows, cafe' terraces, street cars, automobiles and tree become a wealth of equally valid letters of the alphabet that together result in words, sentences and pages of an ever-new book. (Hessel quoted in Frisby, 1994: 81)

The *flâneur's* gaze indiscriminatingly focuses on the urban environment as well as on the people and commodities that 'populate' the modern city. The *flâneur's* gaze is, as most authors writing about the *flâneur* never fail to emphasise, focused on the surface. This, however, should not automatically lead to the popular conclusion that *flâneur's* gaze (and by extension, the *flâneur*) is superficial. Charles' Baudelaire's influential definition of the *flâneur* in *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863/1995) radicalises the claim already present in the mid-19th-century 'physiologies' of the *flâneur* – that his gaze does not stop at the surface but aims to penetrate it, to discover the hidden meaning or beauty beneath it. Thus the poetic task attributed to the *flâneur* by Baudelaire is to transcend the chaos of appearances in order to "*distil the eternal from the transitory*" (Baudelaire, 1863/1995: 11-12), to find the "*element of beauty it contains, however slight or minimal that element is*" (Ibid.).

To accomplish this, the *flâneur* is always attentive to details, to miniscule cues and signs normally overlooked by the fast-paced crowd of the *passants* around him. Thus the *flâneur* is a figure akin to a detective (Benjamin, 1999), scrutinising the scene in search of visual cues, observing details from which he is able to extract and frame larger conclusions. As Proust noted:

[...] I would stand there in front of them, motionless, gazing, breathing, endeavouring to penetrate with my mind beyond the thing seen or smelt. [...] I would concentrate upon recalling exactly the line of the roof, the colour of the stone, which, without my being able to understand why, had seemed to me to be teeming, ready to open, to yield up to me the secret treasure of which they were themselves no more than the outer coverings. (Proust 1922, my emphasis)

Although generally not considered to be one of the seminal authors on the *flâneur*, Marcel Proust describes all the basic elements of *flânerie* in this brief passage from *Swan's Way*: attentive (and passionate) observer, out of step

with the fast pace of modernity, aesthetic sensitivity, attention to detail, intellectual pursuit of an underlying “essence” and structures of meaning. What the *flâneur*'s gaze is searching for are ‘small epiphanies’, insights of either social or aesthetic significance. And these chance encounters are, like the flow of modernity, passing moments. Put differently, they are not only small but momentary epiphanies. Anke Gleber refers to this as ‘Augenblick’, a privileged moment of seeing, described by the novelist E.T.A. Hoffman as a “*moment of insight he perceives external appearance to be a ‘true representation of life’s eternal change’*” (Gleber, 1999: 14).

Take two men going for a walk, for example, like us. Suddenly, thanks to a break in the clouds, a ray of light comes and strikes the top of a wall; and the top of the wall becomes, for the moment, something in some way quite extraordinary. One of the two men touches the other on the shoulder. The other raises his head and sees it too, understands it too. Then the thing up there vanishes. But they will know in aeternum that it once existed. [M15,1.]¹

But there is a precondition for this kind of perception – estrangement. At the level of the practitioner, this type of observation requires anonymity. Although the *flâneur* plunges into the urban crowd to become “*one flesh with the crowd*” (Baudelaire 1995, 9), he does not aim to establish any kind of personal bonds to people in the crowd, but chooses to remain both anonymous and independent. “*The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito*”, wrote Baudelaire (1863/1995: 9), and many authors following Benjamin have developed the theme of anonymity into alienation. However, as Simmel (1903/1971) has noted, the anonymity of a city, particularly a metropolis, is a contradictory phenomenon. Metropolis breeds anonymity and anonymity in turn breeds alienation – but what Simmel emphasises is that it is precisely through alienation that the anonymity of the metropolis produces freedom. In the *flâneur*'s case, the freedom to wander and observe, freed from the social constraints and duties of the domestic, private sphere. *Flânerie* is thus a solitary venture during which companionship is undesirable. Companionship not only compromises detachment, it also compromises movement, *flânerie* itself.

At the level of practice, the precondition of estrangement manifests itself in the non-utilitarian strolling. To *flâner* is an end in itself, the *flâneur* wants to be driven by the ebb and flow of the crowd in the street, guided by momentary fascinations, the visual cues that he discovers or stumbles upon. As Shields put it, “*seeing visual lures is the key to the flâneur’s move-*

1 This is a standardised form of referencing entries in Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (1999).

ment, drawn from sight to sight"² (1994: 65). By allowing the act of strolling (or wandering) to impose its own logic, *flânerie* can be seen as a practice of estrangement from the place for the purpose of achieving the heightened sense of awareness needed to enhance the *flâneur's* perception and susceptibility, a native "going stranger". The central characteristic of the *flâneur's* gaze is thus the ability to see the city, the people and the commodities as if it were for the first time:

To walk out your front door as if you're just arrived from a foreign country; to discover the world in which you already live; to begin the day as if you've just gotten off the boat from Singapore and have never seen your own doormat or the people on the landing...it is this that reveals the humanity before you, unknown until now. (M10a, 4)

2.2. KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION

The underlying rationale of the *flâneur's* gaze is "a mythology of scopic penetration and understanding" (Shields, 1994: 78) which transforms the *flâneur's* observation into an act of knowledge production, during which a series of fragmented, momentary "images" that were carefully collected and catalogued by the *flâneur* undergo an act of interpretation.

The *flâneur's* main objective is to come to terms with fleeting modernity, to render transparent the dynamic and fragmented world of contemporary urban existence. As Gluck (2003) succinctly points out, two strands of this enterprise have existed – one that addresses the social and the other that focuses on the aesthetic aspects of modernity. While both strands of *flânerie* embrace modernity and position the *flâneur* as a central agent of its articulation, the first strand believes that the analysis of observable phenomena can ultimately lead to the discovery of the underlying social structure and can hence enable its critique, while the second strand sees observable phenomena merely as a site of aesthetic experience, a subject matter that requires the artist's creative reassessment. In the first perspective, modernity is a social labyrinth that is waiting to be deciphered (and also to be made controllable); in the second, it represents an aesthetic text (or its raw material) that needs to be conveyed through the creative potential of the artist. While the first strand produces knowledge in terms of truth claims and classifications and primarily deals with the world of people, typical,

² "The visual pursuit of the evasive and conflicting aspects of the city becomes personified above all in the figure of the woman who passes in the street." (Gleber, 1999: 17; cf. Wolff, 2006)

for example, of journalism or social sciences, the second strand produces ways of aesthetic appreciation and modern forms of beauty that are primarily focused on the environment (the city) and the world of material objects, and reside typically in the domain of (avant-garde) artists.³

Despite their differences, both perspectives promulgate the position of the scopic authority of the *flâneur* and attribute knowledge production to a specific trait of the *flâneur* – to his power of imagination. In order to produce conclusions, the *flâneur* draws on modernity, on its subjects and objects, on detached, i.e. outside observation, not exact knowledge. In short, they are inferences. The *flâneur* never speaks to the subjects of his clandestine gaze, but interprets, or rather imagines, the meaning of the visual signs he discovers:

With the aid of a word I overhear in passing, I reconstruct an entire conversation, an entire existence. The inflection of a voice suffices for me to attach the name of a deadly sin to the man whom I have just jostled and whose profile I glimpsed. [M7,8]

In part, it was this speculative nature of the *flâneur*'s knowledge production, the interplay of imagination and projection, that led Benjamin to label the *flâneur* a dreamer, or more precisely, "a dreaming idler" [M1,5], and, by extension, a figure falling prey to 'false consciousness'. Thus, for Benjamin, "[t]o the idler who strolls the streets, things appear divorced from the history of their production, and their fortuitous juxtaposition suggests mysterious and mystical connections" (Buck-Morss, 1986: 106) Benjamin's critique was not, however, aimed at the *flâneur* as such, but essentially at the *flâneur* who ceased to practise the critical production of knowledge, the one who replaced *Erfahrung*, the active creation of one's reality, with *Erlebnis*, the consumerist phantasmagoria of the idler. (Ibid.) The emphasis on the critical nature of the *flâneur*'s knowledge production (either in the form of the 'social' or 'artistic' *flâneur*) is an important – though frequently overlooked – component in the definition of *flânerie*, since it means that the *flâneur* as an observer "cannot [...] be reduced to the spectator, to mere idler or to the gaper (badaud)" (Frisby, 1994: 93), to Benjamin's department store consumer or Bauman's shopping mall rat (1994), as long as there is an intellectual component behind the *flâneur*'s surface-oriented gaze.

³ Parsons, for example, observes a similar dichotomy when he compares the definitions of the *flâneur* by Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer, noting that Benjamin's definition embodies a more masculine and politicised perspective which aims to categorise and thus familiarise the crowd, while Kracauer's is "less omnipotent and controlling, [...] more leisured, observing the surface pleasures of the city with a mind that registers rather than orders." (Parsons, 2000: 37-38)

2.3 PRODUCTION OF TEXTS

The third constitutive privileged discursive element of the *flâneur* is the *flâneur's* relation to the production of the accounts of his *flânerie*, which marks one of the concept's fundamental dialectics. Although *flânerie* is necessarily an act of solitary, anonymous, detached observation, the fruits of the *flânerie* are not intended for the *flâneur's* own consumption. Quite the contrary, the act of *flânerie* is not complete until the *flâneur's* insights are shared with a public (see Baudelaire's (1863/1995) description of Constantin Guys). Or at least materialised in a form that can/will be conveyed to an audience.

The *flâneur* is, therefore, a producer⁴ of a wide variety of "texts" on urban modernity. Although most often associated with writing, either in the form of art (poetry, prose, plays) or journalism (feuilleton, cultural criticism), the productive output of *flâneurs* also includes the often curiously⁵ overlooked visual production, ranging from illustrations and caricatures to paintings and later photography and film.

In the discursive articulations of *flânerie*, the productive aspect of the *flâneur* is often used (following Benjamin) to connect the *flâneur* with the notion of commoditisation (as discussed before). In these articulations, the *flâneur* becomes "a genius whose spirit has been capitalized" (Mazlish 1994, 47), someone who commoditises the *flânerie* itself in order to be able to practise it. But what such articulations implicitly presuppose is a "full time *flâneur*", an individual for whom *flânerie* is both a permanent and an overarching identity. From the "a-historical" perspective on *flânerie*, advocated in this chapter (as well as from the perspective of identity theories), such a reduction simply cannot be sustained. Rather, the *flânerie* is to be seen as a pastime, something a person might occasionally indulge in, producing a record that goes beyond leaving footprints on the pavements of the asphalt jungle.

2.4 TIME

Flânerie is a practice that ultimately depends on the availability of 'non-utilitarian' time, which in turn links the *flâneur* to capitalism. I would argue that it is not the commodity but the notion of the 'non-utilitarian'

4 The *flâneur* is not only a producer, but also a consumer of a wide variety of 'texts' on urban modernity – see Frisby, 1994.

5 Especially since Baudelaire's archetypal *flâneur* is a painter, not writer.

time that defines the *flâneur*'s ties to capitalism. For it is precisely the non-utilitarian-ness of strolling that differentiates (and distances) the *flâneur* from the functional flow of the crowd, from what Simmel (1903/1971: 328) described as the dictate of organised time – the rational organisation of the co-ordination of men and goods in the metropolis that makes the functioning of the capitalist economy possible. *Flânerie* exists outside the disciplining power of time that is linked to capitalist productive relations, to confinements of 'productive work time' and 'functional leisure'. From this perspective, even for Benjamin, the "*idleness of the flâneur is a demonstration against the division of labour*" [M5,7]. And even for the *flâneur*-journalist or *flâneur*-writer, whose time spent strolling could be seen as a form of labour, it is first and foremost a time spent outside the constraints of industrial capitalism, outside "*the increasing ordinance of public life by punch-clock measurement of time in terms of labour and productivity*" (Shields, 1994: 73). Ironically, modernity's most attentive observer is someone whose existence "*is out of step with the rapid circulation of the modern metropolis*" (Tester, 1994: 15), someone who walks at a different, slower pace than the crowd that surrounds him, who takes the time to observe, inspect, reflect, imagine. A kind of anachronism (Donald, 1999: 46).⁶

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the introduction to an influential edited volume on the subject, Tester (1994: 7) notes that "[b]ecause the *flâneur* is fundamentally a figure who can only be known through the activities of *flânerie*, a certain mystery is intrinsic to his identity". What I have proposed in this chapter is to challenge the notoriously elusive identity of the *flâneur* through a 'discursive turn' by focusing on the articulation of the social practice itself, on *flâneur*'s constitutive activity – *flânerie*.

This focus enables one to move away from some of the hotly debated issues on the *flâneur* as a (sociological) subject, such as the continuous and painstaking attempts to locate the historical figure of the *flâneuse* in the liminal public spaces of the 19th century (e.g. see a recent edited volume by D'Souza and McDonough, 2008).

As I noted above, the discursive shift from the *flâneur* to *flânerie* enables us to transcend the limitations of conceptualising the *flâneur* as a 19th-century

6 It is also the notion of 'non-productive time', the loitering, not the gaze, that can make the *flâneur* a suspicious character in the eyes of the crowd or its official observers and regulators (cf. Hessel 1929/2011 or Benjamin 1929/1999; McDonough, 2002).

social phenomenon. By claiming that this 'discursive turn' enables us to go beyond the debate on the (non)existence of the 19th-century *flâneuse*, I do not mean to downplay the importance of understanding power-gender relations and their historic articulations, but merely to suggest that accepting Wolff's (2008) argument on the nonexistence of the 19th-century *flâneuse* should not automatically imply the nonexistence of the *flâneuse* as such, for we can find this elusive female observer in present-day practices such as photoblogs, where the *flâneuse* proliferates, if not dominates the production of contemporary vernacular visual culture.

Flânerie, as a bodily practice of mobility, observation, knowledge production and dissemination, is the outcome of fluctuating socio-historic articulations (and materialisations) of power, which define the impermanent constellation of the four privileged discursive elements of *flânerie* outlined above. Although I am aware of the underlying tautology of the proposition of defining the *flâneur* as "a man who indulges in *flânerie*" (Tester, 1994: 113), I still believe that *flânerie* can teach us much more about the *flâneur* as a sociological subject immersed in a specific socio-historical position than the other way around.

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