

# The Flâneur Abroad



The Flâneur Abroad:  
Historical and International Perspectives

Edited by

Richard Wrigley

**CAMBRIDGE**  
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**P U B L I S H I N G**

The Flâneur Abroad: Historical and International Perspectives,  
Edited by Richard Wrigley

This book first published 2014

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-6016-6, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-6016-1

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Elizabeth Jennings for taking responsibility for the practical organisation of the conference from which these papers are derived, and seeing this through with her unfailing efficiency and good humour. As ever, Penelope Curtis helped in many essential ways. On the day, Mary Jane Boland provided welcome assistance. The conference was supported by the Centre for Advanced Study in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Nottingham. However, I am most indebted to all the contributors for their boundless patience, and above all their enthusiastic involvement both in the conference and this volume.

Richard Wrigley

## INTRODUCTION

The flâneur – the leisurely but vigilant urban stroller - is well-known as a quintessential nineteenth-century Parisian archetype. A self-contained but all-seeing city-dweller, the flâneur has been variously seen as an icon of modernity, master of the empowered male gaze, and embodiment of anguished *urbanité* in retreat from the inhospitable environment of the city and its threatening crowds. Within Paris, its meanings evolved from early nineteenth-century versions, including alienated consumers and compulsive voyeurs, to more derivative types of pedestrian observer, as in the case of self-indulgent touristic fantasies.

From its inception, this character has attracted a distinguished array of champions and historians – from Balzac and Baudelaire to Walter Benjamin. However, so familiar has the figure become in the realms of academic commentary that it has been considered to have turned into a tired cliché – more often recycled in simplified form than analysed. For example, a conference held at the Institut National de l’Histoire de l’Art in Paris, on the representation of Paris in film, had the subtitle ‘beyond the flâneur’ (‘au-delà du flâneur’). The subtitle acted as a reassuring signal that the conference would steer clear of any simplistic and overfamiliar equation of cinematic practice with the flâneur’s leisurely scanning of urban spectacle.<sup>i</sup> Benjamin’s charismatic writings, both in essay form and the encyclopedic *Passagen-Werk*, have been translated into a well-rehearsed orthodoxy in the standard-issue intellectual furniture of cultural historians, and have been assumed to provide an authoritative source for our knowledge of the origins of this phenomenon.<sup>ii</sup> It is hard to ignore the culturally promiscuous breadth of appropriation by means of which the flâneur becomes a prop for much writing whose diffuseness is, indeed, precisely expressed by the casual invocation of this model. There is evidently a kudos attached to the claim to be following in the prestigious footsteps of Baudelaire and Benjamin, which can stand in for active analysis or scrutiny.

One reason to revisit the flâneur is to reassess this orthodoxy, and to consider the way it conceals second-hand misconceptions. However, although several of the contributions to this volume engage with aspects of Benjamin’s ideas (most originally Kathrin Yacavone’s essay), the primary purpose in gathering these texts together was to adopt a different

perspective, by means of which to approach the flâneur in a new light - that of internationalism. By stepping away from Paris, we can review the potential for an expanded, more versatile combination of the flâneur's two essential features – walking and looking, and how they might take on different forms and purposes depending on context.

Recent writing on the subject has given little sustained attention to the widespread adaptation of the flâneur outside Paris, let alone France and indeed Europe, whether in the form of historic antecedents, modern sequels, or contemporary echoes. Yet it is clear that the allure of the flâneur's persona has led to its translation and adoption far beyond Parisian boulevards and *passages*. The conference in which these papers originated sought to map some of the flâneur's travels and transpositions. In doing so, the question of how far the flâneur is dependent on Paris as a milieu was opened up for questioning: for all the international dispersal of this idea and model, in some sense Paris is always present, if only as a reference to kick against or replace. When modern flâneurs appear in foreign cities, how far does a Parisian ethos cling to them, however much they might claim independence? This is not to ignore critical repudiations of the stereotype, notably from a postcolonial perspective, which look to local, alternative, subaltern, independent and indigenous modes of mobility, walking, and viewing, beyond the highly prescriptive behaviour of the flâneur, as in the male Gallocentric urbanite.<sup>iii</sup> Indeed, Anne-Marie Milne has reflected on the viability of flânerie in a post-68 internationalised world, as manifest in Paris itself as a subject in the work of François Maspero. The myth of modernity had given way to a fractured urban/suburban landscape, which could no longer sustain the ritualised individual surveillance of a leisured, empowered observer. Yet refusal of the spectacle of the city in its new forms leaves the author in a quandary as to where s/he stands.<sup>iv</sup> In his review of Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), Amit Chaudhuri points to alternatives and equivalents to the association of the flâneur with Western modernity, thereby disowning the habit of taking modernity to be a universal measure of cultural relevance.<sup>v</sup>

The conference was intended to be interdisciplinary, and brought together scholars from art history, history, literary studies, film, history of photography, music, historical and cultural geography. Although the initial programme included several papers addressing topics from Asia and Africa, various practical obstacles (and late withdrawals) led to these not materialising. Furthermore, there was significant interest in what might be called the virtual flâneur, justifying a separate conference. One of the



legacies of the conference will be two further conferences on the global flâneur and the virtual flâneur. To that extent, an answer to the question which would usually be raised at the end of this introduction regarding further lines of enquiry and research can already be acknowledged.

In the event, it has been possible to add two papers (by Jonathan Conlin and Kevin Milburn) to those given which extend the range and scope of the volume (while also regretting that we were not able to include Robert Adlington's contribution, "Without Tendency: Amsterdam, situationism and atonal music"; fortunately, this has been published elsewhere<sup>vi</sup>). What is as striking in reviewing these essays as it was during the conference, is the way that the figure of the flâneur provided a point of consensual convergence. On the one hand, the Parisian prototype seemed to drift across national frontiers with ease; on the other hand, it carried its local identity pungently with it, whether met with approval, ambivalence, or mockery.

A suitably challenging point of departure is Laurent Turcot's problematisation of the very existence of the flâneur. Against the backdrop of his study of "le promeneur" in the eighteenth century and a long-term perspective on the significance and feasibility of walking in cities, Turcot seeks to refine our sense of how the specialised phenomenon of the flâneur fits within broader forms of individual and collective pedestrian activity. What emerges very clearly is that the flâneur is indeed a Parisian phenomenon, and needs to be analysed as such, relating successive phases of characterisation and function to its initial manifestations. This historical anchoring includes subsequent mythologisation, which has reinforced the belief that the flâneur is both quintessentially Parisian and an historically contingent phenomenon. Moreover, as Turcot emphasises, we should also take account of the adoption of this role model more widely as leisure time and spaces proliferated both amongst Parisians and visitors to the city (although the idea that there were true flâneurs and inauthentic imitators can be found already in the heyday of flânerie in the July Monarchy). Such derivative practices have their own meaning and function as signs of social confidence, laying claim to a particular urban tradition. There is also a kind of meta-flânerie evident in the tourist groups who march through the *passages*, and the pseudo-flânerie of latterday Surrealists following reverentially in the footsteps of Breton and Nadja, rubbing shoulders with more serious souls in search of the shade of Walter Benjamin, the seed of whose *Passagen-Werk* was sown, as Kathrin Yacavone points out, by his reading of Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris* as a child.

It was possible to adopt the identity of the flâneur when travelling, by means of which a Parisian outlook could be applied to foreign sights,

locations, and behaviour. Henri Béraud inherited the flâneurial journalistic vein of the nineteenth century, which seems to have succeeded in giving him access to places in early twentieth-century Ireland which would otherwise have been off limits. Béraud doubles the paradoxical usage of the flâneur as persona by converting it into a salaried *nom de plume*. Rather than exploiting the advantages of anonymity, he played up his role as sympathetic yet intrepid reporter – a Parisian at large whose vocation was visual attentiveness translated into the genre of eye-witness accounts.

Precedents for exporting the flâneur's ways of looking and surveying are to be found in the series of French writers who stayed in or passed through Brussels, where it became starkly evident that the familiar symbiosis between Parisian spaces and spectacle was strongly dependent on quite particular structures of public space and forms of mobility. This aperçu became jarringly obvious once the limitations of Brussels – its urban thoroughfares, its inhabitants and their rebarbative habits – assaulted the senses of, successively, Baudelaire, Nerval, and Huysmans. Daniel Acke nonetheless shows that there was a homegrown culture of urban literature which was tailored to local circumstances, in his sampling of writings of Marcel Lecomte (1900-1966), in which walking becomes an instrument of Surrealist sensibility, oriented around a programmatic indifference, and later William Cliff (b.1940), for whom the city's degradations become visible to the eye of the pedestrian, on the receiving end of a profiteering and disastrously inept administration. Albeit filtered through idiosyncratic poetic form, this is nonetheless critical writing, against the grain of the status quo, embodied in the city's abused fabric.

The way that an alternative, unfamiliar locale can provide a counterpoint to established habits of flânerie emerges especially vividly in Alexander McCabe's account of northern towns in their fictional reinventions by Sartre and Camus as inhospitable settings which suffocated flâneurial inclinations. Le Havre and Amsterdam are each sounded out as types of *mise-en-scène* suitable for the playing out of existentialist repudiation of city life as a microcosm for more abstract philosophical assertions of individual despair and integrity. In McCabe's account, the flâneur works as a template which, by the mid-twentieth century, was capable of remaining attached to its original roots, even while taking on dissonant and distorted internalised forms. The Baudelairean flâneur was "source and model, something in the bloodstream of writers like Camus and Sartre." Ideas of a contemporary "poetics of the crowd and of the city" were recast in the form of "stark surface description of nauseating sensory experiences in the case of Sartre, detached ironic judgement in the case of Camus, and a shift in gaze from cityscape to seascape, from the social to

the abyss.”

Themes that emerged in discussions on and between papers included the relative status of the city’s visual appearance and character in writing – be it journalism, literary chronicles, or legislation. What did it mean to try to capture or trace the outlines and contours of the city’s fabric and spaces? Is textual visualisation a particular genre, with its own history and changing conventions; or does it constitute a specialised form of narrative? From the eighteenth century onwards, one solution to this is to make the narrator a mobile spectator.

It is obvious that one should not casually easily equate prints, photographs and film with written descriptions and evocations. Yet it is striking that early versions of the flâneur are quick to call on graphic illustration to flesh out and add a sense of observational detail to different kinds of discursive account. Indeed, Jonathan Conlin suggests that Gabriel de St-Aubin was an artist-flâneur almost a century before Baudelaire came up with his own formulation of what a “painter of modern life” should do and why it was Constantin Guys who fulfilled this programme. While St-Aubin’s images are meticulously notated and empirically grounded, they are characteristically often somewhat fantastical. This might seem to chime in with a personalised, episodic form of vision and transcription which can be thought of as corresponding to a flâneur’s outlook, but he operated in an essentially private register, in which his sustained scrutiny and reinvention of scenes from Parisian life becomes part of an introverted palimpsest.

In the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century, attention given to daily life as a symptom of the state of a city became a familiar theme in journalism in the form of descriptive vignettes, sometimes accompanied by prints. Christian Deuling’s chapter gives an account of a journal whose sole concern was to provide reportage on London and Paris for an audience based in Germany. However, the fact that the journal existed at a time when the impact of the French Revolution was working its way through European social and political systems provided an urgent demand for news and comment. The prints which were part of this journal can be seen as sharing a satirical vocabulary which crossed frontiers between Germany, France and Britain. This imagery is evidence of an appetite for imaginative travel narratives and anecdotes, and the well-established role of comparison in making sense of the unfamiliar. Such an outlook was indeed germane to reflecting on the transferability of homegrown forms of pedestrian observer. Interestingly, the prints oscillate between being plausibly descriptive and obviously satirical, thus nicely illustrating the way reportage was an eclectic, indeed heterogeneous discourse which required attentive decoding.

The flâneur travelled as much, if not more so, on the page, as on foot. Huart's *Physiologie du flâneur* (Paris, 1841) has long been a classic text, if tending to be referred to in passing, or as an obligatory, if somewhat decontextualised, reference. Jo Briggs explores this canonical monograph in detail, by means of an analysis of the degree of dependence on or deviation from it found in Albert Smith's *The Natural History of the Idler upon Town* (London, 1848). She addresses the way both texts rely on a steady sequence of prints, in varied formats – chapter headings, vignettes, full-page 'portraits' – to accentuate distinctions between flâneur, *musard*, and mooner. Her particular thematic focus is the relation of these observers to work as an urban spectacle, which offers a precise antithesis to the leisured observers who circulate or drift between such points of visual curiosity. Briggs places imagery in the foreground, asking how this corresponds to text, while also highlighting different graphic idioms, in so far as Smith is palpably a variant form of Huart, but with its own independent, local outlook and attitudes. Their strong connections add to the argument that the flâneur was not a Parisian monopoly, and neither was there any means to constrain its adaptation. The logic and identity of flâneur and idler is set against attitudes to the visibility of work in public places. Nonetheless, as Briggs underlines, for all the Idler's repackaging and relocating in a London context, Smith borrows wholesale from the Parisian prototype, marrying mimicry with chauvinism.

The political status of the flâneur was a primary concern of certain papers across a range of periods and locations. Deuling notes how "Winckler's reports from Paris lack the aimless searching movement of the casual stroller. His flâneur is a political analyst." As a witness to the unfolding events and conflicts of the Revolution, this was inevitable, but such an outlook was not automatic, being entwined with preconceptions about Paris as capital of luxury and vice, literary and theatrical culture. Deuling's aperçu in fact highlights the very limited degree to which such a reading of the flâneur has been considered previously, in so far as Benjamin's alienated consumer strolling through *passages*, or the flâneur as gendered observer have been taken to be the most substantive critical revisions to the stereotype and its meaning. Indeed, as Laurent Turcot points out, when the flâneur crystallised in the mid-nineteenth century, it was explicitly identified with forms of public life which were detached from institutionalised political culture – an aspect also underlined by Jo Briggs in her comparison of texts by Louis Huart and Albert Smith from the 1840s. Commentators on Benjamin's idiosyncratic reconstruction of the flâneur such as Susan Buck Morss have of course related flânerie to matters of political fragmentation in the early twentieth century, the context which

fed Benjamin's own motivation for excavating modernity's sources and figures.<sup>vii</sup> However, accounts of early flâneurs tend to equate their political significance in terms of the physical conditions which defined the scope of their pedestrian engagement with the congested, heterogeneous flux of city life.<sup>viii</sup> That there might be connections between the world of national, that is Paris-based, government, and civic administration seems absent.

Between these two phases, Kevin Robbins account of *L'Assiette au beurre* surveys a remarkably elaborate vein of imagery – a genre which takes on the heritage of Daumier, Gavarni and their peers, and creates new vocabularies for social critique and satire. While Daumier was a virtuoso of the monochrome lithograph, *Assiette au beurre* could unleash a vivid palette of colour to expand the impact of its graphic reportage from the streets of Paris. Moreover, the diverse artists who contributed to the journal created an unpredictable, eclectic alternation of idiom, manifest in shifts of focus from the everyday miseries to be espied in urban interstices, to the full glare of high life, and its scandalous extravagances and inequalities. Street scenes form a staple setting for denunciatory sentiment – articulated through images which only had captions by way of explication. The lack of fuller commentary was possible because readers could be relied upon to bring their own partisan opinions regarding social inequalities to what at first sight might seem trivial anecdotes and fragmentary “choses vues.”

The relationship of a politics of vision to a particular medium, and one at a specific phase of its use and exploration, is abundantly evident in James Harvey-Davitt's analysis of Chantal Akerman's film, *News from Home*. While this study addresses a late twentieth-century film, the way it opens up, indeed necessitates, reflection on the politics of viewing, the identification of a subject position, and how this might be translatable into cinematic form, is manifestly relevant to the phenomenon of the flâneur from its very inception (wherever one situates this). Akerman's scrutiny of a city (New York), through the tableaux she constructs, embodies her sustained, unsettling attention to an apparently commonplace spectacle. The film articulates a selfpossessed refusal to recycle readymade visual cliché, facilitated by Akerman's outsider status. Indeed, the use of slow tracking or continuous static shots forces the viewer to shift out of a casual viewing position into a selfquestioning approach to the business of taking in the narrative of the film. The viewer is unsure what to expect, and equally unsure of how they should respond to what they see. I think this can be related to the outlook enshrined in what may be the earliest forms of the flâneur in Restoration Paris, in which the sceptical edge and polemical pungency given to observations recounted is rendered all the more resonant by virtue of being understated, usually anonymised, as if these are the

result of an almost accidental state of viewing. More generally, it is essential to understand certain forms of walking and viewing in public space as being determined by prevailing spatial ideologies, whether post-revolutionary France or 1970s New York.

As well as Harvey-Davitts' analysis of a way of looking being transposed from Europe – if not Paris – to a foreign location, and thereby creating a novel politics of place, several essays consider alternative settings, and how the role of the flâneur is assimilated or adapted to these alien environments, and what implications this has for indigenous, pre-existing forms of viewing, walking and inhabiting the space of the promenade or street, square, boulevard or bar.

Kathrin Yacavone illuminates our reading of Benjamin's approach to the flâneur by focusing on his writings on Berlin. In particular, his recollections of childhood show how these ideas are "complexly related to memory and imagination on the part of the child-flâneur, as the alter ego of the adult writer." This provides a perspective within which to understand the way in which "the flâneur as an observer of modern life gives way to mnemonic flânerie as a critical and creative approach towards autobiographical writing, which in turn reveals a profoundly redemptive dimension of the flâneur motif in Benjamin's œuvre as related to the attempted saving of that which is about to vanish or has already disappeared."

In the case of later eighteenth-century Madrid, as discussed by Simon Lee, one manifestation of the inherently political nature of walking in public is the conjunction of popular and élite sociability, at least in the sense of the former being an object of scrutiny for the latter by means of fine art (in this case tapestries and their cartoons); whereas the parade of carriages was a reciprocal type of spectacle, shared by pedestrians and those being wheeled along in a ritual form of leisure. The development of the *paseos*, themselves a form of ordering and framing, was at once an expression of social order and aesthetic distancing. The association of city life and status with fashion and its excesses provides a bridge to ideas about the viewing of Parisian public life. Lee also illustrates the way that great cities such as Madrid were part of a wider selfconscious or comparative cosmopolitan discourse. It is interesting to compare the later Parisian coupling of flâneur and *passage* with the Madrilenian development of a space for codified leisure. If both aspire to a form of modernity, in Madrid this occurs under the aegis of royal power and as a form of collective sociability, rather than the solitary meandering of the flâneur.

Vanesa Rodríguez-Galindo discusses the role not of tapestry cartoons

but the illustrated press, a medium in which eclectic forms of journalism cohabited with a diverse array of vignettes, tableaux, and character studies, each of which contributed to the sense of a glimpsed scene from public spaces in Madrid. As with Lee's study, these representations were symptoms of uneasy, contested attitudes to modernity and its insertion into an older urban environment. Rodríguez-Galindo's examination of the equivalence of Spanish vocabulary as an indigenous alternative to foreign words and ideas exemplifies the way the flâneur had a pungent significance which, whether out of doors or in the pages of a journal, could elicit derision as much as it seduced would-be strolling observers to style themselves in this manner. The particular distinction she emphasises is between Southern cities with their different customs of collective sociability, performed in open spaces – not merely a consequence of climate but extensions of social self-image (family, courtship, rivalry, etc.).<sup>10</sup> One might see these images, in which the flâneur and its cognate forms are delineated, as being just as ritualised as the forms of promenade by means of which social groups had registered their own coherence in the eighteenth century, and challenged that of others. Such images spoke to different audiences, defined in terms of degrees and modes of visual literacy and varying degrees of recognition or identification with the figures on show. That said, while they are rooted in a particular urban imaginary and lexicon, they yet share a family resemblance with contemporary illustrated journals elsewhere in Europe.

Like Lee and Rodríguez-Galindo's texts, the two texts centred on aspects of St Petersburg highlight the interplay or tension between continuities within a given context, and the possibility of the spectacle of urban life being subject to both technical innovations and imaginative recasting. Tatiana Senkevitch investigates the relation between the panoramic images of Sadovnikov and the patterns of social life as played out on Nevsky Prospect and in the pages of Gogol. In so doing, she analyses how the architectural framework or urban stage allowed or required particular forms of viewing and pedestrian movement. This was what we might call a prismatic space designed to reveal the identities, characteristics, and actions of native citizens to their peers, while also being the result of a grand vision for a newly coherent, ordered city space.

Claire Gheerardyn reveals how, in his 1916 novel *Petersburg*, "Bely evokes a city of unrealities, permeated with fog, a city of greenish waters teeming with germs, where streets transform passers-by into shadows." The city is the stage for an existential struggle between some kind of psychological release achieved through walking, and the anxiety and horror which permeate the locale. Walking becomes a means to externalise

various personal and national symptoms of malaise. The pedestrian is denied the pleasures of *flânerie*; indeed, pedestrian mobility and the frightful spectacles it reveals become pathologised. The city is cloaked in fog, and in consequence illuminated by treacherous pools of half-light. The co-ordinates of material appearance are dissolved, here as in Alexander McCabe's account of existentialist castigation of the banal every-day. The notion of walking is no simple visual metaphor for being, but subject to disassociation and dislocation. Walking is a highly performative, stylised activity; in Bely's novel it becomes a knotty metaphor for a disturbed imagination, itself the literary projection of a social and political critique, or at least a form of ruminative dissent.

The *flâneur's* afterlife has been versatile and vigorous. In addition to the well-established genre of novels of the city, new media (photography, film and TV) have successively adopted the *peripatetic* as a mode of vision, that is, projected into static and moving images, expressing either the city as seen by the *flâneur*, or the *flâneur* as wandering protagonist whether on foot or on board modern forms of transport. When the modern *flâneur* has migrated into other media, how has this reinforced or reinvented the motif?

In Kevin Milburn's reflections on the migration of the *flâneur* across media, the focus returns to the individual, condemned to his own isolated surveying of a bleak, nocturnal world. This theme provides the narrative for Frank Sinatra's songs and associated graphics in postwar North America. As Turcot and Conlin note, the *flâneur* thrives after dark. In the case of the albums focused on here, it is precisely the solitary predicament, with its associated emotional edge that is conjured in the lyrics and cover imagery. While it would be too easy to align this ethos with the purgative sense of angst and disgust through which Sartre and Camus theatricalise their protagonists' rejection of social norms and values, nonetheless, Sinatra chooses to inhabit a bleak, isolated space cut off from the envelope of alcohol and nicotine-fuelled up-tempo sociability associated with night-life. However, that this was a cultural and stylistic choice is manifest from the contrasting emphasis on romantic brio in his other work from adjacent years. The album designs discussed by Milburn also illustrate how the image and persona of the *flâneur* were assimilated into twentieth-century commercial rhetoric (sharing with his nineteenth-century Parisian predecessor the quintessentially male, ruminative attribute of the cigar/cigarette, with its ribbon of curling, floating smoke).

The question of how fully or faithfully there may be a process of transfer between text and image, and the role played by prints in the crystallisation and dissemination of the image of the *flâneur* is one in need of further research. However, in this volume, several authors (Briggs,



Conlin, Deuling, Robbins, Rodriguez-Galindo, Senkevitch) address aspects of this topic. On the one hand, such images – interestingly diverse in their format and vocabulary – can play a significant role in persuading viewers of the reality of flânerie and its cognate activities as a practice, if not indeed a way of life. That said, we are confronted with the ambiguous limitations of print culture for doing this. The diversity of images included in Huart and Smith’s compendia is in part a consequence of the evolving, eclectic nature of illustrated popular (but no less sophisticated) literature in which contemporary streets and public spaces were depicted. In these cases, the nuances articulated in the habits and characteristics of their protagonists are firmly anchored in anecdote; that is, while the images have a life of their own, and are, as Briggs shows, connected to conventions current in fine art, they nonetheless rely on the surrounding narrative to make full sense of them. On the other hand, such images might be said to give a deceptive sense of concretisation, as if they were a form of witness to an objectively observable phenomenon. That is, there are aspects of the history of the flâneur which would be hard to depict, in so far as they depend on states of mind, and kinds of viewing positions which cannot be easily translated into pictorial form, and come to life more in the form of subjective aperçus, which can be more fully spelt out as part of characterisation and narrative. In a French context, we can relate the currency of the flâneur to the growth of political and social caricature. Caricature was an integral part of the growth of political culture in the Revolution, and survived as a means to attack and mock the status quo, despite Napoleonic repression. There is a particular sense in which the flâneur sees or conjures up episodes as if they were reportage, which later become transformed into myths of the everyday. As ever, ambiguity seems to be deeply inscribed within the flâneur’s outlook.

One fundamental aspect of the international currency of the flâneur is the degree to which this term was integrated within indigenous languages, or adapted to form a neologism. Thus, as Senkevitch notes, “the term flâneur in relation to a particular city type was already in use in Russian in the 1830s. Dostoyevsky, for example, used it ironically in his 1847 ‘Petersburg Chronicle’.”<sup>9</sup> We find interesting parallels in Karla Huebner’s account of Czech attitudes to pedestrian wandering and observing, where getting about Prague could be a carefully calibrated cultural enterprise. Moreover, while there was an acute awareness of Parisian precedents, this reference became a matter of some polemical import in so far as it was “not their sole source for the practice.” As Huebner points out: “there are multiple Czech terms for walkers, but although the Czech language has adopted many French words (for example, *garaž*, *pasaž*, *montaž*), “flâneur”

is almost nonexistent, while *chodec* is frequently used in contexts where one might expect “flâneur” (particularly in the work of Nezval).” Huebner also notes how, in Prague, flânerie could be a shared experience, as indeed it could be in Paris – what we might call as a form of second-order flânerie. While it is true, as Turcot observes, that the flâneur as an inherited idea was dispersed into forms of collective strolling, and as Huebner notes in Prague, flânerie à deux became an accepted variant, and O’Hanlon underlines the essentially collaborative nature of Béraud’s ability to move about Ireland, it was perhaps primarily the appeal of solitary nature of this figure, expressed in its idiosyncratic but essentially autonomous degree of mobility and solipsistic gaze, which allowed it to achieve an international reach throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> *Paris au cinéma: lieux, personnages, histoire. Au-delà du flâneur*, part of the research programme on City and Cinema, Institut National de l’Histoire de l’Art, Paris, 6-7 December 2012. A similar sense of exegetical exhaustion was expressed in Tom Gretton, “Not the *Flâneur* again: reading magazines and living the metropolis around 1880,” in Aruna D’Souza and Tom McDonough (eds), *The Invisible Flâneuse? Gender, public space, and visual culture in nineteenth-century Paris* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 94-112. A variant on this is the idea that the *flâneur* became extinct; see Elizabeth Rechniewski, “When and why did the flâneur die? A modern detective story,” *Literature and Aesthetics*, 17: 2 (2007): 91-104.

<sup>ii</sup> Notable critiques of Benjamin are Martina Lauster, *Sketches of the Nineteenth Century. European Journalism and its Physiologies, 1830–50* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), Martina Lauster, “Walter Benjamin’s myth of the flâneur,” *The Modern Language Review*, 102: 1 (Jan. 1, 2007): 139-56.

<sup>iii</sup> See Ting Chang, “Disorienting Orient: Duret and Guimet, Anxious Flâneurs in Asia,” in D’Souza and McDonough (eds), *The Invisible Flâneuse?*, 65-78, a topic further developed by the same author in *Travel, Collecting, and Museums of Asian Art in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Ashgate: Farnham and Burlington, VT, 2013).

<sup>iv</sup> Anna-Louise Milne, “From Third-Worldism to Fourth-World Flânerie? François Maspero’s Recent Journeys,” *French Studies*, no. 60 (2006): 492-502.

<sup>v</sup> “In the Waiting-Room of History,” *London Review of Books*, 26: 12 (24 June 2004): 3-8. See also Adebayo Williams, “The postcolonial flâneur and other fellow-travellers: conceits for a narrative of redemption,” *Third World Quarterly*, 18: 5 (1997): 821-41, and Liesbeth Minnaard, “The Postcolonial Flâneur: Ramsey Nasr’s ‘Antwerpse Stadsgedichten,’” *Dutch Crossing: Journal of Low Countries Studies*, 37: 1 (March, 2013): 79-92, in which postcolonial flânerie refers to “a particular way of processing the, at times, overwhelming experiences of the increasingly globalized metropolis” – in this case Antwerp, by Ramsey Nasr, a writer of Palestinian-Dutch background who was appointed “City Poet of

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Antwerp” in 2005. See also Hazel Hahn, “The Flâneur, the Tourist, the Global Flâneur, and Magazine Reading as Flânerie,” *Dix-Neuf* (special issue: ‘Rethinking the Flâneur: Flânerie and the Senses’, guest editor Aimée Boutin), 16: 2 (July 2012): 193-210.

<sup>vi</sup> Robert Adlington, *Composing Dissent: avant-garde music in 1960s Amsterdam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>vii</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, “The Flâneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering,” *New German Critique*, no. 39, Second Special Issue on Walter Benjamin (Autumn, 1986): 99-140.

<sup>8</sup> Pamela Parkhurst Ferguson, *Paris as Revolution. Writing the Nineteenth-Century City* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: California University Press, 1994), 80-114. Symptomatically, she reproaches Christopher Prendergast (in his *Paris and the Nineteenth Century* (Blackwell: Cambridge MA. and Oxford, 1992), 102-25) for accounting for Flaubert’s treatment of flânerie “entirely in political terms” (242 note 8).

<sup>9</sup> See Julie A. Buckler, *Mapping St Petersburg: Imperial Text and Cityshape* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 99-100.

<sup>10</sup> Vanesa Rodríguez-Galindo notes the following studies: Dorde Cuvardic García, “El flâneur y la flâneire en el costumbrismo español,” *Filología y Lingüística*, XXXV (1) (2009): 23-38; Edward Baker, *Materiales para escribir Madrid: Literatura y espacio urbano de Moratín a Galdós* (Madrid: Siglo 21 de España Editores, 1991), 26-32; Vicente Pla Vivas, *La ilustración gráfica del siglo XIX* (Valencia: Universitat de Valencia, 2010), 123-42; Dorde Cuvardic García, *El flâneur en las prácticas culturales, el costumbrismo y el modernismo* (Paris: Éditions Publibook Universitaires, 2012).

## CHAPTER ONE

# “THIS PUBLICK SORT OF OBSCURITY”: THE ORIGINS OF THE FLÂNEUR IN LONDON AND PARIS, 1660-1780

JONATHAN CONLIN

In his book *Imagining the Modern City* James Donald discusses the modern city as at once a text and a built environment. The city is made up of both bricks and mortar and that imagined city that we all carry around with us in our imaginations. The city of the imagination weaves its web of metaphors, associations and fantasies around the actual buildings, streets and spaces. Meanwhile the buildings' design shifts to reflect those fantasies, in turn spawning new ones. Crucial to this mutually-reflexive evolution is the city's "textuality." This textuality is confirmed, Donald writes, by the fact of the city's "representative figures."<sup>1</sup> Chief among these figures is the flâneur. The flâneur "embodies a certain perspective on, or experience of, urban space and the metropolitan crowd." He sells the city to a bourgeois audience as a set of vignettes, characters and caricatures.<sup>2</sup>

The figure of the flâneur has (as Donald himself notes) become something of a cliché, a stereotype. The word itself was first defined by the newspaper *Figaro* in 1831 as a male who visited all free spectacles, who made the street his salon and shop windows his furniture. But it does not seem to have been much in use in Paris until the 1840s, when Louis Huart published his *Physiologie du flâneur* (1844), part of the fad for such physiologies of urban types.<sup>3</sup> Writing in 1843, Jules Janin seems to have been the first Frenchman to claim that one could only be a flâneur in Paris.<sup>4</sup> Historians, art historians and literary scholars have repeatedly drawn on two essays: one by Baudelaire ("Le Peintre de la vie moderne," 1845) and one by the Frankfurt School sociologist Walter Benjamin (*Paris, capitale du XIXe siècle*, 1935). The flâneur has been canonized as the patron saint of the nineteenth-century city and of modernity itself, all

thanks to a piece of Salon criticism addressing a minor artist, Constantin Guys. Though Guys himself was not an impressionist, Baudelaire's commentary has been transferred to members of the latter school, largely thanks to the oft-cited tome *The Painting of Modern Life* (1985) by T. J. Clark. Feminist art historians such as Griselda Pollock have reproached Clark with neglecting women artists and overlooking the appropriation of public parks and other spaces by bourgeois women. But they have not questioned the significance of the flâneur, who for Pollock "embodies the gaze of modernity which is both covetous and erotic."<sup>5</sup> Born outsiders, today's historians and critics are happy to preen themselves as latter-day flâneurs.

The solipsistic, arrogant pose of the flâneur is one that we continue to find very attractive. To quote Baudelaire's famous 1863 essay, for the flâneur:

The crowd is his element, as the air is that of birds and water of fishes. His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world... The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito.<sup>6</sup>

The flâneur is a solitary walker who patrols the city with a certain hauteur. One might define him thus: a solitary, disembodied being of the masculine gender who roams the streets in silence, gathering impressions in order to relay them later on to his peers. The adjective "solitary" is important. Though it is possible to find earlier texts celebrating urban walks (by John Donne, for example), those walks are in company - a profoundly different and by its very nature more social proposition.<sup>7</sup>

The flâneur is characterized as a quintessentially Parisian figure, a product of the nineteenth century. Benjamin states clearly that "the flâneur is a creation of Paris."<sup>8</sup> Benjamin is willing to contemplate the hypothesis by which the flâneur might have emerged in other cities, but Rome is the only apparent contender. To continue quoting from one of his index cards on "Der Flaneur":

The striking thing is that it didn't happen to Rome. Why? Do not one's very dreams follow the streets there? Why, is not that city so crammed with temples, quiet squares and folk idols that every paving stone, shop sign and entryway affords the passer-by such stuff as dreams are made of? ... It was not the foreign visitor but the Parisians themselves who made it

the promised land of the flâneur, that “landscape made of life itself,” as Hoffmannsthal once called it. A landscape: that is exactly what the city is for the flâneur.<sup>9</sup>

Paris created the flâneur, and in so far as Paris is the capital of the nineteenth century, so the flâneur is, ipso facto, a phenomenon of the nineteenth century. This city is his aquarium, and anywhere else at any other historical period he is, as it were, a fish out of water. As Théophile Gautier himself claimed: “The flâneur is a being unknown in London.”<sup>9</sup> This essay proposes to seek the flâneur in the wrong place (London) and at the wrong time (the eighteenth century). Far from being a product of the nineteenth century, of Benjamin's arcades and Haussmann's boulevards, this apparently eccentric exploration discovers the solitary urban promenader walking the streets more than a century before his supposed birth - and not in Paris, but in London.

In the fourth issue of his journal, *The Spectator*, Joseph Addison's Mr Spectator strikes a familiar pose:

One would think a silent Man ... should be very little liable to Misinterpretations; and yet I remember I was once taken up for a Jesuit, for no other Reason but my profound Taciturnity. It is from this Misfortune, that to be out of Harm's Way, I have ever since affected Crowds. He who comes into Assemblies only to gratifie his Curiosity, and not to make a Figure, enjoys the Pleasures of Retirement in a more exquisite Degree, than he possibly could in his Closet; ... To be exempt from the Passions with which others are tormented, is the only pleasing Solitude. I can very justly say with the antient Sage, *I am never less alone than when alone...* There are so many Gratifications attend this publick sort of Obscurity, that some little Distastes I daily receive have lost their Anguish; and I did the other Day, without the least Displeasure, overhear one say of me, *That strange Fellow*; ... There are, I must confess, many to whom my Person is as well known as one of their nearest Relations, who give themselves no further Trouble about calling me by my Name or Quality, but speak of me very currently by *Mr. What-d'ye-call-him*.<sup>10</sup>

Just as Baudelaire's “man of the crowd”<sup>12</sup> so Mr Spectator revels in his anonymity and eccentricity. He never speaks, but nonetheless betrays a desire to “to communicate the Fulness of my Heart” in writing for us.

Mr Spectator is a writer who recounts his own traits as he gathers impressions and anecdotes of the city, to the extent that he erases himself in the very act of sharing those impressions and anecdotes with us. Indeed, he declares himself resolved “to Print my self out, if possible, before I die.”<sup>11</sup> As he notes in another issue of the journal (written by Addison's