

The Game of Flânerie : *A Spectator, a Gentleman in the Dark Suit and the Vision of Modernity in the 19th Century Metropolis*

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In 1863 Charles Baudelaire published his essay *The Painter of Modern Life*. The theme of his essay, a perception that unique to the metropolis of Paris at the time, was the idea of modern life. “And so away he goes, hurrying, searching,” Baudelaire wrote of his poet, the observer of modernity.

But searching for what? Be very sure that this man, such as I have depicted him --- this solitary, gifted with an active imagination, ceaselessly journeying across the great human desert -- has an aim loftier than that of the mere flaneur, an aim more general, something other than the fugitive pleasure of circumstance. He is looking for that quality which you must allow me to call “modernity”; for I know no better word to express the idea I have in mind..... By “modernity” I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable. Every old master has had his own modernity, the great majority of fine portraits that have come down to us from former generations are clothed in the costume of their own period.¹

In *The Painter of Modern Life*, Monsieur Constantin Guys, or the poet, had particular talent to capture the “modern” in everyday affairs, and to extract the poetic from the fashionable. As Baudelaire described, Monsieur Guys had the eyes that could arrest the eternal in the transitory, he captured the essential present of the metropolis. His subjects were the contemporary themes drawn from the bustle of metropolitan life. Constantin Guys’ passion and profession, as Baudelaire described, were to become one flesh with the crowd.

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For the perfect flaneur, the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of the 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 center of the world, and yet remain hidden from the world -- such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define.²

For Baudelaire, who himself was the flaneur, life in the great city was full of contrasts between commercial excess and poverty, decorum and venality. Abounding in imagery, the great city was electrifying, it possessed disorienting novelty and devilish glamour.³

Flanerie, the activity of strolling and looking which is carried out by the flaneur, is a recurring motif in literature, sociology and art of urban and especially of the metropolitan existence.⁴ Though the figure of the flaneur was tied to a specific time and place that is the nineteenth century Paris, the flaneur has been allowed outside the streets and arcades of his original place and time. The figure appears regularly in the attempts of social and cultural commentators to understand the nature and implications of the conditions of modernity.⁵ The Flaneur enters history along with capitalism. In 1781, Louis-Sebastian Mercier published a book *Tableau de paris*. Deriving his inspiration from Diderot's theory of Drama, Mercier was a pioneer in seeing the city as a picture, a scene, as in a dramatic presentation.⁶ The nineteenth century city was a scene that embodied the spirit of modernism. Then enters the flaneur, observing the life of metropolis from a view of a spectator. With Capitalism, the city, further transformed by the railroad, was metamorphosed into an exotic unknown, to be explored. Dioramas accustomed the bourgeoisie to look at the city as a total, distance scene. By 1841,

along with Louis Huart's *Physiologie du Flaneur*, it became a recognized type.

It is in the prose and poetry of Baudelaire that the flaneur receives his most famous eulogy. Flanerie is one of the main narrative device of both *The Painter of Modern Life* and the *Paris Spleen*, where Baudelaire gave an insight into what the flaneur does. By calling forth a poetic vision of the public spaces, Baudelaire depicted his poet to be the man for whom metropolitan spaces are the landscape of art and existence.⁷ His poet is a man who is driven out of the private and into the public by his own search for meaning. It reveals the tense and fluctuating relationship between the poet and his participation in the public life of the city. The poet is able "to be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home, to see the world, to be at the very center of the world and yet remain hidden from the world."⁸ Within his participation, the poet keeps the distance between himself and the crowd in which he mingles. For Baudelaire, multitude and solitude are identical terms, and interchangeable by the active and fertile poet. For "the man who is unable to people his solitude is equally unable to be alone in a bustling crowd."⁹ Baudelaire's poet possesses a nobility that is located in his thinking of his mediocrity in the eyes of others. The poet knows that he is a face in the crowd but by virtue of that knowing, he is a man apart though he might appear to be a man like any other. In fact, if he does appear to be like everyone else, so much the better. The secret of his task lies in his anonymity for "the observer is a prince enjoying his incognito wherever he goes."¹⁰ Indeed, if the flaneur could be seen, he would be unable to observe.

Out of an ability to be anonymous, the flaneur has often been connected with the Dandy. There was sartorial ideal of the dandy -- gentlemanly discretion, appropriateness, and lack of ostentation -- as exemplified by 'Beau' Brummel, elaborated by Baudelaire and practiced by many others. Nowadays the dandy tend to be thought of as a fop, as someone who dresses in an extravagant manner like the incroyables, the macaronis and the peacocks.¹¹ But the ideal dandy is the antithesis to that. Beau Brummel was

a dandy, the original one by all accounts. His importance lies in the fact that around 1800 he reformed the style of masculine costume and laid down principles for urban dress which have lasted down to the present. The well-tailored, unflamboyant, dark suit and white linen were his trade mark. Brummel found it much better to shun any outward peculiarities and only trust the "nameless grace and polish ease" which he possessed in a remarkable degree.¹² He achieved his goal by attiring himself in well fitting buck-skin trousers, worn down to the ankle, blackened boots, a dark blue frock coat, a buff-coloured waistcoat and, most important of all, a lightly-starched and perfectly tied neckcloth or cravat of the finest white linen. There certainly was nothing remarkable about Brummel's dress except a certain exquisite propriety.¹³ The major principle he followed brings in the notion of decorum for he himself remarked: "the severest mortifications a gentleman could incur was to attract observation in the street by his outward appearance."¹⁴ Whether when he rode with the hounds, or skated on the ice, he was always impeccably and *unremarkably* dressed for the part.

In France, the dandy was metamorphosed from socialite to revolutionary. First by Barbey d' Aurevilly in 1844, and later by Baudelaire. The dandy was presented as the product of society in which each individual had to strike a balance between conformity to social conventions and the boredom that resulted from them. Some rebelled, some cultivated eccentricity but Dandyism was an infinitely more subtle solution. The dandy obeyed the rules for his triumph over them.¹⁵ Baudelaire corrected anyone who assumed that the essentials of Dandyism lay in an excessive attainment to dress and social elegance as ends in themselves. In the period between the decline of aristocracy and the rise of democracy, the dandy was the inhabitant of the modern city, who merges unnoticeably with the crowd, yet holds himself apart to observe it. The dandy and the flaneur then merged. The flaneur must dress as a dandy to be unnoticeable. The secret of his elegance lies in subtlety, propriety and anonymity. This explains the amount of time Brummel spent tying his neckcloth, only to make it unremarkable. The hours of labours the dandy

spent of the toilet all for that absolute simplicity of dress. He was a symbol for the modern man.

Appearing like others is crucial for the flaneur. Because he can or does look like anyone else, nowhere is forbidden for him. This sovereignty based in anonymity and observation means that for the flaneur the meaning and the importance of everything is mutable more or less at will. He enjoys the incomparable privileges of being able to be himself or someone else, as he chooses.¹⁶ Baudelaire's poet possesses the ability to be defining of the meaning and of the order of things which is an event entirely in the realm of ideas quite dependent of material factors.¹⁷ It implies a connection between the intuited fluidity of things in the environment of the city and the physical negotiations of the space and other bodies carried out by the flaneur during his stroll. In these senses, the figure and the activity of the flaneur is fundamentally about freedom, the meaning (or the lack of meaning) of existence, and *being with others* in the modern city.¹⁸

For these reasons, the flaneur and the activity could leave the streets of Paris and be connected to something more by way of a genre of urban existence. It invokes a universal and a general situation of the metropolis which can be found in Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*.

Musil used flanerie as the narrative devices which he showed a tendency to connect them to global problems of existence in cities. In the opening chapter, he set the scene for the whole novel by locating it in a specific place, that is Vienna. But despite his explicit identification of the scene, he actually suggested that his concern lay within the universal and general issues of metropolitan existence. Here, the flaneur reappears, away from Paris, on the streets of Vienna. He explained that no special significance should be attached to the name of the city for the Viennese context of his novel was actually beside the point of the broader things he tries to say. Musil wrote:

Cities, like people, can be recognized by their walk. Opening his eyes, he would know the place by the rhythm of movement in the streets



long before he caught any characteristic detail. It would not matter even if he only imagined that he could do this. We overestimate the importance of knowing where we are because in nomadic times it was essential to recognize the tribal feeding ground. Why are we satisfied to speak vaguely of red nose, without specifying what shade of red, even though degrees of red can be stated precisely to micromillimeter of a wavelength, while with something so infinitely more complicated as what city on happens to be in, we always insist on knowing it exactly? It merely distracts us from more important concerns.

So let us not place any particular value on the city's name. Like all big cities it was made up of irregularities, change, forward spurts, failures to keep step, collisions of objects and interests, punctuated by unfathomable silence; made up of pathways and untrodden ways, of one great rhythmic beat as well as the chronic discord and mutual displacement of all its contending rhythms. All in all, it was like a boiling bubble inside a pot made of the durable stuff of buildings, laws, regulations, and historical traditions.¹⁹

Musil defined the city in terms of its public space, movement and rituals. His city is a place of flux and fleeting images as those of “automobiles shot out of deep, narrow streets into the shallows of bright squares. Dark clusters of pedestrians formed cloudlike strings.... Hundreds of noises wove themselves into a wiry texture of sound with barbs protruding here and there, smart edges running along it and subsiding again, with clear notes splintering off and dissipating.”²⁰ An important difference between

Musil’s universal Vienna and Baudelaire’s streets is that Musil’s are places of collisions and chaos of order while Baudelaire’s seem to be tranquil. In other words, Musil’s streets are much noisier as if Baudelaire’s flaneur remains in the nineteenth century whereas Musil brings the figure to the twentieth century.²¹

The Positions of Musil’s narrator is that of the observer who defines the meaning of what he sees. Moreover, within the text, Musil described the two individuals wandering along the streets. It expresses a kind of dialectic of flanerie that consists in the flanerie of the narrator and the flanerie in the text. The two characters are made to stand out from others in the city, they themselves are carrying out an activity of flanerie while the narrator is also a flaneur in relation to them.²² The narrator of the novel and the two characters in the novel are responsible for the meaning they use to try to make sense of their urbanity. Strikingly, the two characters are nameless, or rather, the narrator is unable to know their true names so the reader is confronted with the enigma of who they are. Nameless, yet they are possessed of the confidence to wander the streets, their identities are not outwardly displayed but “they know who they were and that they were in their proper place in a capital city.”²³

But as Musil brings the reader closer to the twentieth century, the flaneur begins to disappear. The considered strolling and observing which is the essence of flanerie has become doubtful. Musil identified three sources that challenge the flaneur. First, the problem of traffic, the flaneur idling on the streets can become a victim of automobile as Musil described at the beginning of the novel of a man, perhaps the last flaneur, who was knocked down by the truck. Second, flanerie and the profound intellectual activity it requires might become simply exhausted, the mysteries of the city could well become banal. Third, flanerie is rendered less and less likely by the increasing domination of rationality and of an order imposed on the city as if by necessity.

In 1902, Georg Simmel’s essay *The Metropolis and Mental Life* presented a quite different picture from Baudelaire’s but more similar to Musil’s.

The great city had become less seductive. With increasing "intensification of nervous stimulation" resulting from the "swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli," the individual was forced to face the difficult problem of preserving his humanity.²⁴ Personal involvement was inhibited, every activity was reduced to an anonymous transaction. Calculability and exactness became the dominant behavioral attributes of the urban individual. Approaching the twentieth century, the electrifying *modern life* was gradually reduced to impersonal matter of fact.

This process of alienation in the metropolis was surveyed by Walter Benjamin in his *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century*. Baudelaire's flâneur strolls the streets and arcades both aware of his modernity and deferential to his reification, humbly taking his part in a vast, surreal comedy.²⁵ But as the century progressed, things were permanently altered. Benjamin's argument is that the rationality of capitalism and, especially, commodification and the circulation of commodities, itself defined the meaning of existence in the city so that there remained no spaces of mystery for the flâneur to observe.²⁶ Capital imposed its own order on the metropolis. Benjamin proposed that the hollowness of the commodity form and the hollowness of the egoistic individuals of capitalism was reflected in the flâneur. In other words, flânerie is a desperate attempt to fill this emptiness even though it is actually a final resignation to it. He wrote:

*The flâneur only seems to break through this unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest by filling the hollow spaces created in him by such isolation, with the borrowed - and fictitious - isolations of strangers. The flâneur is someone abandoned in the crowd, in this he shares the situation of the commodityThe intoxication to which the flâneur surrenders is the intoxication of the commodity around which surges the stream of customers.*²⁷

The flâneur becomes a seeker after mystery from banality. Like Musil, Benjamin also identified challenges to flânerie revolving around the rationalization of the spaces in the city. All mystery is removed from the city by rationalization. Certainly, flânerie is predicated on the possibility that there might be secrets to be imputed to things. But that possibility is destroyed by administrative rationality. The mystery of what might lurk behind the doors of the houses is eliminated by giving each house a matter-of-fact and a defining number. Benjamin saw house-numbering as a measure intended to pin down every face in the city to a single place and meaning. Such pinning down established the meaning and the order of things in advance and makes flânerie less possible. He wrote: "Since the French Revolution an extensive network of controls had brought bourgeois life ever more tightly into its meshes. The numbering of houses in the big cities may be used to document the progressive standardization."²⁸ In other words, rigid orders and numbers destroy the poetry of the city which means that the city ceases to be a place of free wandering, of free coming and going. Benjamin also stressed that rationalization also challenged flânerie through the establishment of the time discipline. Flânerie is more or less independent of the clock. The relationship between flânerie and time discipline is illustrated well by the temporary predilection of the flâneur to take a walk with a turtle. It represents one desperate response to the increasing speed of circulation in the nineteenth century. Flânerie can be seen as a nostalgia for a slower and more definite world. For this reason, the arcades of the Paris before Haussmann as well as the streets of Vienna before the Ringstrasse are important. They are public spaces which were protected from the circulation of the city. Without the arcades and the labyrinth of small streets, flânerie and its pace is out of step with the rapid circulation of modern metropolis.

The messages from Musil and Benjamin are quite clear that the flâneur dies, or fades away, in the modern city. They used the figure of the flâneur to try to say something about metropolitan existence as a general problem. On the one hand, the flâneur seems to be a figure specific to a Parisian time and place.



On the other hand, it is a figure to illuminate issues of city life irrespective of place and time. As for Benjamin, though he paid special attention to the historical specificity of Paris, he was also ready to refer to London or Berlin if they would enable him to stress his point more forcefully.²⁹

According to Baudelaire, the flaneur observes and seeks the meaning of his modernity. And modernity, for him, is “the ephemeral, the contingent, the half art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable.”³⁰ In other words, the flaneur observes the fleeting and the contingent content of the eternal and the immovable forms.

In the end, is it possible that the wish of flaner-
ie lies in every individual who wishes to find a small wonder in an increasingly rationalized city? Can it be said that flaner-
ie is a game that represents cosmological understanding of order and change. Georges Perec’s *Life: A User’s Manual* provides a clear view of this game of flaner-
ie.³¹ It induces creative invention through recognizing spaces and places not as fixed but as potential and possible. Perec’s book seems to randomly move from floor to floor and from apartment to apartment within the building 11 Rue Simon-Crubbellier. The reader is turned into a flaneur of the text. The meaning of existence from

within the pages is waited to be found. The reader is free of any single plot-line and aware of nothing so much as the multiplicity of the existence in and of the text. The reader is thus responsible for the meaning of the book and if the reader pauses with any one part of the novel, the meaning found is only partial. A satisfaction is caused by the possibility that perhaps the reader could find something better or clearer with the next tenant, in the next apartment. By this means, the reader as flaneur has to get up and start going up and down the stairs once again.³²

Perec’s novel shows a potential that the flaneur from Baudelaire to Musil to Benjamin all try to find. The work generates many possible readings, and the possibility of entering differently. The places, the buildings or sites are full of possibilities, always rich and surprising. If it possible for the sites in a novel to generate excitement and new readings always, the question is whether it would be possible for the real sites to do the same. It is a game that takes imagination not only of the creators of the game but also of the players. But any games always exist with their own rules and orders, if the flaneur wishes to survive through the centuries, how, then, the game of flaner-
ie can create its own rules that will coexist with the changing orders of the *modern* world.

Notes

- ¹ Charles Baudelaire. *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*. Tr. J. Mayne. London: Phaidon, 1995, p. 13.
- ² Ibid., p. 4.
- ³ Harry Malgrave. In an introduction to Otto Wagner. *Modern Architecture: A Guide Book for His Students to This Field of Art*. Tr. H. Malgrave. Santa Monica, CA: the Getty Center, 1988, p. 11.
- ⁴ Keith Tester. *The Flaneur*. New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 10.
- ⁵ Ibid., p. 1.
- ⁶ Bruce Mazlish. "The Flaneur: From Spectator to Representation." In *The Flaneur*. Ed. K. Tester. p. 46.
- ⁷ Tester, p. 1.
- ⁸ Baudelaire. *The Painter of Modern Life*. p. 4.
- ⁹ Charles Baudelaire. *Paris Spleen*. Tr. L. Varese. New York: New Direction Books, 1970, p. 20.
- ¹⁰ Baudelaire. *The Painter of Modern Life*, p. 9.
- ¹¹ Jules Lubbock. "Adolf Loos and the English Dandy." *Architectural Review* 174 (1988), p. 43.
- ¹² T.H. Lister. *Granby*. London: Henry Colburn, 1826. The character *Trebeck* was considered to be a very exact portrait of Brummel.
- ¹³ Capt Jesse. *The Life of George Brummel Esq.* London, 1886, p. 70.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., p. 59.
- ¹⁵ Lubbock. p. 44.
- ¹⁶ Baudelaire. *Paris Spleen*, p. 20.
- ¹⁷ Tester, p. 4.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p. 8.
- ¹⁹ Robert Musil. *The Man without Qualities*. Tr. E. Wilkins and E. Kaiser. New York: Capricorn Books, 1965, p. 4.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Tester., p. 11.
- ²² Ibid., p. 12.
- ²³ Baudelaire. *The Painter of Modern Life*. p. 10.
- ²⁴ Malgrave., p. 11.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Tester., p. 13.
- ²⁷ Walter Benjamin. *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet In the Era of High Capitalism*. Tr. H. Zohn. London: Verso, 1983, p. 58.
- ²⁸ Ibid., p. 47.
- ²⁹ Tester., p. 16.
- ³⁰ Baudelaire. *The Painter of Modern Life*. p. 13.
- ³¹ Georges Perce. *Life: A User's Manual*. Tr. D. Bellos. London: Michael Haag, 1987.
- ³² The description of Perce's novel in relation to flânerie can be found in Tester. p. 19.



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