Women’s Passages: A Bildungsroman of Female Flânerie

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The writing of a dissertation requires a lot more than just a computer and books: apart from the many material and practical necessities, there still are many personal and difficult-to-trace advices, inspiring conversations and cityscapes that have helped me writing this little volume. This list cannot be inclusive, but I can try to track down the most relevant people, in their most relevant environment (in the line of the following chapters…).

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Flânerie, or the motive of aimlessly walking the city, has become a widespread literary device in contemporary female writing. To understand the concept of female flânerie, we need to trace back the origins of modern urban writing. The activity (or non-activity) of city-dwelling and the idea of modernity go back a lot further than the nineteenth century. As early as 1405, Christine de Pisan used the city as a metaphor for the history of women (Le Livre de la Cité des Dames), but the most recognised and canonised (male) flânerie literature is situated in the mid-nineteenth century, when early modern writers such as Charles Baudelaire and Emile Zola first started to use the city as a character, or at least a very decisive setting for their flâneurs’ moods and experiences.

After the First World War, Walter Benjamin, who was influenced by early twentieth-century sociologists such as Georg Simmel and Siegfried Kracauer, announced “Die Wiederkehr des Flâneurs”. He was inspired by a collection of essays by Franz Hessel, Spazieren in Berlin (1929). Walter Benjamin then turned to the roots of nineteenth-century Parisian flânerie, writing his major opus, the unfinished and fragmented Passagenwerk. This is a study of Paris, written as an archaeological study of the city, its phenomena and its mysteries. It will serve as a basis for this dissertation, not only in the sense of what is in the Passagenwerk, but also in the sense for what is not in the Passagenwerk: women as badauds, voyeurs, life artists, and, eventually, as flâneuses. I will investigate in which way female flânerie evolved from the nineteenth century until now, with many detours along the way. This includes investigating the position of women as objects/subjects in the city, their “ability” for flânerie, and possible difference with the male flâneur.

It is impossible to say to what extent “real” flâneuses existed, because, as I will discuss further on, the nature of the flâneur is already filled with oppositions. He was a solipsist, but

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more than any other characteristic ascribed to him, the flâneur was a figure of ambiguity. He could be peripatetic and immobile at the same time; some flâneurs loved the crowd, others abhorred the masses. Some were very effeminate to the point of dandyism (exhibitionism), others were rather macho voyeurs (scopophilia). The figure of the flâneur, as a Man with No Qualities, was a typical modern subject. The flâneur was an idle stroller with an inquisitive mind and an aesthetic eye, a mixture of the watchful detective, the aesthetic dandy and the gaping consumer, the badaud. A solitary character, he avoided serious political, familial or sexual relationships, and was only keen on the aesthetics of city life. He read the city as a book, finding beauty in the obsolete objects of other people, but in a distanced, superior way.

Without judging Benjamin for the absence of women’s experiences in his further on very inclusive work, or adopting the negative viewpoints of Griselda Pollock and Janet Wolff “that there is not and could not be a flâneuse”, I will try to write a more positive history sans rancune. Aware of the many difficulties posed to women in the city, I will nevertheless try to adopt the more positive stance from female critics such as Deborah Parsons, Anne Friedberg and, with some drawbacks, Anke Gleber. All of these critics will be included in the account of female flânerie.

In trying to work my way through almost two centuries of history, sociology, literature and the spaces of many metropolises in one dissertation, I needed a useful theoretical instrument to structure all the fragments, in order to avoid a small new unfinished Passagen-Werk. I opted for the framework out of the book Een Drempelwereld: Moderne Ervaring en Stedelijke Openbaarheid by René Boomkens, a Dutch professor of architecture and popular culture at the University of Amsterdam. Like developmental psychologists, he uses the metaphor of the human life (childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age) to indicate the separate moments in the development of big metropolises. I will discuss the different important moments in a Bildungsroman of female flânerie, placing them in their most relevant settings. I have chosen nineteenth-century Paris (childhood), Berlin in the 1920s/30s (adolescence) and New York in the 1980s/90s (adulthood) as the three first settings of my progress, evolving into the new millennium through the idea of a “Welt flânerie” (middle age). Of course, it is a fiction to say

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that these three cities\textsuperscript{4} were the only important ones, but they are very useful instruments for ordering all the material. Whenever there are important developments in another city in the same period (e.g. in the Paris of the 1920s, whilst Berlin is the setting for that era), the chapter of that period will be closed off with a short overview of what was happening elsewhere. Just like in a real person’s life, the childhood still influences the adulthood, and the adolescence is retrospective and progressive at the same time.

I have chosen Paris as the setting for the flâneuse’s childhood because flânerie finds its roots there. Benjamin called Paris “the capital of the nineteenth century”, because modernity and mechanical/industrial progress were all around (for example, in the shocks and jolts of trains, stations and machines). The modern world had become incomprehensible, giving rise to anxiety in the individual, who fled into phantasmagorias\textsuperscript{5}, fantasies and festivals. Fairs, photography, festivals, world exhibitions and big department stores gave the bourgeois individual a chance to enjoy the world in a voyeuristic mode, and became inspiring locuses for the writer-artist. For this chapter about nineteenth-century Parisian flânerie, the literary texts will mainly consist of extracts out of Baudelaire and Zola’s works, interpreted with the help of Benjamin’s \textit{PassagenWerk}, and contemporary writings by Susan Buck-Morss, Bart Keunen, Deborah Parsons, Sally Munt, René Boomkens and Anne Friedberg. The main focus will lie on the male flâneur versus urban women as presented by Baudelaire, and the “birth” of female flânerie in the department stores of the mid-nineteenth century (Zola’s \textit{Au Bonheur des Dames}). This has given women a status of badauds (consumers) rather than flâneuses, but it creates an opening towards flânerie with a female touch. Like a little child, who will only take baby steps at first, the young flâneuse’s development is one of winning and losing, but it is nevertheless very important for her further life, which will show in the course of this dissertation.

From the childhood of female flânerie in mid-nineteenth century Paris to its adolescence in the interbellum, the focus will shift geographically onto the women writers and artists of the Weimar period in Berlin. A number of contemporary studies have been written on the (female) artistic circles of that period, and for this dissertation the two most interesting ones

\textsuperscript{4} London will not be discussed separately, but sometimes examples will be used from London-based authors to give strength to an argument. For an almost exhaustive account of female modernist writers in London, see: Parsons, Deborah, \textit{Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity}, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000.

\textsuperscript{5} The phantasmagoria or shadow play is a metaphor for the miraculous scenery of the nineteenth-century’s carnivalesque sites, giving rise to the most magnificent delusions.
were *The Art of Taking a Walk* by Anke Gleber, and *Verrückt nach Leben* by Ute Scheub. From the era itself, I have opted for literature by Georg Simmel (early twentieth century), Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, Herman Hessel and extracts out of Irmgard Keun’s novels *Gilgi, eine von uns* and *Doris, das kunstseidene Mädchen*. All these writings demonstrate that the Weimar period was an era of “growing pains”, with years of abundance and decadence (sexual ambiguity, the salons of the roaring twenties, the bohemian life) and a decade filled with fear and melancholy (the 1930s, over-clouded by the gloom of the upcoming Second World War, even resulting in the suicide of Walter Benjamin). Like a teenager, the flâneuse went through periods of ecstatic joy and heavy bouts of depression.

The opening up of possibilities for women in professional life and the rise of the cinema in the Weimar period are also important features and will be discussed in terms of the *female gaze*, or *female scopophilia*. I will also mention shortly the parallel development of the (lesbian) literary community in Paris, the so-called *Women of the Left Bank*.

After the backlash of the Second World War, which brought women back to the domestic area of the kitchen as mothers and wives, the revolutionary years of the sixties and seventies gave a new impulse to female writers to become independent and self-sustaining. This resulted in the fiction of the eighties and nineties, with the finger on the pulse of New York. Capital of postmodernism, capitalism, fashion, design, art, bohemia, and many other things, it housed a lot of individual women writers and women’s artistic communities (e.g. in Sarah Schulman’s *Girls, Visions and Everything* and Beth Nugent’s *City of Boys*). For a theory of postmodern society, (fashion) images, popular culture, cinema, window shopping and the mall, the works of Michael Featherstone and Anne Friedberg will provide a framework. Also, because the early emancipation of women in public went hand in hand with the rise of the cinema and the department stores, I will give some examples of TV-series (*Sex and the City*) and pop culture (Madonna), to show that female flânerie has become adapted in many ways and produced cultural products which, like it or not, give their own interpretation and twist to the motive. In the line of the aesthetics of pop art (revelling in scraps and shreds), this chapter will contain

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various paragraphs, since it attempts to give an “as-inclusive-as-possible” overview of the grown-up flâneuse and her Manhattan Attitude (where everything is possible).

After the adulthood in the 1980s-1990s, the flâneuse reaches her middle age (turning point?) in the new millennium of globalisation and world travelling. The decentralisation and fragmentation which was already to be found in the stories set in New York, reaches its climax in the phenomenon of Welt flânerie, a mode of travelling the world out of a flâneur’s/flâneuse’s disposition. Centreless metropolises (e.g.) have replaced the old cultural capitals (London, Paris) and have adopted the postmodern Manhattan Attitude. The hyper-reality of shopping malls, cinemas and cyberspace turns the world into one big phantasmagoria. The whole world has become a playground for the contemporary flâneuse, which she travels restlessly as a post-tourist. The labyrinthine ruins and debris of postmodernism give rise to a new way of appropriating “old” modern motives of flânerie. The fictional works for this chapter are Zomerhuis, later and Niets dan geesten by Judith Hermann12, and again Sarah Schulman’s Girls, Visions and Everything. I will not only discuss the phenomenon of Welt-flânerie, but also offer a canvas of the many interwoven threads out of the former chapters. Every aspect of female flânerie can suddenly surface (for example, in books, films, TV-series and city culture) and become an important motive. That is why I will wait until the last chapters for discussing novels and stories, because all the elements from Paris and Berlin have their importance for contemporary literature; they are not restricted to my fictional framework.

In the same way that foreign travel and adventure are used as metaphors for self-discovery in the traditional male Bildungsroman, will the different periods, authors and cities that are presented take the reader on a “voyage out” in order to come to a “voyage in”, a search for the female consciousnesses in the cities. The method of montage, already used by Benjamin, is the only possible one for this project, which will touch upon a variety of subjects, following the multi-sided personality of its subject, the flâneuse. The Passagenwerk is in itself a form of literary flânerie, with labyrinths and “one way streets” (also the title of a book by Benjamin), including subjects as various as fashion, Haussmannization, iron construction, prostitution, the flâneur, Baudelaire, the rag-picker, advertisements, photography, dolls, Marx and the

In the same way, this small attempt to provide a female account of Benjamin’s *Passagenwerk*, will touch upon a lot of subjects and writers, glued together by the technique of montage into a positive *Bildungsroman* for female flânerie. Only this way we can see the many parallels in different periods and track down the history of female flânerie. It also gives us a point of reference to see how the motive has become appropriated in contemporary literature.

My hypothesis is that the novels or short stories of today will use different elements from all the three moments discussed above, which makes this “scattered” study also very rich as a stock of female flânerie motives and developments. The complete project is a big one -and maybe too ambitious, as well- but nevertheless it can help us to interpret the urban world surrounding us, by way of digging into the literature and arts of past times. Looking back on the gendered politics of urban space in the last two centuries, contemporary urban women might understand their daily environment better, in terms of both joyful (reading, shopping, wandering, café-going, working) and difficult (sexual assault, unequal working conditions, objectification) experiences. If the literary motive of female flânerie proves to be important for the critical analysis of contemporary novels, TV-series, images, commercials and other cultural products, this dissertation wants to be a positive step towards a better understanding of the concept.
L’art de la flânerie\textsuperscript{13}
Have you ever reflected on everything contained in the term ‘flanerie’,
this most enchanting word which is revered by poets…?
Going on infinite investigations through the streets and promenades;
drifting along, with your nose in the wind,
with both hands in your pockets,
and an umbrella under your arm,
as befits any open-minded spirit;
walking along, with serendipity,
without pondering where to and without urging to hurry…
stopping in front of stores to regard their images,
at street corners to read their signs,
by the \textit{bouquinistes’} stands to touch their old books…
giving yourself over,
with all your senses and all your mind,
to the spectacle.

\textsuperscript{13} Fournel, Victor, \textit{Ce qu’on voit dans les rues de Paris}, 1858 in: Gleber 1999:3.
“And what is Flâneur? It's a magazine dedicated to the celebration of urban life, the sanctification of the stroll.”

II. Paris 1840-1900: The childhood of female flânerie

A. Concepts for nineteenth-century flânerie

1. Flânerie, or the art of taking a walk

In order to investigate the way in which women positioned themselves as observers of the urban territory in nineteenth century Paris, I first need to gain some background knowledge about the literary metaphor of flânerie as an act of reading the city, and of its male protagonist, the flâneur. Following Deborah Parsons’ project for modern female writers, it is necessary to start with a description of male flânerie because we need some point of reference for the childhood of female flânerie, which started during the culmination point of male flânerie in nineteenth-century Paris. One should note here that male flânerie is still a powerful conceptual metaphor, but its original heydays belong to the past. The original male flâneur was “killed” together with his habitat, the arcade, in favour of the female-oriented department stores. Anne Friedberg argues the following: “The department store may have been, as Benjamin put it, the flâneur’s last coup, but it was the flâneuse’s first.” (Friedberg: 1993: 37)

The department stores were a starting point for the flâneuse’s existence, but they also labelled her as a consumer, a badaud. The difference between badauds and flâneurs is the distance they maintain (or do not maintain) between themselves and the spectacle of the city. The key concept for flânerie is an aesthetic distance towards the object of attention, and the new-born department store flâneuse seems to lack that characteristic. Walter Benjamin, inspired by Baudelaire and Fournel’s Ce qu’on voit dans les rues de Paris (1858), was the first author to

14 Flanifesto, of the e-magazine Flâneur, <http://www.flaneur.org>  
15 (…), we must begin with an examination and reassessment of Walter Benjamin’s motif for the writer and writing of urban modernity, the flâneur. What is the status of the women who trespass upon his pavement and his page? Can there be a flâneuse and what forms might she take? Answering these questions involves questioning the status and meaning of the flâneur as both historical figure and critical metaphor in literary and cultural criticism, (…). How are women writers situated, how do they situate themselves in the maps of urban location and literature? (Parsons 2000:2)

distinguish theoretically between both figures. The flâneur is a distinct individual with a shield of distance around him, whereas the badaud is part of the plebs:


This chapter will take a closer look at the key concepts of male flânerie (aesthetic distance, the gaze, ambiguity) and the difficulties for female flânerie (consumerism, objectification, sphinx-status, lack of distance), mostly situated in the city where it all began, Paris.

The concept of flânerie is one of early modernity, initialised in the eighteenth century (Rousseau, Goethe), further developed Charles Baudelaire, E.T.A. Hoffmann and Victor Fournel. It culminated in the symbolism of the fin-de-siècle decadence and the new art forms of the twentieth century, like Surrealism, Dada-art and Futurism. Baudelaire’s definition of modern art, as defined in *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne*, contained two parts: « La modernité, c’est le transitoire, le fugitive, le contingent, la moitié de l’art, dont l’autre moitié est l’éternel et l’immuable. » (Baudelaire in Boomkens 1998:19) Within this definition we see two extremes opposing each other: on the one hand, there are traits of elusiveness, fugitivity and transition, whilst on the other hand, the second half of modern art is eternal, serious and static.

The flâneur, with his detached and artistic perception of daily reality, embodies the ideals of the modern artist. He integrates art (l’immuable) into his life (le contingent), and becomes a life-artist, a “Lebenskünstler”. The best-known writings about French nineteenth-century flânerie include the prose poems and essays by Baudelaire (*Les Fleurs du Mal*-1861, *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne* -1863, *Le Spleen de Paris*-1864), novels by Balzac (*Illusions Perdues*), by Zola (*Au Bonheur des Dames, Le Ventre de Paris*) and many others. The main point of focus will be on Baudelaire in this chapter, by means of charting his view on flânerie, modernism, photography, artistic life, gender ambiguities of the male flâneur and, most importantly for this study, his ambivalent attitude towards women.

Descriptions of satisfactory female flânerie do not occur in Baudelaire’s writings, but this does not make our quest for a female flâneuse a mission impossible. It is rather an indication of the complex social structures that shaped nineteenth-century society. These admitted the largest part of women to become badauds but did not really respect them as flâneuses. Women are represented in a stereotypical way in Baudelaire’s work. Widows, prostitutes, lesbians and *femme passantes* are recurrent figures in most of his poems, without ever being
granted a three-dimensional identity. They are all objectified through the eyes of a pitiful, disdainful or fascinated observer. The fleeting *passante* remains a mystery, a disturbing presence or sphinx, symbolising the enigma of the feminised city, the metropolis (from the Greek: Meter [mother] and Polis [city]). According to Deborah Parsons, the feminine aspect is not oppressed, but emphasized throughout these writings:

> It would almost seem that the intellectual male tried to define himself out of a society that was uncontrollable and thus abhorrent, both the product and the consumer of the commodity world being described as feminine. (Parsons 2000:38)

With this statement, Parsons links femininity with consumerism, which was abhorrent for the male artist: Fournel and Baudelaire wanted to secure their male flâneur’s status, distinguishing themselves from women-badauds. Nevertheless, Parsons searches for the positive changes in the nineteenth century, and, like Anne Friedberg, adopts a constructive point of view on early female flânerie. I will try do the same, by means of discussing the new possibilities that were presented to women in the nineteenth century in the form of the consumption palaces and new technologies.

The conclusion of some critics (for example Marshall Berman’s *All that is solid melts into air*, discussed in Mike Featherstone 1991:75, Janet Wolff\(^\text{17}\), *The Invisible Flâneuse* and Renée Boomkens, 1998:129), that it would be more rewarding to investigate the changes modernity brought to women’s domestic lives (instead of looking for artistic female presences in the city), is giving in too much to the non-existence of female flânerie and reasserting the old, and only partial valid, male/public, female/private dichotomy.

### 2. The flâneur and the badaud

#### 2.1. The flâneur, a figure of paradoxes

The flâneur is a cultural category with many subcategories: there is the artist-flâneur (the painter/writer), the popular flâneur (concerned with consumerism and spectacle, the *badaud*), the detective flâneur (as in Poe’s story *The Man of the Crowd*), the dandy flâneur (aesthete) and the journalistic observing flâneur. The intense, journalistic observation of the crowd gives way to the description of stereotypical urban figures, in the form of *Physiologies*. We find examples of those in many nineteenth-century writings like Zola’s naturalistic cycles *Les Rougons-Macquart* (1871-1893), and in Edgar Allan Poe’s story *The Man of the Crowd* (1840). The figures out of the above-named subcategories are not necessarily always flâneurs.

themselves, but the figure of the flâneur is a mixture of these characters, the key concepts being his *aesthetic detachment* (masculine) towards the objects/crowds/sceneries he sees and his *elusivity/ambiguity* (feminine?) when it comes to finding an accurate definition. The different and complex descriptions we get from critics might be a consequence of the “modernity” of the flâneur, who keeps changing himself. Mike Featherstone discusses in this context Michel Foucault’s essay *What is Enlightenment?:*

> This is the sense of being modern associated with Baudelaire which, as Foucault argues, entails an ironical heroicization of the present: the modern man is the man who constantly tries to invent himself. (Featherstone 1991:4)

The flâneur, a figure of transition from the “old world” to the “modern world” is both a nostalgic and enthusiastic figure. His eyes filter the city scenes as metaphors for his own inner life, he sympathizes with figures as the rag-picker, the widow, the prostitute and the bag-lady, because they symbolise his own loneliness or placelessness. Baudelaire never defined the flâneur literally, whilst he did categorize many of the above-named figures. An appropriate description of the flâneur could be, ironically, the *Man With No Qualities.* An early literal definition of the figure is a pamphlet out of 1806, detailing a day in the life of the flâneur, M. Bonhomme. The pamphlet illustrates the flâneur’s detachment from ordinary life:

> The life of M. Bonhomme is characterized by freedom from financial/familial responsibility, by membership of the aesthetic circles of café life, by interest in the sartorial codes of society, by a fascination with womanhood but detachment from sexual relationships, and by a position of isolated marginality. (Elizabeth Wilson, *The Invisible Flâneur,* in Parsons 2000: 17)

He is, like Boomkens would have it, a man on the threshold (or in the margin): he is on the threshold of bourgeois life and bohemian life, rebelling against it but anxious about what is coming next, not feeling at home in either of both worlds. The same holds for Benjamin as a twentieth-century historian (see Boomkens 1998:410): he is also a man between threshold worlds, celebrating the shocks and jolts of modernity whilst assembling the fragments of history, pointing out to the readers of the *Passagenwerk* the importance of memory, of historiography.

Baudelaire’s flâneur has authoritative characteristics which give him a sense of visual power over the world he beholds; Baudelaire compares him to a royal figure, a prince:

> To be away from home, and yet to feel at home; to behold the world, to be in the midst of the world and yet to remain hidden from the world (...) the observer is a prince who always rejoices in his incognito. (Charles Baudelaire: *The Painter of Modern Life,* in Friedberg 1993: 29)
The prince-like posture implies an exclusively male point of view, Baudelaire genders his observer as masculine\textsuperscript{18}. There is no trace of melancholy in this passage, it is a clear example of the flâneur’s “jouissance de la foule”. Although the flâneur rejoices in the sights of crowds, he does not feel part of them, “always rejoicing in his incognito”\textsuperscript{19}. The flâneur is in the midst of the world. The crowd, like a veil, turns the city into a phantasmagoria, a realm of dreams and spectacle. He swings between moods of detachment and immersion into the crowd, never admitting the mass to come too close or to touch his inner self:

The flâneur is a hypersensitive and observant type of the indifferent individuals who co-exist as the urban crowd. He is physically part of this crowd yet also mentally detached from it; it is in no way a socio-political collective. (Parsons 2000: 225)

His hypersensitivity is related to the watchfulness of a detective: like the detective, the flâneur reads the city in its signs and images, in the physiologies of its inhabitants. Like a journalist, he records events and images, but he differs from the journalist in his mode of perception: the flâneur’s recording style is not an example of “matter-of-fact-ness”, but rather a magical, mnemotechnic way of reading the city. His distanced attitude leaves space for artistic interpretation. He is a solipsistic, if not anachronistic hero of nineteenth-century capitalism, using his art de la flânerie to subdue the impulses pounding on his senses\textsuperscript{20}.

The flâneur needs distance from the spectacle for his artistic interpretation, whereas the badaud immerses himself completely in the urban scenery. The flâneur “looks but does not touch”, he develops a good taste without necessarily consuming the objects of desire:

The control of the emotions and the capacity to develop a taste for the good things in life in a measured, distanced manner—be they painting, books, music, food or drink— is the product of a life-long education process and must itself be understood as part of a more general long-term civilizing process in which emotional controls are developed more systematically in the upper and middle classes than in the lower orders. (Elias,

\textsuperscript{18} For the German poets Ludwig Börne and Heinrich Heine too, the male gender of the flâneur was the only logical possibility:
Both a product of modernity and its seismograph, he represents the man of the streets. He is at once a dreamer, a historian, and an artist of modernity, a character, a reader, and an author who transforms his observations into literary and latenly filmic texts. (…) this unbounded, unrestricted pursuit of perception has been mainly ascribed to men. It is no accident, for example, that Heine and Börne, in Briefe aus Berlin and Schilderungen aus Paris respectively take their point of departure from their own physical and tangible presence as men in the city, evoking and facilitating their flaneuristic reflections by observing a contemporary public in the streets (Gleber 1999: 171)

\textsuperscript{19} Anke Gleber refers to Benjamin’s notes on Baudelaire, his exemplary case: “Baudelaire loved solitude, but he wanted it in a crowd.” (Gleber 1999: 59)

\textsuperscript{20} Anke Gleber interpretes the flâneur’s walking as a resistance to the functionality of modern time- schedules: A decidedly anachronistic if not “timeless” form of movement, his walking helps him retreat him from a time that is subject to functional measures and restrictions, to the limitations that arise from the imposition of any specific speed, duration, or destination to his movement. (Gleber 1999:50)
The flâneur’s lifelong educational process is a logical consequence of being a man who constantly tries to invent himself. The flâneur’s preferred habitat for his development of taste were the (Parisian) arcades, where he could loiter, roam and be immersed into the new acquisitions of modern consumer culture. The image of the strolling wanderer has been caricaturized in the figure of a man walking a turtle, because the flâneur, supposedly, had all the time in the world. With the rise of department stores, the *grands magasins* and the *Haussmannization* of Paris in the second half of the nineteenth century, the flâneur’s habitat was being destroyed, just at the time when he (the middle-class, leisured, white male) was becoming a recognisable social character (by means of pamphlets, novels and caricatures). The downfall of the arcades does not mean that loitering had gone out of fashion, but that the typical place of the arcade (a mixture of inside and outside) did not “do” any longer in the modernised city. Through the Hausmannization of Paris, the historical centre of Paris had been swept away in large parts, leaving the flâneur with a sense of melancholy, a desire for what was lost.

Benjamin focuses in his *Passagenwerk* (or *Arcades Work*) on the flâneur as a collector/reader of cultural signs, seeking out images of fashion, advertising, prostitution, architecture and many more. There seem to be no women’s passages or arcades in his work, which does not mean that there were no similar female experiences. Since the flâneur was a financially secure, leisured character, it is remarkable why women were not perceived as flâneuses at all, since middle class women had more time to roam and stroll than their men. It is a useful project to investigate nineteenth-century Paris as a site for the childhood of female flânerie, because “Once we establish the flâneur’s mobility, we will see the necessity of charting the origins of his female equivalent, the flâneuse.” (Friedberg 1993: 17)

### 2.2. The badaud

The flâneur was not the only male figure loitering in the arcades: they were also the preferred “playgrounds” for the badaud, a male consumer who commodified himself in the urban spectacle. Mike Featherstone considers the badaud as a “mere gaper who becomes intoxicated by the urban scene to the extent that he forgets him [- or herself]”. (Featherstone 1998: 914)

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21 During the reign of Napoléon iii (Paris of the Second Empire-mid, in the mid-nineteenth century), the architect Baron Haussmann had been given the responsibility for transforming Paris from a historical town into a modern city with large squares and boulevards, using steel and metal constructions. This face-lift for the city became later known as the *Haussmannization* of Paris.
My addition to Featherstone’s definition shows his male-oriented approach, which confines his theoretical assumptions solely to the male figure.

To see and be seen (*esse est percipi*) is the badaud’s greatest concern; he does not retain an aesthetic distance from the spectacle. Whilst visiting World Exhibitions, parks and boulevards, he does not read the city so much as consume its pleasurable sites. Sally Munt\(^\text{22}\) explains his attitude as an acceptance of the new consumerist society, something the flâneur perceived as a threat:

> Here is epitomized a crucial structuring principle of the *flâneur*: at the same time as he is the master of his own agency, his symbiosis with the city is such that his individualism is constantly threatening to implode, as he becomes himself commodified, collapsed into the spectacle. (Munt 1998: 39)

Like the flâneur, who reads the city in its streets, shops and faces, the badaud frequents terraces and fairs to consume the sights with an unabashed voyeurism, selling himself in an exhibitionist manner. Instead of melting in with the crowd, the badaud makes of his own persona a spectacle, defending his individual borders with a fashionable shield. This makes the badaud (woman?) a less defensive, and thus, more open figure towards the new aspects of modern city life.

According to the early twentieth century sociologist Georg Simmel, the individual’s need for differentiation in metropolitan environments led to the “strangest eccentricities whose significance merely lay in ‘making oneself noticeable’” (Simmel, *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, in GUST 1999: 145)\(^\text{23}\). The badaud could be interpreted as an early form of the postmodern consumer, since, “In the aestheticized perception of consumers, no form of distance imposes itself.” (GUST 1999:131) On the other hand, we could also conclude that, in today’s mass consumption society, it is the badaud who has survived the flâneur.

The badaud talks, breathes and lives consumption in a way that is mostly associated with women. His narcissistic impulse for outwardly appearance is also a trait often ascribed to women (and dandies). The difference between the badaud and the dandy is the dandy’s anti-political pose of dilettantism as a defence against the outside world, whereas the badaud simply enjoyed the consumer spectacle, giving himself over to it. Since the birth of the female flâneur or *flâneuse* is linked with the entry of women in the commercial life of nineteenth-century Paris, we could conclude that the image of women as *badauds* has been more influential than that of *femme flâneurs*.


\(^{23}\) GUST (Ghent Urban studies Team), *The Urban Condition: Space, Community and Self in the Contemporary Metropolis*, Rotterdam, 010 Publishers, 1999.
3. The urban woman: a badaud or sphinx in the city?

3.1. Different approaches towards the “impossibility” for female flânerie

The impossibility for female flânerie has been stated by Griselda Pollock and Janet Wolff. The gist of Wolff’s essay *The Invisible Flâneuse*, is that “there is no question of inventing the flâneuse: the essential point is that such a character was rendered impossible by the sexual divisions of the nineteenth century.” (Wolff 1989: 45) Pollock’s research into the presence or absence of female artists/observers concludes that “there is no female equivalent of the quintessential masculine figure, the flâneur: there is not and could not be a female flâneuse.” (Pollock 1988:71) In her essay, she restricts the figure of the flâneur in the fields of gender, race and class; the flâneur being the quintessential white middle class observer. Yet, other theorists like Anne Friedberg and Deborah Parsons do find a valuable option for female flânerie in the phenomenon of “department store flâneuses”. Friedberg criticizes Wolff’s selection of male literature which easily gives a male-exclusive account of the nineteenth century:

Wolff wants to produce a feminist sociology that would supply the experiences of women, but it seems important also to turn to some literary texts by female ‘modernists.(…) Certainly the literature that Wolff surveys- Simmel, Baudelaire, Benjamin- describes the experience of men in the public sphere from which women are invisible. (Friedberg 1993:37)

Friedberg herself advocates the possibility for female flânerie through her perception of shopping as a woman-orientated, aesthetic and mobile activity:

And, although Wolff does mention that consumerism is a central aspect of modernity and that the establishment of the department store in the 1850s and 1860s created a new arena for the public appearance of women, she does not consider the female consumer as an important figure. Yet, it is precisely here that I find the origins of a new social character, the flâneuse. Shopping, like other itineraries of the late nineteenth century- museum- and exhibition-going, packaged tourism, and, of course, the cinema- relied on the visual register and helped to ensure the predominance of the gaze in capitalist society. The department store that, like the arcade before it, “made use of flânerie itself in order to sell goods.” (Friedberg 1993: 37, quoting Benjamin’s *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century* in the last sentence.)

Friedberg is nevertheless conscious of the fact that this new freedom was not equal to the freedom of the detached male flâneur, since the department store flâneuse’s perfect example is still an image that is dictated by the male department store managers:

The flâneuse was empowered in a paradoxical sense: new freedoms of lifestyle and ‘choice’ were available, but, as feminist theorists have amply illustrated, women were
addressed as consumers in ways that played on deeply rooted cultural constructions of gender. (Friedberg 1993: 36)

Anke Gleber argues in this context that the presence of women in the streets was not comparable to male flânerie. She does away with the “department store roamers” as being no more but puppets in their bourgeois theatre, also denying the working class women a possibility for flânerie:

(…) reduced in its potential to the purposefully limited and capitalistically promoted licence of shopping, the early ‘department store flâneuses’ who ‘roam’ the interiors of capitalist consumption represent little more than a bourgeois variant of domesticized “flanerie”. Women workers and housewives had always already entered the streets without ever becoming flâneuses in their own right. Instead, the street presented itself to them as a space of transition en route to functional purposes (…).
(Gleber 1999: 174)

Anke Gleber follows the “hardcore” feminist Adrienne Rich (Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence), who sees the cult of haute couture and other feminine fashions as a masculine oppression of women, linking it to physical harassment and rape-terrorism:

Characteristics of male power include the power of men… to confine [women] physically and prevent their movement (by means of rape as terrorism, keeping women off the streets, purdah, foot-binding, atrophying a women’s athletic capabilities; haute couture, “feminine” dress codes; the veil; the sexual harassment on the streets). (Adrienne Rich in Gleber 1999: 177)

She further argues that there is not an inherent female incapacity for flânerie, but that the impossibility is a symptom of a male-oriented society which imposes restrictions on women’s lives:

Men still habitually “check out” and evaluate women’s images, in a casual yet consistent cultural ritual that continues to make women’s presence in public spaces a precarious and volatile one. (Gleber 1999: 177)

3.2. Exclusion of women in the public sphere: the woman as a threat

The impossibility for female wandering in the nineteenth century stems from an intellectual masculine fear for the uncontrolled, “animalistic” female body in the street. The female body, confined to the interior of the home, was a recurrent challenge for feminist polemical struggles throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. The idea of the woman as a danger, a sphinx in the city was very alive in the nineteenth century. A telling example of the negative
perception of single women on the street, is the extract out of Jules Michelet’s treatise *La femme* (1858-60), quoted by Anke Gleber.

The nineteenth century’s scientific classification of “female offenders” evolved into a pseudo-scientific discourse which described women as a less-developed species than men. By means of skull-measurements and the taxation of “offensive” features in prostitutes’ and female offenders’ faces, the scientists established the image of a woman as being more natural, less moral and thus more prone to violence than men. Although most women’s characters were softened through maternal instincts, a female offender was said to be ten times more crude and sadistic than her male pendant.

The new mobility of urban women at the turn of the nineteenth century caused a lot of anxiety amongst the intellectual men, who perceived women as sexual creatures which threatened the stability of the male individual. In this context, Parsons quotes out of Andreas Huyssen’s *After The Great Divide*:

> the fear of the masses in this age of declining liberalism is always a fear of woman, a fear of nature out of control, fear of the unconscious, of sexuality, of the loss of identity and stable ego boundaries in the mass. (Parsons 2000:28)

The woman in the city was always a suspect, since a courtesan could often not be distinguished from a respectable bourgeois woman. These two types, the *fille publique* and the *femme honnête* have been named by TJ Clark, who

> (...) discussed the oscillation between two divergent painterly representations of woman in the nineteenth century- the *fille publique* (woman of the streets) and the *femme honnête* (the respectable married woman”). (TJ Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris and the Art of Manet and his Followers* in Friedberg 1993: 36).

Griselda Pollock criticizes Clark for neglecting the “presence of female observers or the absence of female artists, both factors that offer a more precise account of the sexual politics of modernism.” (Pollock 1988: 53) Clearly, if we want to investigate the possibilities for female observation and flânerie, we have to find a figure that is neither a *femme honnête* nor

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25 How many irritations for the single woman! She can hardly ever go out in the evening; she would be taken for a prostitute. There are a thousand places where only men are to be seen and if she needs to go there on business, the men are amazed, and laugh like fools. For example, should she find herself delayed at the other end of Paris and hungry, she will not dare to enter into a restaurant. She would constitute an event; she would be a spectacle: All eyes would be constantly fixed on her, and she would overhear uncomplimentary and bold conjectures. (Jules Michelet in Gleber 1999:173-4)

26 Women were perceived as increasingly dangerous in the 1890s, evident in large numbers not only in organized groups of the suffrage or strike crowds but also in generalized groups such as shoppers, working girls, and spinsters. (Parsons 2000: 44)

27 The woman on the outside is implicitly sexually mobile. Her sexuality is no longer controlled by the house. In Greek thought women lack the internal self-control credited to men as the very mark of masculinity. (Munt 1998: 35)
fille publique; a woman able to enter the public and commercial life without having to cross-dress as a man or masquerade herself into something she is not. The male/female dichotomy of the city, nowadays a contested theory, still plays an important role in the writings by Janet Wolff (*The Invisible Flâneuse*) and Elizabeth Wilson (*The Sphinx in the City*) \(^{28}\):

\(\ldots\) at the commonsense level of our deepest philosophical and emotional assumptions, the unconscious bedrock of Western culture, the male-female dichotomy has damagingly translated itself into a conception of city culture as pertaining to men. Consequently, women have become an interruption in the city, a symptom of disorder and a problem: the Sphinx in the city. (Wilson 1991: 9)

Although Wilson admits that the nineteenth-century city granted women the freedom to roam around department stores and amusement parks, she still asserts that the nineteenth-century dichotomy has left us with archetypal, unconscious assumptions that labels city culture as “male/public”, and the women in it as “sphinxes in the city”.

Just like Janet Wolff’s conclusion\(^{29}\), in *The Invisible Flâneuse*, these findings narrow the scope for female flânerie. Nevertheless, they remain individual stances, opposed by other theorists like Deborah Parsons and Anne Friedberg, who point towards consumerism and cinema as sites of pleasure that enabled women to participate in modern urban life: “Although flânerie began as a predominantly male perceptual mode it was, by the mid-nineteenth century, available to women- first as shoppers, then, as tourists and cinema-goers.” (Friedberg 1993:184) The scope is narrow but has some small entrance *passages*: the nineteenth-century flâneuse, if she existed, was “not possible until she was free to roam the city on her own. And this was equated with the privilege of shopping on her own.” (Friedberg 1993:36)

I will distinguish between the artist-flâneuses and shopping flâneuses in sections C and D of this chapter.

### 3.3. The urban woman as badaud

The idea of women being more inclined to shopping and cosmetics as a form of masquerade goes back a very long way, but the Enlightened spirit of the eighteenth century had a great

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\(^{29}\)For Anke Gleber, the problem or impossibility of female flânerie is not even “classed” as a typical symptom of the nineteenth-century divisions, like in Wolff’s article. Gleber sees the struggle for free movement as an unfinished project: Even acutely aware and critical female subjects have been unable significantly to change the terms on which their images are perceived in the street, the codes and judgments of a culture that perceives them as objects. As long as a woman’s movement in the street requires more self-determination and self-confidence than a man’s, female flanerie cannot really come into its own. (Gleber 1999: 178)
merit in restricting women’s interests into those of their appearance. Through confining women to the interior of the boudoir, the eighteenth-century men protected these “feeble” creatures from the lustful dangers of the newly modernising city. Deborah Parsons illustrates this with a typical misogynist description out of Addison and Steel’s magazine, *The Spectator* (1711), which describes woman as having a:

Natural Weakness of being taken with Outside and Appearance (…) false Happiness loves to be in a Crowd, and to draw the Eyes of the World upon her. She does not receive any satisfaction from the Applauses which she gives herself, but from the admiration which she raises in others. She flourishes in Courts and Palaces, Theatres and Assemblies, and has no Existence but when she is looked upon. (Parsons 2000:18)

In this article, the woman’s love for being in the crowd is very similar to the badaud’s attitude: it is a self-centered love, she needs the crowd to applaud her, but does not like the crowd in itself like the flâneur. The woman’s insecurity is different from the badaud’s narcissism, since the woman cannot applaud herself and “has no Existence but when she is looked upon”.

Baudelaire, too, had something to say about women and cosmetics. Deborah Parsons explains Baudelaire’s sympathy and contempt for women’s masquerades: in *Le Peintre de La Vie Moderne*, he lists the different subjects of the artist, amongst which *The Woman* and *The Dandy*. He depicts the woman as an “idealised object, a divinity, a star”. Whereas many contemporary female critics would find fault with this objectifying view, Parsons (2000:25) interprets this as an admiration of women in general:

The masquerade of dress is thus, for Baudelaire, part of womanhood itself and what increases her fascination. For the woman is consequently a powerful and creative figure and also enigmatic, as elusively transient as her fashions.

In a further line of development, Parsons considers Baudelaire’s ambivalent stance on women and cosmetics as a mixture of admiration for, and intimidation by, the women’s artistic capacity to change herself:

Through the masquerade women can subvert the superior possession of the male gaze by themselves controlling the image that it objectifies. (…) She too is thus an artist, and through the masquerade of femininity does not so much objectify herself and see herself through the eye of the male, as construct and present herself as she wants to be seen.(…) If this self-sufficiency is a reason for Baudelaire’s admiration of the woman, it also explains his need to denigrate and condemn her. In the following section of ‘Le peintre de la vie moderne’ then, ‘In Praise of Cosmetics’, he trivializes women’s interest in appearance. Assuming an all-knowing authority, he implies that man is always aware of women’s ‘tricks and artifices’ but encourages them for their attractiveness (Parsons 2000:25-6)
So, the woman is more unified, she is a subject and object at the same time through the union of inner (artistic sense) and outer (dress/appearance) characteristics. This is an important appreciation since we cannot deny the general tendency of women towards outward appearance, but we can see a creative and critical attitude in the woman as an artist who constantly invents herself. That way, we could conceive of the early flâneuses as dandy–consumers. Baudelaire, threatened in his male superiority by the unified woman, denied her this characteristic. He sent her back to the traditional, sexual “naturalness” in stead of the acquired tastefulness or artificiality of the dandy:

Woman is the opposite of dandy. Therefore she inspires horror. Woman is hungry so she must eat; thirsty so she must drink. She is in heat, so she must be fucked. How admirable! Woman is natural, which is to say, abominable. (Munt 1998: 34)

Women as sexual creatures formed a threat to the stable identity of the male artist, by questioning this identity and disrupting his personal boundaries. Munt quotes in this respect Mark Wigley’s *The Housing of Gender*:

(…) the identity of the self, cannot be maintained by a woman because her fluid sexuality endlessly overflows and disrupts them. And more than this, she endlessly disrupts the boundaries of others, that is, men, disturbing their identity, if not calling it into question. (Munt 1998:42)

The two opposing visions, woman as natural and woman as artificial, were equally as negative for the male artist: women’s artificiality threatened the flâneur/badaud’s own artfulness, whereas their fluid sexuality threatened his individuality. Both ideas have later been conflated by Walter Benjamin into one idea of female commodity. Deborah Parsons observes that, in his comparison of the flâneur with the botanist (an essay in the *Arcades Work*), Benjamin states that the arcade presents an

(…) organic and inorganic world, full of the ‘female fauna’ of the arcades: ‘whores, grisettes, old witch-like saleswomen, female second-hand dealers, gantières, demoiselles’ as well as the inorganic souvenirs in the shops, all of which, it is implied, are equally for consumption.” (Parsons 2000:37)

The whores and old witch-like saleswomen represent the naturalness, the “fauna”, whereas the gantières and second-hand dealers are symbols of tastefulness and consumption (they are dandies/badauds). The whore conflates both images: she is natural, sexual and commodifies herself through an artificial masquerade. The arcade is a typical space for these traditional roles ascribed to women: from high to low, they are all objects of fascination in the flâneur’s arcades. Anne Friedberg quotes in this context *Lost Illusions* (1839) by Balzac. In the fragment he describes an arcade, the Galerie d’Orléans, as a “greenhouse without flowers”, “a
disreputable bazaar”, and a “lewd hangar”, “containing a full spectrum from luxury to poverty, from dandies to thieves, ladies of fashion to prostitutes.” (Friedberg 1993: 68)

4. The Passante, Female Badaud or Flâneuse: what’s in a name?

Anke Gleber points towards the absence of a name for the female flâneur, since her presence was so restricted that the concept is hardly sayable:

The female flaneur has been an absent figure in the public sphere of modernity, in its media and texts, and in its literature and cities. From the very first step she takes, her experience is marginal, limited, and circumscribed. The female flaneur has not been noted as an image that the canonical authors of flanerie would expect to encounter in the streets, nor as a concept that would give the female flaneur a figure and a term of her own. This is why female flanerie has no more been considered than its expression in language-and in a concept of its own- has been sayable. (Gleber 1999:172)

The goal of this study is to trace back the origins of the female counterpart of the wide-spread nineteenth-century literary urban figure, the flâneur. Whether or not the flâneuse “existed”, or incorporated more features of the badaud, the first thing we need to do is to give the concept a name. Since women in the literature of the male flâneurs are often depicted as fleeting passantes, bag-ladies, rag-pickers or prostitutes, we need to separate the name of the flâneuse from these figures, in order to avoid the disempowered status these women had in nineteenth-century public life. Although she mainly advocates the possibility of a flâneuse in her book, Anne Friedberg also points towards the difficulties for a subject-flâneuse:

As the gendered French noun designates, the flâneur was a male urban subject, endowed with a gaze at an elusive and almost unseen flâneuse. The flâneur could be an urban poet, whose movements through a newly configured urban space often transformed the female’s presence into a textual homage. (Friedberg 1993:33)

30 An interesting aside here, is Deborah Parsons’ discovery that: In the nineteenth-century Encyclopaedia Larousse, the entry ‘flâneur/flâneuse’ describes a figure who loiters in the city, shopping and watching the crowd. Although predominantly an idler, this flâneur can also be an artist. Significantly, this pre-Benjaminian entry concedes the possibility of a feminine version and it includes the largely female occupation of shopping as a characteristic activity, despite then assuming a masculine gender throughout. In English dictionaries, however, despite Benjamin’s study, the word flâneur does not appear until the 1960ies. (Parsons 2000: 17)

31 Anke Gleber (1999:172) argues that the name flâneuse refers to the (German) names of typically female, menial jobs, such as Friseuse (female hairdresser) or Masseuse (female massage worker). This label, inviting unwanted discriminatory associations, is not appropriate for the undomesticated, vagrant figure the flâneuse is supposed to be. As a consequence, Gleber avoids this word and uses the terms “woman walker” or “female flâneur”. Obviously, these terms either lack the specific notion of flanerie (woman walker) or they just feminise the male subject (female flaneur).
She here confirms the idea that the flâneuse was almost invisible (referring to Wolff’s essay, on which she criticizes forcefully further on in the book), and that the flâneur’s gaze was inadvertently male.

The concept of female flânerie, less assured than the male one, might prove to be a more challenging, and, although difficult, more rewarding project than only reiterating the male observers’ trajectory. Deborah Parsons’ starting point for her work on modernist literature, “Can there be a flâneuse and what forms might she take?” (Parsons: 2000: 2), already betrays a certain optimism: the concept does exist since she investigates its forms. In the same line, her question “How are women writers situated, and how did they situate themselves, in the maps of urban locations and literature?” (Parsons 2000:2) reveals the existence of urban female writer-observers in modern literature.

Nevertheless, we have to admit that Wolff’s statement has a gist of truth in it: there might have been some artistic feminine souls who were able to observe and enjoy the crowd in a detached manner, but they were mostly only able to do this when they cross-dressed as a man. These female writers were scarcely published and thus not easily to be found. This is why it is necessary to further investigate their histories. Intellectual women, who enjoyed their newly-gained entrance into public spaces, were in between the consumerist position of the badaud and the intellectual artistic position of Baudelaire. They were dandy-consumers: they liked to develop their taste, but they were more critical subjects than the (female) shopping herd. For this reason, I would like to use the term femme flaneur as a concept for the (almost-impossible) female, detached, traditional flâneur, and the term flâneuse for the figure who incorporates many of these traits (critical eye, aesthetic distance), but is not abhorred by the consumer spectacle and other people. This way, I can talk about the impossibility of femme flâneurs but leave space for flâneuses to have a childhood and a lifestyle of their own.

B. Baudelaire, the most influential author on flânerie

1. The modern urban poet as flâneur

With titles like Les Fleurs du Mal (1861), Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne (1863), Le Spleen de Paris (1864), Charles Baudelaire established himself as the greatest “modern” urban writer of the nineteenth century, or, at least, a very inspiring one, since his work mainly gave the impetus for Benjamin’s Arcades Work, prefigured in the essay Charles Baudelaire: a lyrical poet in the high capitalist era (firstly published in 1969). Other writers like Rilke, Balzac and
Zola also used the metaphor of flânerie in their novels, just as Hessel and Kracauer did in their later essays, but I will mainly focus on Baudelaire, interpreted by Walter Benjamin. Benjamin firmly states why Baudelaire is to be considered as one of the most important nineteenth century urban, modern writers. The first of his three arguments are the fact that Baudelaire was the first author to introduce the theme of the city into the lyrical genre and considered it as an independent, satisfactory subject. Whilst other writers used the city as a setting, a (dystopian or utopian) background, Baudelaire’s city had the status of a full character. The second argument for Baudelaire’s importance as a modern urban writer is that he shows great attention for the gaze of the poet as an allegorical dimension which turns the daily urban scenery into an embodiment of the personal problems of the poet, and for the psychic impressions of alienation. As a third argument Benjamin points towards the gaze of the flâneur (der Blick des Flâneurs), which is that of an observing aesthetic subject. Benjamin then shows the dichotomy between the daily cheerless experience of the disconsolate city inhabitants and the softening, aesthetic pleasure of the flâneur.

A contemporary critic, Mike Featherstone, describes Baudelaire’s fascination (in The Painter of Modern Life) with the Parisian scenery and his love/hate relationship with it:

Baudelaire was fascinated by the fleeting transitory beauty and ugliness of life in mid-nineteenth century Paris: the changing pageants of fashionable life, the flâneurs strolling through the fleeting impressions of the crowds, the dandies, the heroes of modern life—(…) who sought to turn their lives into works of art. (Featherstone 1991: 73)

In the next paragraph, these two states of mind will be explored in order to use them again for the flâneuse’s traject.

### 2. Love and Hate: dysfoteric and euphoric elements in the work of Baudelaire

From Baudelaire’s own positive and negative views on his own era of high capitalism, we can induce that he was on the threshold of the Romantic, city-loathtaking aesthetic and of the rhetoric of modernity. His alienation (spleen) and symbolism are late developments of Romantic leftovers, whereas his acceptance of new, collective culture makes him into a fore-

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32 I have translated and edited a quote from Benjamin by Keunen 2000: 155.

33 An example of a dysphoric, sensorial tableau is to be found in Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge by Rainer Maria Rilke, where the shock-effect of the modern metropolis (Paris) on the young Danish poet is almost death-inducing: “elektrische Bahnen rasen lautend durch meine Stube. Automobile gehen über mich hin.” (Rilke, R.M., Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge, in Keunen 2000:46)
runner of twentieth-century modernism. The same ambivalence is found in the “myth of Paris as an organic unity: it is a threat and consolation at the same time” (Keunen 2000:170). In *Paris Spleen*, a collection of Parisian prose poems with a rather dark tone, Baudelaire still mentions that Paris is a city of “chooses merveilleux et poétiques” (Baudelaire in Keunen 2000:162), or is generally conceived of as “la capitale des plaisirs”, with its parks, prostitution, fairs, boulevard life, world exhibitions and luxury houses. (Baudelaire in Keunen 2000:158-9)

The alternation between euphoric and dysphoric moods is a constant feature of Baudelaire’s descriptions of Paris. Keunen (2000: 168) exemplifies this with the passage of *Le Vieux Saltimbanque*, where the solitary acrobat catches the attention of the flâneur in the midst of the folkloristic scenery of a fair. According to Hiddleston’s *Baudelaire and ‘Le Spleen de Paris*, the text “oscillates between an egotistic self-awareness and the dispersion into the outside world of objects or people” (Hiddleston, J.A. in Featherstone 1991:22). The motive of carnivals, fairs and markets has always been a part of pop culture, going back to medieval times. These carnivalesque spaces have been described by Bakhtin (*Rabelais and his World*) and Stallybrass and White (*The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*) as:

(…) liminal spaces, in which the everyday world was turned upside down and in which the taboo and fantastic were possible, in which impossible dreams could be expressed.(…) The popular tradition of carnivals, fairs and festivals provided symbolic inversions and transgressions of the official ‘civilized’ culture and favoured excitement, uncontrolled emotions and the direct and vulgar grotesque bodily pleasures of fattening food, intoxicating drink and sexual promiscuity. (Bakhtin, M.M., and Stallybrass P., White A. in Featherstone 1991: 22)

These spaces of transgression often enticed the flâneur into the crowds, which was mostly followed by a filtering of the experience through aesthetic detachment. The Paris of Haussmann was an endless festival, giving way to a very sensorial perception of “a uniquely enticing spectacle, a visual and sensual feast.” (Berman, M. *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air. The Experience of Modernity*, in Featherstone 1991:151) As a defence against the complete immersion into the spectacle of the modern city, the flâneur’s attitude was one of discipline and detachment, because

While there is a strong emphasis in such writings upon the sensory overload, the aesthetic immersion, dreamlike perceptions of de-centered subjects, in which people open themselves up to a wider range of sensations and emotional experiences, it is important to stress that that this does not represent the eclipse of controls. It needs discipline and control to stroll through goods on display, to look and not snatch, to

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move casually without interrupting the flow, to gaze with controlled enthusiasm and a blasé outlook, to observe others without being seen, to tolerate the close proximity of bodies without feeling threatened. (Featherstone 1991:24)

We find the oscillation between immersion and detachment in the writings of Baudelaire, and later, Simmel and Benjamin, whose observers (Featherstone 1991:75) “all presume the city crowd to be a mass of anonymous individuals, which they can slip into and which carries them along.” Women, once they were allowed to frequent the carnivalesque sites of society, needed this distance if they did not want to become passive, carnivalesque objects themselves, in the form of sexually provocative courtesans, fashion victims or masked – as in masqueraded- mannequins.

3. Isolation and Distance

The flâneur, although rejoicing in sceneries of masses and crowds, is a lonely figure. Like Keunen (2000:163) argues, the most important topic of Baudelaire’s Le Spleen is that of psychic isolation, sometimes enjoyed by the poet, sometimes a source of psychical pain. The sceneries depicted in it (for example Les Veuves) are all examples of people in isolation, with whom the flâneur identifies. There is no place for a partner, never mind a flâneuse, in his life. This self-willed isolation of the flâneur impedes warm human relations like friendship, love or familial relations. The flâneur lives in his own world, sometimes fascinated and attracted by the beauty of a passante (see further), but she largely remains a mysterious element of the crowd. The mystery of the passante is not to be dismantled, because closeness to a female object would take the attraction away. The flâneur is a solipsistic, almost autistic figure, preferring his walks to love and friendship:

(...) giving him a perspective more reliably comforting and more consistenly exhilarating than either “friendship” of “love”. That is to say, the texts of flanerie provide the flaneur with not only everything that “friendship” and “love” would offer but also the means to preserve, collect and present these pleasures between the covers of a series of readings. (Gleber 1999:125)

In The Perils of Going Astray, Susanne Rohr points towards the flâneur’s endless deferral of desire: the flâneur is attracted by the sight of an object/ a woman/ a shop-window, but from the moment he is near to the object of desire, he is drawn to the next one, and the one next to

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that one. This ultimately leads to the isolation of someone who’s unable to be captured by one sight or person:

It is thrilling to march aimlessly and leisurely along streets, with every step walking becomes more violent. Less and less do shops, bistros and smiling women seduce one, more and more one is drawn to the next corner, to leafage seen afar, to a street name. Like an ascetic animal, one prowls through unknown quarters till collapsing, fagged out, in one's room to a cold welcome. (Benjamin, Passagenwerk in Rohr 2003: 91)

The intellectual male inflicts the cold welcome on himself: he does not need a warm welcome, being the only one to rejoice so much in the crowd’s spectacle. He was “a man with the love of masques and masquerades, the hate of home and a passion for roaming” (Baudelaire, Paris Spleen, in Friedberg 1993:30). The “hate of home” mentioned here is that of the mobilized flâneur, looking for the modern (ephemeral) qualities of life, disinterested in social contact or the stability of a home. The nineteenth-century woman, often confined to the home, was already endowed with a love for masques and masquerades: what she needed now was the passion for roaming and the “hate of home” in order to become a flâneuse.

4. The artist-flâneur Baudelaire: attracted by bohemian circles.

Baudelaire, although himself a middle-class, white, male writer, saw himself as an artist who strayed away from the beaten path. This makes him again a threshold figure: in between bourgeois culture and bohemian circles, he fled from his own class identity (middle class). This is a logical consequence of his dualistic position, as a respected (canonised) and marginal (anti-bourgeois) artist. Prefiguring the twentieth century’s modernist anti-art movements like the Dada movement, he positioned himself as an autonomous artist, not enslaved by the values of the upper middle class, the bourgeoisie.

He rebelled against institutions like the Académie Française, institutionalised theatre, and generally, against the bourgeois art-establishment. A fellow rebel in his conceptions of art was Gustave Flaubert. From 1850 onwards, we find a relatively autonomous artistic field: the bohemian circles start to lead a life different to that of the bourgeoisie. Illustrious cafés, literary salons and opium-houses become the new habitat of the nineteenth-century modern artist. Baudelaire was a fierce defender of the depiction of modern, nineteenth-century life, repudiating his contemporaries who still wrote or painted like the classics, says Featherstone:

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36 My source for this paragraph is Keunen 2000:191.
37 The word field here refers to Pierre Bourdieu’s Field Theory, in which society consists of different fields which strive for more autonomy/power, this theory will be further discussed in chapter three.
For Baudelaire, art should endeavour to capture these modern scenarios. He despised contemporary artists who painted pictures with the costumes and furnishings of every age; each age has its own gait, glance and gesture, not only in manners and gestures, but even in the form of the face. (Featherstone 1991:73)

He was also aware of his own commodification (prostitution even), realising that his profession was mainly selling himself to the public in a capitalist society. This awareness made him mock the more idealistic, ethereal artist:

Baudelaire was not only aware of the ways in which intellectual and artistic activities, including his own work, had become commodified, he disdained the attempt of the ethereal, spiritually minded artist to escape the process of appropriation in public life. Hence in his prose piece ‘Loss of a Halo’ he mocks the poet who thinks he can float invisibly through the crowds and shows that his art is profane and his persona socially recognizable. (Featherstone 1991:76)

These features involving Baudelaire’s position towards the art world show us the ambivalence of his position. On the one hand, he strives for an autonomous, authentic, bohemian artist-life, and on the other hand, he mocks the socially recognizable individual, the visionary artist who distinguishes himself from the crowd. His acceptance of being commodified, of having “lost a halo”, still shows signs of bourgeois, middle class values, indulging in the fact that everything in life is for sale. That way, it is difficult to understand why he showed so much disdain for women as “fashion victims” (consumers) or prostitutes, since he did not mind being consumed or prostituted himself. What is important here, is that even Baudelaire was not superior to the commercial “badaud” attitude, and showed that an artist did not necessarily have to be poor.

5. The flâneur’s mode of seeing: intoxicated, hyperreal or naïve?

5.1. The artist’s natural high

The fuddle or high that the artist gets from walking the city leads to a special, hyper-realistic perception, probably a fore-runner to the surreal mode of seeing. The symbolic perceptions of Baudelaire often took place in a toxicomanic state, which he praised in his prose poem Enivrez-vous. The mania is expressed through an exalted, rhapsodic way of writing. Nevertheless, it is not just alcohol or drugs that induce this mania on the writer, the ecstasy also follows the contemplation of the ordinary, the sight of “silent orgies”:

Le vaste parc se pâme sous l’œil brûlant du soleil, comme la jeunesse sous la domination de l’Amour. L’extase des choses universelles ne s’exprime par aucun
The flâneur’s ability to see the magic of universal things gives him a profane, mystical trait. Benjamin speaks in the (later) context of surrealism of the Profane Enlightenment as a kind of overpowering epiphany. (Walter Benjamin, Der Sürrealismus. Die letzte Momentaufnahme der europäischen Intelligenz, in Keunen 2000: 262). The surrealist Breton will drop the term point suprême (Keunen 2000:262) and choose for a concept that points towards the extraordinary quality of things, called le merveilleux.

The epiphany, or experience of le merveilleux, comes from the contemplation of the crowds and everyday objects, “trouvailles”, or lucky finds. These obsolete objects are endowed with a magical status by the flâneur. Featherstone quotes in this context Susan Buck-Morss:

The capacity of the ever-changing urban landscape to summon up associations, resemblances and memories feeds the curiosity of the stroller in the crowds. To the idler who strolls the streets, objects appear divorced from their context and subject to mysterious connections in which meanings are read on the surface of things. (Susan Buck-Morss, The Flâneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering in Featherstone 1991:74)

5.2. Hyperrealism, dream-like perception and allegoric visions.

The flâneur’s intense, subjective perception makes ordinary objects into such condensed images that the scenery becomes hyper-real. The new, hyper-real images, who refer to ordinary objects, are unrecognisable, or at least deviate from the original through the process of condensation (see Keunen 2000: 97). The perception is dream-like, but not in a literal sense: the phantasmagoria of the modernising city induced allegorical visions which were different from the dream or the traditional allegoric vision. Featherstone points towards Benjamin’s concepts in the Arcades work:

For Walter Benjamin the new department stores and arcades, which emerged in Paris and subsequently other large cities from the mid nineteenth century onwards, were effectively ‘dream worlds’. The vast phantasmagoria of commodities on display, constantly renewed as part of the capitalist and modernist drive for novelty, was the source of dream images which summoned up associations and half-forgotten illusions –Benjamin referred to them as allegories. Here Benjamin used the term allegory not to point to the unity or coherence of the doubly-coded message which is occluded, as in traditional allegories such as Pilgrim’s Progress, but to the way a stable hierarchically ordered meaning is dissolved and the allegory points only to kaleidoscopic fragments which resists any coherent notion of what it stands for. (Benjamin in Featherstone 1991: 23)
Thus, the hyper-real perception of the flâneur has characteristics of the allegoric dream, but differs from it because the dream is a state which is steered by the unconscious, whereas the hyper-real perception is a conscious montage of ordinary sights into a dream-like vision:

De hyperreëele chronotoop is, omdat het een literaire wereld constructie is, in niets te vergelijken met een reële droom- of roestoestand, maar moet worden beschouwd (als) een artificiële, geobjectiveerde constructie die enkel lijkt op de droom. (Keunen 2000:98)

So what is “hyper-real” perception then, exactly? Keunen explains the concept from an etymological point of view: the prefix “hyper” points towards the excessive and extraordinary character of the world construction, whilst the word “real” indicates the mimetic reality of the basic perception.38

5.3. The first gaze of the flâneur: perception with child-like enthusiasm.

The supposed naïveté of the flâneur, which makes him “drunk” with pleasure at the sight of the crowds, can be compared with the enthusiasm of a child. This emotion is similar to the joyfulness of the crowd itself, when the masses forget the sorrows of life during a festival:

(...) partout s’étalait, se répandait, s’éboudissait le peuple en vacances. C’était une de ces solennités sur lesquelles (...) pour compenser le mauvais temps de l’année. En ces jours-là il me semble que le peuple oublie tout, la douleur et le travail ; il devient pareil aux enfants. (...) Pour les grands, c’est un armistice conclu avec les puissances malfaisantes de la vie, un répit dans la contention et la lutte universelles. (Baudelaire, Le Spleen de Paris, in Keunen 2000:167)

The ability of the flâneur to see everything in a different light is comparable to the perception of a child who sees everything for the first time. The flâneur nostalgically tries to re-capture the child’s first gaze: “In the mythical and magical world of the modern city the child discovered the new anew, and the adult rediscovers the old in the new.” (Susan Buck-Morss in Featherstone: 1991:74) Featherstone considers the enthusiasm of the artist (which exists out of toxicomanic and convalescent phases) similar to the “drunkenness” of the child:

Baudelaire sought to capture this in his use of the post-illness ability to see everything anew in its immediacy. Convalescence, he tells us is like a return to childhood: the convalescent, like the child, is possessed in the highest degree of the faculty of keenly interesting himself in things, be they apparently of the most trivial...The child sees everything in a state of newness, he is always drunk’ (Baudelaire, The Painter of Modern Life, in Featherstone 1991: 74)

38 A more detailed chapter on perception will follows after this one, I only discussed hyperrealism in the context of the flâneur’s perception, different from the dream.
5.4. The perfect subject: young Maisie reclaiming the innocence of the first gaze

The nostalgia for a lost innocence is not only a feature of the male artist’s perception: the kind of hypersensitive intoxication of the flâneur is equally applicable to a young female character, like Maisie out of Henry James’s novel *What Maisie Knew* (1897):

Speaking of the use of a ‘light vessel of consciousness’ as the fulcrum of the text, James states that a female consciousness was particularly suitable as ‘the sensibility of the female young is indubitably, for early youth, the greater.’ (…) James’s comment on Maisie that ‘small children have many more perceptions than they have terms to translate them’, being equally applicable to female characters in the turn-of-the-century city. (Henry James, *Preface to What Maisie Knew*, in Parsons 2000:56)

James’s perfect subject was one with an open consciousness, able to receive subtle impulses from its environment. So, we find that these characteristics of early childhood are bestowed upon a young girl by James in 1897, and not exclusively upon the male observer. The flâneuse, bordering on the edges of childhood and adolescence at the turn of the nineteenth century, becomes a perfection of Baudelaire’s old male prototype, in terms of her abilities for intense perceptions. In James’s novel, Maisie is a perfect subject, but the lack of women’s hyperreal / toxicomanic perceptions sometimes makes this last characteristic (the child-like drunkenness) into a stereotypical “hysterical” one. James’s perceptive subject gets no chance to bloom: some decades later, André Breton writes *Nadja*. This young woman is the artist’s object, not the subject. Although she has very intense perceptions and is gifted with a hypersensitive eye for *le merveilleux*, she cannot control her own gaze in the end, and is left in a mental asylum.


Many twentieth-century cultural critics (Friedberg, Gleber, Buck-Morss) linked the flâneur’s scopophilia (from the Greek skopein: to look/scrutinize, and philia: the love for) and hyper-real perception to forms of proto-cinematic perception like painting and photography, eventually establishing a discourse using the terms flânerie, montage, the gaze, cinema, scopophilia and photography. I will draw the connection between the mobilized gaze of the flâneur and the lens of the camera, investigating whether the scopophile impulse of filmmaking is a male activity (Mulvey) or the first step towards more “female” fluidity, since the moving picture became more popular than the static painting.

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6.1. The scopophilic gaze of the flâneur

The gaze of the flâneur, defined by Benjamin in the Passagenwerk as der Blick des Flâneurs, is, according to Friedberg, one of “physical and psychical mobility” (Friedberg 1993:13). When the flâneur is seen as a prowling animal, his gaze is one that quickly snatches images, registers and processes them without intervening in the normal course of things. It is a scopophilic compulsion, but the flâneur leaves space for his objects of fascination to lead their own life, in opposition to Foucault’s observer in the panopticon 40, whose scopophilia is a means to impose order and discipline on his prisoners. For the flâneur, scopophilia is not a means to a functional end, it is his favourite activity in itself:

The trope of flânerie delineates a mode of visual practice coincident with – but antithetical to- the panoptic gaze. Like the panopticon system, flânerie relied on the visual register- but with a converse instrumentalism, emphasizing mobility and fluid subjectivity rather than restraint and interpellated reform. (Friedberg 1993:16)

The concept of scopophilia has a large semantic field, which has been reduced to a male-sexist impulse by feminist film critics in the 1970s like Laura Mulvey. One of the most important feminist film theorists, she defined the scopophilic pleasure of the cinema-goer as a two-sided phenomenon:

The first scopophilic pleasure arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen. (Mulvey 1975: 4)

I will not go deeper into Mulvey’s arguments against women’s subjection to a so-called “imposed male spectatorship” in the cinema (where the relationship man/woman is mostly one of subject/object), but this cinematic definition of scopophilia does point towards the two most important sources of pleasure that it brings about: desire and narcissism. The flâneur’s love for the individuals in the crowd comes thus from a narcissistic impulse, from an identification with, for example, the melancholy of the widow; whilst his fascination for fleeting objects or passantes is a sexual impulse, he desires them with his gaze.

Whereas in Baudelaire’s time, the male gaze returned by the passante was a fascinating rarity, the twentieth century flâneur recedes from city life to avoid someone looking back at him (see chapter two, the “man at the window”).

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6.2. The flâneur: from the painter to the photographer and director of modern life.

René Wellek describes in *Concepts of Criticism* the sudden change of nineteenth-century realism into a new mode of perceiving reality: the art form is still mimetic, but in such an individual or idiosyncratic way that it is not recognizable as realistic to outsiders: it is a symbolic form of art. Movements like symbolism and impressionism can be seen as forerunners of twentieth-century modernism:

> The accepted nineteenth century meaning of realism is turned upside down. It is replaced by an individualising, atomistic, subjective realism that refuses to recognize an objective order of things: it is even solipsism in the sense of Pater and Proust. (René Wellek in Keunen 2000: 87)

The literary mode of perception was similar to the pictorial style of impressionism. Like Keunen tells us (2000:99), impressionism was the style of the artist as poet-flâneur. He quotes in this respect Hauser, who called impressionism the most appropriate form of urban art in *Sociale Geschiedenis der Kunst*:

> Impressionism is the pre-eminent urban art, not only because it discovers the scenery of the city-scape and brings back the art of painting from the countryside, but also because it perceives the world through the eyes of an urbanite and reacts to the outward impressions with the over-tensed nerves of the modern technical person. It is an urban style, because it captures the inconstancy, the nervous rhythm and the sudden, fierce, but immediately fading impressions of city life. (Arnold Hauser in Keunen 2000: 85-6, my translation)

Through the depiction of modern life as fragmented and discontinuous, the impressionist and flâneur’s mode of perception can be regarded as a form of cinematic montage. The flâneur, or *bricoleur*, brings fragments together in an associative mode, like a montage. It resembles the dream-like perception because the scenes do not take place in real time, but it is different from the dream, because montage is, again, a conscious process:

> By stressing the filmic, discontinuous perception, it becomes possible to nuance the vague references to toxicomanic and dream states. During the montage, more encompassing image sequences come into being, which exist out of a series of fragments. The temporal development of such series is not continuous but associative; the images do not follow the order which characterizes real observation (that of an ordinary observer), but they are glued together by an ‘external’ monteur. (…) When we call the impressionist observer - like Baudelaire in his essay- a ‘painter of modern life’, we can name the avant-garde artist the ‘film director of modern life’. (Keunen 2000: 99, my translation)

The parallel between the flâneur’s perceptive eye and the camera has been noticed by a famous twentieth-century cultural critic, Susan Sontag. In her extended essay *On
Photography, she investigates the relationship between the object/model who’s photographed and the photographer as a collector of images, comparing the camera to the flâneur’s eye:

In fact, photography first comes into its own as an extension of the eye of the middle-class flâneur, whose sensibility was so accurately charted by Baudelaire. The photographer is an armed version of the solitary walker reconnoitring, stalking, cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic stroller who discovers the city as a landscape of voluptuous extremes. (Sontag 1971: 55)

So, we find that flânerie is a central form of perception linking (impressionist) painting, photography and cinema to each other. Baudelaire however, cried out against the use of cameras in his work The Salon of 1859, claiming that photography was “art’s most mortal enemy” or “a cheap method of disseminating a loathing for history”; it “harms the viewing public to view copies of nature, not copies of imagination”. (Baudelaire in Friedberg 1993:30) Anne Friedberg opposes Baudelaire’s scopophilia (for the crowds) to his scopophobia (for the recording object, the camera). The camera threatened the flâneur in his monopoly of the gaze: Friedberg calls Baudelaire a “partisan for the mobilized but not virtual gaze”. (Friedberg 1993:30) Since photography “fixed” mobile scenes onto paper, it could not be conceived of by Baudelaire as a satisfactory form of art. It was perfect in its immobility, and thus also unendingly reproducible and soul-less. It did no longer present an artist’s view on reality, it was reality, but in a plagiarised form. The nostalgic artist/flâneur’s resistance towards this (postmodern) quality of photography is a logical consequence.

Apart from its immense popularity, the use of photography for criminal records and newspapers gave a more powerful and utilitarian status to this new form of art than the symbolic painting of modern life. Baudelaire, overpowered in his status of a “collector” of urban images and scenes, cried out in vain against this medium. The idea of photography as a phallic, aggressive art form (in the sense of fixing its objects, as opposed to the mobile flâneur’s eye) is today still found in Sontag’s work: “To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge - and, therefore, like power.” (Sontag 1971: 4)

We do not know what Baudelaire would have had to say about cinema, but in his line of thinking, the roving eye of the cinematic camera would be a conciliatory development from the fixed camera of photography. The cinematic camera is also virtual but more mobilized than the latter.

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To conclude, we can say that photography and cinema are certainly related to the flâneuristic mode of perception. Whereas the nineteenth-century perception and depiction of the city scenes was male-dominated, the shift to photographic and cinematic modes of seeing in the fin-de-siècle/twentieth century implies a change, a possible gateway for a more “female perception” within the originally male concept of flânerie.

7. Stasis versus mobility

Mobility and movement are crucial distinctive elements of flânerie: the flaneur cruises through the crowd with its rapid flow of bodies and objects, delighting in other people’s appearances in a playful process of de-coding. Whereas the nineteenth-century flâneur’s playgrounds were the boulevards and arcades of Paris (and other metropolitan cities), it is not hard to imagine people’s fantasies about Welt flânerie, or even, Space Flanerie, after seeing World Exhibitions and “Enlightened” developments of modernity. The flâneur seems to be unbound in time and space, if we do not restrict him to the nineteenth-century’s arcades and give him the possibility of an after-life in the form of the twentieth-century traveller/observer/artist/writer.

The connection between flânerie and tourism is a fragile one: the tourist, who watches historical or natural sights with a politically correct cultural interest, plain voyeurism or fascination, is different from the flâneur, who is less interested in the temples of the past, but enjoys the sceneries of the here and now. The flâneur can be nostalgic, but he will not systematically visit old historical sites. Yet, there are also connection between the tourist and the flâneur: if we look at the philosophical travellers and human observers throughout the centuries (Baedecker), we often find an aesthetic detachment in the descriptions of locals, who resemble the journalist-flâneur’s Physiologies. The writers of tourist guides, as intermediaries between the tourist and his destination, filter their “first gaze” by means of philosophical and functional parameters. The anthropologic interest and critical eye of the Baedecker guide resembles the flâneur’s fascination for the crowds and aesthetic distance towards them. The flâneur and the tourist guide are connected through their mobility, their “love for roaming”.

A visionary French illustrator, Jean-Ignace-Isidore Gérard (pseudonym Granville), born in 1803, already envisioned a highly mobile form of flânerie, one of interplanetary travel. His drawing Flâneur of the Universe (1844, out of the magazine Un Autre Monde) is a beautiful illustration of futuristic and contemporary technologies, in its combination of space travel and iron building. Granville matches the flâneur’s mobility/alienation as he knows it (someone
who walks quietly over bridges, smoking a pipe) with the imagined futuristic way of travelling from one planet to the other:

![Image of Granville, Flaneur of the universe](image)

Figure 1: Granville, Flaneur of the universe

When we accept the link between the critical tourist and the flâneur’s observant eye, we can add this form of mobility (tourism) to the list of emancipative developments towards female flânerie and observation (together with cinema-going and shopping).

8. Baudelaire’s view on women

8.1. The passantes

Although Baudelaire’s prose poems have been largely influenced by Edgar Allan Poe’s story *The Man of the Crowd* (entirely male populated), the difference in Baudelaire’s writing is that his chance encounter always happens with a woman, not with a man, of the crowd. Women in Baudelaire’s work are elusive, fleeting and disturbing presences: they are mostly examples of sphinxes in the city. Sexually-loaded presentations of women (the prostitute, the passante, the lesbian, and even the widow) are dominant motifs in *Le Spleen de Paris* (1862) and *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857, originally titled *Les Lesbiennes*).

Through his depiction of women as objects, Baudelaire leaves very little space for the possibility of female flânerie, although he never exactly defines the flâneur either: we could state that, in the way Baudelaire’s flâneur was a mixture of many of his urban male characters (collectors, dandies, rag-picker s, artists), the flâneuse (in her “toddler” years) also hovered

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42 Walter Benjamin reflected on this picture in Convolut G of his Passagen-Werk, called “Der Saturnring oder Etwas von Eisenbau”, describing the nineteenth century’s optimism involving new building technologies using iron iron(Benjamin in Friedberg 1993:62) : “On a bridge, from which one cannot survey both ends at the same time, and the pillars of which are supported on the planets, one travels on wonderful paved asphalt from one planet to the other”. We can clearly see the reference to the ‘passerelle’, an iron bridge connecting two high-up platforms, which was used in buildings like the Bibliothèque Nationale (1858) and the store ‘Au Bon Marché’ (1876).Ignace Isidore Gérard Granville, “Flâneur of the Universe”, from *Un Autre Monde* 1844, in Friedberg 1993: 63)
between the types of the passante, the lesbian, the old woman or grisette, the prostitute, the badaud, the dandy and the widow.

The most famous female persona of Baudelaire, the Passante, is forever fixed through the canonical poem *A Une Passante* (1857), in which Baudelaire meets the gaze of a (mourning) woman, which she returns, in one split second, and is then lost forever. After the recognition or coup de foudre (éclair) follows a philosophical thought on the destination of the passante:

À une Passante

La rue assourdissante autour de moi hurlait.  
Longue, mince, en grand deuil, douleur majestueuse,  
Une femme passa, d'une main fastueuse  
Soulevant, balançant le feston et l'ourlet ;

Agile et noble, avec sa jambe de statue.  
Moi, je buvais, crispé comme un extravagant,  
Dans son oeil, ciel livide où germe l'ouragan,  
La douceur qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue.

Un éclair... puis la nuit ! - Fugitive beauté  
Dont le regard m'a fait soudainement renaître,  
Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l'éternité ?

Ailleurs, bien loin d'ici ! trop tard ! jamais peut-être !  
Car j'ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais,  
Ô toi que j'eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais !

(Baudelaire, « A Une Passante », out of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, in Friedberg 1993 :34)

Many books and essays have been written about Baudelaire’s admiration or damnation of this femme passante, some theorists (like Janet Wolff) have argued that this mourning woman (a widow?) is a prostitute, because she dares to meet the male gaze. It is possible since prostitutes often disguised themselves as women of the upper-class, like Parsons demonstrates in her discussion of Peter Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*: “Yet just as the courtesan is indistinguishable from the lady in her stylish finery, so too is the lady indistinguishable from the courtesan as a figure of vice.” (Parsons 2000:53) Still, I think that the overall tone of *A Une Passante* is one of seriousness, not one of doubt about the status of the woman: the fascination with the worthy figure betrays a serious admiration for this agile, elusive woman, who avoids objectification by fleeing. She is nevertheless not passive, since she returns the gaze. Parsons shows the possibility for this woman to be a subject, in power of her own appearance, desire and status:
The *passante* is a particularly significant figure because her position in the city streets cannot be denigrated through objectification. She is an enigma, like the man in the crowd, who cannot be placed in the familiarized city of the male *flâneur*. She is also a mirror image of the male observer, however, her height and confidence implying a masculinity that parallels the femininity of the dandy-*flâneur*. The *passante* can perhaps therefore act as a metaphor for the women as artist-observer of the city. (Parsons 2000:72)

The *passante* could be a well-dressed courtesan, a ladylike prostitute, or simply, a bourgeois widow or lady. Anyhow, the appropriateness of a returned gaze was a delicate matter.

A very telling example here is the case\(^{43}\) of the painting by the Dutch painter/photographer Breitner, called *De Singelbrug over de Paleisstraat* (1896). Breitner was a bohemian artist who painted city-sceneries (he was a painter and photographer of modern life), many of them populated with women, mostly bag ladies and washing girls of the lower classes. In this painting, he had painted a city-scenery with a female figure in the front, which made it more like a portrait. The first version of the painting showed a street girl who returned the watcher’s gaze, but this was deemed indecent and provocative. The critics talked about the disharmony of the painting which had no candidate-buyers.

![Figure 2: Breitner’s first and second version of De Singelbrug over de Paleisstraat, 1896.](image)

Once Breitner changed the figure of the girl into that of a mysterious lady, clothed in fur, the painting was sold immediately. It seems that the returned glance/gaze was not only a matter of gender, but, even more so, one of class. The bourgeois buyers of Breitner’s art preferred the lower classes to feature in the background scenery, but could not deal with the direct gaze of a working girl. Instead, the gaze returned by a mysterious middle-class *passante* was preferred. It seems that the nineteenth-century flâneuse, just like the flâneur, could only be a leisured middle class woman: the working-class girls were deemed too indecent to have a right to their own gaze.

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\(^{43}\) This case is discussed in “Van Dienstmeiden en Bugerdames: de stadstafereelen van Breitner als visuele topografie.” in Altena: p. 56-73, 69
8.2. Lesbians in Baudelaire’s work

Baudelaire’s fascination with the lesbian, a damned figure in the nineteenth century, was so strong that he firstly named his famous oeuvre of poems, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857), *Les Lesbiennes*. This book was confiscated by judicial order and Baudelaire was fined 300 francs, after which he had to delete six poems out of the bundle. The three lesbian poems, *Lesbos*, *Delphine et Hippolyte*, and *Femmes damnées* were seen as provocative by the court. Anne Friedberg includes these poems in her book, claiming that, “In these poems, Baudelaire cast the lesbian as a heroic yet pitiable force” (Friedberg 1993: 223):

Wandering far from mankind, condemned
To forage in the wilderness like wolves,
Pursue your fate, chaotic souls, and flee
The infinite you bear within yourselves!

Sisters! I love you as I pity you
For your bleak sorrows, for your unslaked thirsts,
And for the love that gorges your great hearts!

(Baudelaire, *Femmes damnées*, in Friedberg 1993: 223)

Out of these fragments speaks a lot of respect and condemnation of Baudelaire towards the lesbians: he sees them as heroic wolves, condemned to “wander far from mankind”. They are outsiders, since their (phallic) “thirsts are unslaked”, but this does not prevent them for having “great hearts”. Being non-heterosexual, they could not be objectified as easily as the passantes or prostitutes, which makes them more “mannish” and thus more respect worthy. The female-female constellation, a doubled infinity (“unfilled void”) of two women, is something so pitiable (or threatening?) to Baudelaire that his admiration for them enables him to even call them “sisters”, which is quite a strong, familiar word for the almost-misogynist, individualistic Baudelaire. In *Central Park*, Walter Benjamin also explains Baudelaire’s fascination with the lesbian as heroic, ultimately strong and mannish. This masculine trait is linked to the toughening process of commodity production. The threat of the mobility of

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44 A contemporary critic, Sally Munt, has taken up the discourse of the lesbians as heroines-flâneuses. In her book, *Heroic Desire*, she sees the lesbian flâneur, next to the butch lesbian, as a figure who transcends strict gender distinctions. According to her, the lesbian flâneur (she never uses the word flâneuse) perfectly embodies the essence of flânerie, in its sense of indefinite, “unproductive” wandering. More specifically, she uses Bergson’s theories about time and space to convey her ideas:

I want to contextualize my thoughts on space with a model that incorporates time. The flâneur, the hero of lesbian desire- is not just a figure of space, she also embodies time. (...) The restless spaces of the flâneur are fluctuating, rippling and relational, her wandering is not concerned with closure, there is no purpose to it, it is movement for the sake of its own pleasure; in the modernist sense of time it is not productive. It is not to be interpreted, it is to be done, to be written, not read. (Munt 1998: 177)
working women on the street is here conflated with the fear/fascination of the masculinised woman, the lesbian:

The figure of the lesbian belongs in the most precise sense among the heroic models of Baudelaire (…) The 19th century began to incorporate women wholesale into the process of commodity production. All theoreticians agreed that their specific femininity was thus threatened; masculine traits would in the course of time appear also in women. Baudelaire affirmed these traits; but at the same time wished to deny their economic necessity. Thus it is that he comes to give a purely sexual accent to this evolving tendency in women. (Benjamin, *Central Park* in Friedberg 1993: 223)

The masculinized lesbian, or so-called *butch* lesbian, can be interpreted as a transitional figure between masculine appearance and female perception: she belongs to the intermediate sex, the Third Sex. This term comes from the late nineteenth-century sexologist pioneer, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs. He was one of the first to theorize about homosexuality, but, ironically, his efforts to clarify homosexuality were turned into tools of homophobia:

Ulrichs used the existing idea of hermaphroditism to propose his own formulation, the ‘urning’, which he saw as a part of nature. The female version, the ‘urningin’, was a sexual invert; her same-sex desires not corresponding to her female body. The urningin not only had (what we would call) lesbian desires, she also had a masculinized psyche. She was a man trapped in a female body, a metaphor taken up literally by many subsequent apologists. Ulrichs was one of the earliest to believe that there was a separate identity for homosexuality that was inborn, innate, and constituted an essence; his ‘third sex’ was a product of biological inheritance. (Munt 1999: 61)

This “urningin”, a concept that was also taken on by the Bloomsbury group, belongs to the Third Sex as a (female) homosexual. Since the butch lesbian has a masculinized psyche in a female body, she is a useful figure of transition from male to female flânerie.

### 8.3. Prostitutes: female offenders or the first flâneuses?

Prostitutes were very much a part of nineteenth-century urban life. The negative perception of prostitutes was broadened to other women walkers, and thus to possible flâneuses. Descriptions of prostitutes are often to be found in novels of the period, in newspaper articles and scientific publications. They were the women on the street, symbols of seduction, danger and sexuality. In Britain, the discourse of the female offenders led to the *Contagious Disease Act*, through which women alone in the streets were seen as infecting the nation’s

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45 Prostitutes are very much related to the organic idea of the feminised mother-city, with labyrinthine alleys. A passage from Benjamin Arcades Work compares the city with a whore’s womb: “should let himself be jostled through streets whose darkness recalls that of a whore’s womb.” (Benjamin, *The Arcades Work* in Rohr 2003: 91)

46 In 1864 the English Parliament passed the Contagious Diseases Act. This legislation allowed policeman to arrest prostitutes in ports and army towns and bring them in to have compulsory checks for venereal disease. If
virtuous manhood. Instead of seeing them as the ultimate victims of nineteenth-century virility and commercialism, we could ask ourselves if the nineteenth-century prostitute was herself not an observer of the crowd, by continuously walking the street (be it for a living).

The prostitute, together with other Baudelairean images of urban women (such as widows, lesbians, rag-pickers and grisettes) is a constitutive element in the search for the Parisian flâneuse. She is an assemblage of the stereotypical urban characters: she shares a life of vice with the man of the crowd, like the lesbian, she is seen as sexually deviant, she lives off the scraps of others like the rag-picker, is lonely like the widow and, as a courtesan, she has a love for costume and masquerade.

In the best case, male writers showed pity for prostitutes in a response similar to that of the lesbians. In the worst case, they respond to the prostitute “with violent loathing (…) in Les Fleurs du Mal, Baudelaire denies her the power of observation, entirely objectifying her” (Parsons 2000: 24). The need for this control, this objectification, stems from the mixture of admiration and fascination with the female moving body on the street. Sally Munt explains why, although most male writers showed contempt for prostitutes, they were a source of fascination and sexual provocation, rather than passive objects:

Secondly, the figure of the prostitute is problematic in the conventional flâneur narrative –prostitutes, more than most women, have mobility on the streets, and furthermore have a certain power of the gaze themselves, if only to procure business. (…)To construct prostitutes simply as passive objects is a masculinist act of interpretation. (Munt 1998:36)

Deborah Parsons points towards Benjamin’s equation of Baudelaire’s view of the prostitute with the spectacle of consumer society. Examples of this are to be found in the poems of Les Fleurs du Mal, (Parsons 2000:25) “written to Jeanne Duval, in which she is constantly described as an inanimate, purchasable commodity. Consequently her act of sight is denied.” Parsons draws the parallel between the reflection of the prostitute’s eyes and that of the shop window: both reflect the gaze of the observer, but it is an inanimate reflection, not a conscious one. The prostitute in the flâneur’s passage is no more than a mannequin in the shop-window. A contemporary example of the survival of this association can be found in “het Glazen Straatje” in Ghent: a few run-down glass arcades near Saint Ann’s Square have become the refuge for brothels and escort services: under old signs with hairdressers’ and

the women were suffering from sexually transmitted diseases they were placed in a locked hospital until cured. It was claimed that this was the best way to protect men from infected women.

Source: http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/Wcontagious.htm
shoe-makers’ signs, women are sitting in the shop-window, selling themselves to the eager eyes of the men in the arcade.

The equation of prostitutes with inanimate commodity objects is, like Munt argued, a sign of masculine anxiety: it hides the stronger features of the woman in favour of the masculine urge to control the unknown or the dangerous. Still, although Baudelaire might have reacted with “a violent loathing” to the singular figure of the prostitute, his attitude towards the social figure of the prostitute was one of interest and fascination. After all, she was a living creature and had the power of the gaze, so she could be compared to male urban observers, or artists. Parsons explains the dialectical relationship between the artist and the prostitute, since certain traits intertwine them:

Most notably the prostitute corresponds to the narrator-poet himself, a metaphor for the role of the artist as she walks the streets for the material of her profession and offers her constructed body as a commodity in the same way that Baudelaire regarded the artist as prostituting his work in publication. (Parsons 2000:25)

Half a century later, with Louis Aragon’s *Paris Peasant* (1926), we can read a positive shift in the perception of prostitutes: they have become nineteenth-century urban types, towards whom the nostalgic twentieth-century writer feels very affectionate. He prefers the prostitutes (*filles publiques*) to the bourgeois women (*femmes honnêtes*) who walk in the park:

Ancient whores, set pieces, mechanical dummies, I am glad that you are so much part of the scenery here: you are still vivid rays of light compared with those matriarchs one encounters in the public parks.” (Aragon, *Paris Peasant* in Friedberg 1993:72)

This extract is nostalgic towards the nineteenth century, with its “ancient whores”. Also, Aragon links two contradictory characteristics, “mechanical” and “vivid”, into one positive equation, the figure of the prostitute. Since the negative attitude towards prostitutes used to reflect on the flâneuse, there is hope for the future flâneuse because of a positive change in the attitude towards prostitutes (Aragon).
C. Fin-de-siècle gender ambivalences: the New Woman and the Dandy as figures of social transition

1. Introduction

After the negative statements about female flânerie by Wolff, Gleber and Pollock, it becomes obvious that we need a social change in the male/female-structured nineteenth century if we want to open up the possibility for intellectual female flânerie, which differs from the consuming woman/badaud. It seems that we cannot escape the male/female dichotomy of the nineteenth century, were it not that, by the turn of the century, both men and women started to change their patterns of behaviour, their way of dressing and moral codes. Mannish women (the New Woman) and effeminate men (the dandies) “stole” each other’s domains in society: the New Woman positioned herself as an independent, intellectual and sportive character, whereas the dandy’s labour “was simply to appear” (see further on).

Before I talk about the New Woman as a possible subject for female flânerie, I want to shed some light on the lives of two women writers who defied the social code of nineteenth-century society by writing (and painting, in the case of Sand) great works of art. They are two “Georges”, the French George Sand and the English George Eliot. Since they would never have been accepted as women writers in their own time, they used male pseudonyms and cross-dressed, eventually strengthening the “common sense” idea that women could not have the distanced attitude of artists. In *Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity*, Griselda Pollock presents women artists such as Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt like the Baudelairean painters of modern life. She places them as painters and writers in the impressionist movement but mainly points towards the difficulties women experienced by society’s restrictions. Unfortunately, the fore-runners of the New Woman still had to disguise themselves as men, resulting in many diaries, novels and journals of women’s experiences:

> While women were positioned as objects and images that passively received the active male gaze, their desire for the freedom of movement can still be read in the numerous women’s texts of the nineteenth century, writings by adventurous female travellers and explorers who were willing to risk the pursuit of a socially sanctioned scopophilia. (Gleber 1999: 175)

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47 As a reminder:

The street has never “belonged” to women. They cannot walk it freely without also experiencing public judgments or conventions that dictate their images, effectively rendering them objects of the gaze. If women have been considered absent or “invisible”, it is partially because they have been removed from the street. (…) They did not have the right to look, to stare, scrutinize or watch. (Gleber 1999: 175)
As an example of these texts, Gleber cites Marie Bashkirtseff’s efforts in nineteenth-century Paris to be an independent woman, or worse, a woman-artist:

> What I long for is the freedom of going about alone, of coming and going…of stopping and looking at the artistic shops…that’s what I long for; and that’s the freedom without which one cannot become a real artist. Do you image that I get much good from what I see, chaperoned as I am, and when, in order to go to the Louvre, I must wait for my carriage, my lady companion, my family? (Bashkirteff in Gleber 1999: 175-6)

**2. Fore-runners of the New Woman: two cross-dressing authors called George.**

**2.1. George Sand (1804-1876), the cross-dressing student**

The most famous literary example of nineteenth-century cross-dressing is the French (late Romantic) writer George Sand. In 1831, she described her transformation into a male first-year student in the most positive terms: her clothes and boots symbolise a harness against female subordination:

> So I had made for myself a redingote-guérite in heavy gray cloth, pants and vest to match. With a gray hat and woollen cravat, I was a perfect first-year student. I cannot express the pleasure my boots gave me: I would gladly have slept with them.’ (George Sand, *Histoire de ma Vie*, in Munt 1999: 12)

By making herself into a pseudo-masculine subject on the street, instead of a feminine object, she places herself in a safe position, which she would not enjoy being dressed as a woman: “It seemed to me that I could go around the world. My clothes feared nothing.” The enthusiasm of this woman shows her great longing for independence and anonymity: “No one knew me, no one looked at me, no one found fault with me.” (George Sand, *Histoire de ma Vie* in Munt 1999: 12) Her masculinity was not just outwardly: she was keenly interested in natural sciences, participated (in the shadows) of the French *gouvernement provisoire* in 1848 and, as an artist, was the inventor of a technique called *dendritage*. She loved marionettes (in the line of masquerade and women being “puppets on a string”?) and wrote a lot of autobiographical works, theatre pieces and volumes of correspondence. In order to be respected as a woman writer/artist, she had to assume a masculine lifestyle. The transformation that Sand needed to lead a life of her own has been adopted today by butch

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48 biographical information taken from the George Sand website: <http://www.george-sand.info>
lesbians, who cross-dress to make a statement about their sexuality. In this context, Sally Munt quotes Judith Halberstam’s *F2M: The making of Female Masculinity*:

The cross-dressing sexuality is worn outside the body like another skin, it replaces anatomy in the chain of signifiers that eventually stabilizes into something like a sexual identity: sexual identity in this model is a surface that hides and is hidden, an outfit that covers and lays bare. (Halberstam in Munt 1998:89)

The “in between” status of a cross-dressed wandering woman comes from her position as a desiring subject, and, simultaneously, as an object of desire: “she is all-image, a spectacle of auto-eroticism, desired only by herself. As such she is a simulacrum.” (Munt 1998: 36) She unites the powers of both sexes in her male gaze/dress and her female glance/desire, which makes her *more flâneur than flâneur*, a contradiction to the second degree:

(…) for then there is no material ground of maleness of femaleness to be invoked. Is the flâneur a transvestite? Can s/he be a cross-dressed lesbian? Is it possible that the flâneur is a borderline case, an example of a roving signifier, a transient wild card of potential, indeterminate sexuality, trapped in transliteration, caught in desire? (Munt 1998:36)

2.2. George Eliot (°1819- 1860), on the warpath against Victorian femininity.

Another nineteenth-century female author using the pseudonym George is Mary Ann Evans, or George Eliot. Her writings could be read as sympathetic to the feminist cause, because she urges women to liberate themselves in an intellectual way by studying; on the other hand, her way of thinking betrays an immense respect for men’s capacities and contempt for the silly and hysterical behaviour of her contemporary women. Women only seem to be able to improve in terms of becoming *more of a man*, the advancement of woman would only be useful in order to serve patriarchy. She quotes Lord Tennyson’s *The Princess* in this respect: “If she be small, slight-natured, miserable, How shall men grow?” 49

In her essays, *Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft*50 and *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*51 she reacts against the idealized aristocratic heroines that feature novels written by a lot of female authors. The activities of the heroines mainly include praying, sewing, gossiping and making their toilet. As such, they have no experience whatsoever of the trades and outside world they try to describe. George Eliot apologizes for these silly novelists because they write not for their bread but out of vanity, in “elegant boudoirs, with violet-
colored [sic] ink and a ruby pen, that they must be entirely indifferent to publisher’s accounts, and inexperienced in any form of poverty except poverty of brains.”(Eliot 2000b: 1463) She points towards some responsibilities of society, but also urges her own species to improve. She expresses the dialectics of the two powers: “on one side we hear that women’s position can never be improved until women themselves are better; and, on the other, that women can never become better until their position is improved.” (Eliot 2000a: 1460) She pleads for culture and freedom for women, not to give rise to female superiority, but in order to equal out the greatness of men with the compassion of women.

According to Eliot, the intellectual underdevelopment of women stems out of a vain ennui, for which statement she quotes Mary Wollstonecraft in her essay:

Women, in particular, all want to be ladies, which is simply to have nothing to do, but listlessly to go they scarcely care where, for they cannot tell what. But what have women to do in society? I may be asked, but to loiter with easy grace; (...) (Eliot 2000a: 1460)

It seems as if women of this era were the group in society with the greatest amount of leisure time, but it was one of a very restricted quality, as they could never experience the world outside of their boudoirs. They are “depressed from their cradles” (Eliot 2000a:1461) and unable to develop intellectual or virtuous quality due to their suppression into feminine leisure. The issue of leisure is an important one, because, since the bourgeois women were more leisured than the middle class bourgeois male, they should have been more inclined towards flânerie, were it not that nineteenth century society did not accept the idea of a leisured woman “floating” about leisurely. The loitering described above, is not equal to the loitering of the urban middle class male, but it is the homely loitering of the aristocratic woman. The sentence saying that these women go to “they scarcely care where” rings a bell in terms of flânerie and roaming, but means in this fragment that they have no goal, no profession to practice, no studies to busy themselves with. The loitering and “going anywhere” are only used in terms of homely occupation and showing themselves at parties and concerts.

3. The New Woman

After a whole nineteenth century of confinement to the home, the English Victorians of the 1890ies saw the birth of new possibilities, of a “New Woman”. This new “species” cycled, walked out on the streets and was not interested in marriage. Just like the butch (lesbian) flâneur, the New Woman was a possible figure of transition between male and female modes of perception: through her mannish pose, she gained more respect as an intellectual artist,
whilst retaining the women’s glance. The contested New Woman received ambivalent reactions from both men and women. A lot of novels from the time (e.g. *The Heavenly Twins* by Sarah Grand Carter) describe the difficulties these young, intellectual women had to struggle their way out of given structures. The newborn freedom, after the Contagious Disease Act had been abolished in 1886, went hand in hand with a reversal in gender types. Victorian values of marriage and virtue were scorned at by the decadent dandies, and androgyny became the new ideal for the heroine of the fin-de-siècle, the New Woman. The New Woman symbolised a way of life without marriage, children or homely duties. Before society changed, and before women gained access to both the intellectual and the carnivalesque sites of the city, these intellectual women changed themselves by cross-dressing as a man. George Eliot and George Sand could thus be described as fore-runners of the New Woman.

### 4. The Dandy

The flâneur’s interest in appearance, his political neutrality and lingering lifestyle seems at first sight to be a form of dandyism. Yet, there are differences between the loitering of the dandy and that of the flâneur. Whereas the flâneur’s aesthetic eye focuses on the city or the objects/passantes he encounters, the dandy uses his aesthetic skills in order to be watched himself. In this respect he shows similarities with the badaud (exhibitionism), but the dandy’s stance is more political (or rather, apolitical), whereas the badaud was more of a full-blown consumer. In a study, *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm*, Ellen Moers puts the stress on the exhibitionism/narcissism from the dandy, which is different from the flâneur’s voyeurism:

> The dandy’s labour was simply to appear, he was perhaps an early commodity fetish, a consumable spectacle, a paradox of capitalism, for his function was to have no function, except to exist in his symbolic ostentation. Here was a solipsistic hero: a hero so evidently at the centre of the stage that he need to nothing (sic) to prove his英雄ism- need never, in fact, do anything at all. (Ellen Moers in Munt 1998: 32)

The similarity between the flâneur and the dandy is their modern characteristic, argues Featherstone with a quote out of Foucault’s essay *What is Enlightenment?:* “the dandy who makes of his body, his behaviour, his feelings and passions, his very existence, a work of art.” (Featherstone: 1991:67) This is an example of the dandy being a “modern man who constantly tries to invent himself”. The “good taste” ascribed to the dandy is similar to the superiority of the flâneur towards the masses. Although the flâneur rejoices in their sight, he

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sees the masses as one whole; they are distinct from him as an individual. The superiority is an illusion because, “Masses are other people. There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses.” (Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, in: Mike Featherstone 1991:135) The similarity between the dandy and the flâneur, their self-imposed lifelong education, refinement and hence superiority, classes them both as figures of the middle or upper class.

The fin-de-siècle figure of the dandy became effeminate and blurred the nineteenth-century gender dichotomies, together with the androgyny of the New Woman. In this context, Sally Munt quotes Moers again, quoting Oscar Wilde: “Wilde himself commented on late nineteenth century London society as ‘entirely made-up of dowdies and dandies… The men are all dowdies and the women are all dandies.’” (Ellen Moers, *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm* in Munt 1998:36)

The rather English and sociological phenomenon of a dandy differs from the French cultural figure of the flâneur as an artist-writer: there is no real French equivalent for the English dandy, and no English equivalent for the French flâneur. Two theorists explain the difference:

> Yet the English dandy, marked by his attitude of boredom and attention-seeking if unostentatious self-display, is very different from Baudelaire’s petty bourgeois. The latter is distinguished by the fact that he works in the city (as artist or writer) and that he is fascinated and exhilarated by the urban experience.” (Parsons 2000:20)

> The figure of the flâneur shares an aesthetic articulation with the dandy and the snob; yet he emerges not from the stylization of his own appearance but rather from the seemingly disinterested, yet highly visually invested perception of the styles of others. (Gleber 1999: 23)

The French flâneur is to be situated between the spectatorship of the English detective and the English dandy-artist (such as Oscar Wilde). England, with its tradition of male-biased magazines such as *The Spectator*, and later, *The Observer* and its patriarchal capital London, left less space for imagination and mystical associations than France with its labyrinthine and effeminate capital Paris. Since the English form of (literary) female flânerie has been rigorously investigated by Deborah Parsons, I have chosen not to include London in this dissertation.

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53 The figure of English flânerie tends more towards the journalist-detective type, it is an observant ‘Sherlock Holmes-figure’, insensitive to the “jouissance de la foule”:

Rather than elegantly dressed artists populating cafés on grand streets, the London observer tends to be a more shadowy figure haunting the underworld of the working class, a social investigator or rather criminal ‘man of the crowd’. (Parsons 2000:36)
D. Shopping as a means of opening up the possibility of female flânerie.

1. Introduction

One could easily deduce from the previous paragraphs that women’s experiences in the city were restricted (working and shopping without autonomy) and meetings with men could only be situations in which the woman was objectified. We have to be careful with generalisations though, because, like Mike Featherstone points out, there is something as “the myth of cultural integration”, a term first used by Margaret Archer in *Culture and Agency.* (1988) Featherstone explains it thus:

(…) ‘the myth of cultural integration’, which became prevalent both in anthropology and German historicism. In doing so our sense of cultural coherence may be derived from exemplary literary texts to the extent that we read off popular practices from intellectualist accounts and neglect the integrity and diversity of popular traditions. (Featherstone 1991:119)

As such, we should not only construct the images of nineteenth-century urban women through the images presented to us in novels from the time (*Au Bonheur des Dames* by Emile Zola, for example, which will be discussed under section three), but also through historical facts, sociological studies and architectural novelties. An example of this is Griselda Pollock’s essay (*Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity*) on female Parisian artists, like Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassat, which shows that there were women-observers in the streets, but we do not know about them because the absence of their representation in art history. Another, sociological, phenomenon is discussed by Friedberg, the arrival of department stores. She warns against a generalization of T.J. Clark’s concepts *femme honnête* and *fille publique*:

As we will see, to find the origins of a female observer- a public woman who was neither a fille publique nor a femme honnête- one has to turn to new spaces that appeared in the mid-nineteenth century, public spaces such as the department store or the amusement park, spaces where women could exist outside of these two narrow definitions. (Friedberg 1993:36)

In the mid-nineteenth century, cities like Paris and New York paved the way with famous department stores (*Au Bon Marchè* 1852, *Macy’s* 1857) for many other metropolitan cities to follow their example. These new superstores can be seen as extensions of the bourgeois home interior, but they also provided women of all classes with a new freedom to take part in commercial and social life: bourgeois women were allowed to go shopping without a chaperone; working-class girls could go out working in the city without becoming
unrespectable. Mike Featherstone evaluates the department stores as forerunners in the emancipation of women through consumerism:

> With regard to forerunners, the department stores which developed first in Paris and then in other cities in the second half of the nineteenth century were essentially conceived as ‘palaces of consumption’, ‘dream-worlds’, and ‘temples’ in which goods were worshipped by new consumers (largely female) who were able to wander through display areas which introduced simulations and an evocative, exotic imagery.
> (Featherstone 1991:104)

In Paris, later stores like *Printemps*, *Colette* and the *Galeries Lafayette* gave way to the “feminisation” of urbanites. Paris, the capital of fashion, became a symbol for femininity, the city itself being the Muse of many artists. It still had patriarchal institutions and areas as well, but compared to London, Parsons (2000: 20) claims that: “However, it must be admitted that Paris offered, if not greater freedom, then greater tolerance than London for female flânerie.”

The Belgian flâneuses of our own capital, Brussels, also got an outlet store of *Au Bon Marché*, and another store, *Les Magasins de la Bourse*. Some time later, in 1903, the more prestigious *Innovation* opened, nowadays called *Inno*. The architecture of the time, Art Nouveau, made the store into an elegant symbol of twentieth century fashionability:

![Postcard "Innovation", from Het Archief van de stad Brussel.](image)

Although the building later caught fire (1967), it is today the only surviving ‘grand magasin’ in the midst of shopping malls and upcoming shopping streets. Its traditional interior with separate counters where one can buy customised gloves and scarves still attracts many *grisettes* who are nostalgic for the old days, but even young people come in and enjoy the status of the store’s glorious past.

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54 My source for this information was a visit to the open day of the « Archief van de stad Brussel »
2. The shopper’s gaze

In trying to define a flânerie-linked identity for the shopping woman, we certainly need to turn to the mode of seeing of these women, their “shopper’s gaze”. Anne Friedberg finds the roots of a female alternative to the male mode of flânerie in the newly mobilizing social activities of the mid-nineteenth century:

At the beginnings of consumer culture, this gaze became imbued with the power of choice and incorporation: the shopper’s gaze. During the mid-nineteenth century, the coincident development of department store shopping, packaged tourism, and protocinematic entertainment began to transform this mobilised gaze into a commodity, one sold to a consumer-spectator. (…) And here, at the base of modernity, the social underpinnings of gender began to shift. Women were empowered with new forms of social mobility as shoppers, as tourists, as cinema-goers. (Friedberg 1993:4)

Clearly, Friedberg is right in her statement that these new modes of seeing (cinema, tourism, shopping) made a difference in the daily life of urban women. Although most of these female gazes were “guided” in some way or another -women by themselves were not always welcome in the cinema, the department store could be seen as a rational “male trap” for the female hysterical consumer, “tourism” was something different from what we know today- Friedberg still advocates that “the flâneuse was the nineteenth-century version of a female observer, whose gaze was mobilized in these new public spaces of modernity.” (Friedberg 1993: 36)

In addition to the positive and negative stances on the phenomenon of shopping as a way for female flânerie, the female shopper’s gaze is also to be discussed in its strengths and weaknesses. Anke Gleber contrasts the male gaze with the restricted shopper’s gaze, linking the impositions of the stereotypical images in stores to those of the male gaze:

While department store strollers and window-shoppers are predominantly women, they have not assumed the purpose-free gaze of the flâneur. Shopping malls likewise have become centers of female self-consciousness rather than self-confidence, their spaces filled with normative images of femininity that constrict the flâneur’s roaming scopophilia. (Gleber 1999: 185-6)

Quoting Susan Buck-Morss’s *The Flâneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering*, Anke Gleber gives a rather bleak view on the fate of contemporary flâneuses. According to her, even with no one watching, women in the city always already objectify themselves because they are conscious of constantly being viewed:

the female flâneur’s desire for her own exploration of the world ends where it encounters its limits in male pedestrians whose phantasies assault, annoy, and evaluate her in the street. As Buck-Morss explains: “[Women] make themselves objects. Even with no one looking, and even without a display case, viewing oneself as constantly
being viewed inhibits freedom. (Susan Buck-Morrs, *The Flaneur* in Gleber 1999: 185)

Watching other people without making contact with them and the consciousness of constantly being viewed implies a certain (male?) self-discipline, which can be described as “the pleasure to look but not touch”. Mike Featherstone points towards the necessity of discipline for the *flâneur*, which was provided by the architectural structure of the arcades, later, by the insides of the department stores, and now still present in the controlling mechanisms of pleasure-sites today:

Yet to be a *flâneur*, a stroller, who watches others and displays him or herself, necessitates an ordered space as much in the Parisian arcades so dear to Baudelaire in the 1840s and 1850s which became central to Benjamin’s *Passagen-Werk*, as in the exhibitions and department stores of the late nineteenth century and as much in the theme parks, shopping centres and museums of today. In short, to wander through goods or art treasures on display demanded discipline…. And those who lacked it or were in danger of losing it there existed a battery of external controls designed along the principles of a panopticism. (Featherstone 1991: 104-5)

The gaze of the department store flâneuse had to be freed from masculine control in order to acquire distinctive aesthetic qualities.

### 3. *Au Bonheur des Dames*: a male interpretation of shopping women

An important literary example of a masculine interpretation of the “female” activity of shopping, is Emile Zola’s novel *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883). It was inspired by the shopping-mania following the success of Paris’ greatest department stores at the time, *Au Bon Marché*[^55], and the newly built *Printemps*.

![Figure 4: Paris 1900, Au Bon Marché](image)

[^55]: Postcard illustration from 1900 in Friedberg 1993: 40.
The content of the novel seems rather positive, it presents a commercial public space, a pleasure-site, in which women could take part and had some sort of power: “the store is a commercial temple of which woman is both goddess and worshipper.(…) She is served and pandered to, and, as consumer, controls the fortunes of consumer society.” (Parsons 2000: 47) We find a similar example of women’s consumer power in the city of The Hague, where a newly built arcade (1885) was called *Au Bonheur des Dames* after Zola’s novel. Jan Hein Furnée discusses the economic dependence of investors of the female shopping crowd:

In plaats van de suggestie te wekken dat vrouwen in het winkelen hun passieve en afhankelijke rol ten opzichte van mannen bevestigden, bracht juist de passage aan het licht dat deze rollen net zo goed, omgekeerd moesten worden beschouwd.(…) Het was immers zo dat de economische macht van winkelende vrouwen die bepalend zou zijn voor de winst of het verlies van het door mannen bijeengebrachte kapitaal van maar liefst ruim twee miljoen gulden. Vanaf 1880 overtroffen de ‘winkelende’ vrouwen de mannen, gaven ritueel plaats aan de stadsverschuivingen. (Jan Hein Furnée, *Om te winkelen, zoo als het in de residentie heet - Consumptiecultuur en stedelijke ruimte in Den Haag, 1850-1890* in Altena 2002: 44)  

Deborah Parsons confirms the idea of these gender relations through consumer power, although she also shows the illusionary nature of the development: “At the same time Zola implies that this position of authority is merely illusory, and that, rather than controlling the spectacle, the woman is controlled by it.” (Parsons 2000: 47) What I want to stress here is Zola’s perception of the female crowds as hysterical *erotomaniacs*, and not as independent, economically powerful women. Parsons explains why the word *erotomaniacs* links the repressed sexuality of the bourgeois women with their shopping *lust*: “The crowd of female shoppers was popularized by Zola as a mass of ‘erotomaniacs’, a term coined in the 1880s to define desire for objects of the gaze as a pathological tendency.” (Parsons 2000:48) The female customer, like a nymphomaniac, is attracted by the new, newer, newest commodities; she is (sexually) overwhelmed by the sight of the goods on display:

His evocation of the sensuous female crowd follows the cycle of the sexual act; empty waiting, the ardour of the swelling crowd, the moment of maximum saturation and desire, the discharge of desire in spending, and finally emptiness again…Sexual deviance is thus still connected with the ‘public woman’, extended from the prostitute to the shopper and criminalized for the latter in the psychosomatic disease of kleptomania. (Parsons 2000: 48-9)

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In her ever-changing desire for new objects of sights though, this shopping flâneuse shows similarities with the flâneur who kept extending his gaze from one corner to the other, from one window to the next.

The disempowerment of the female shopper (Zola), just like Baudelaire’s disempowerment of the prostitute, guaranteed the nineteenth-century intellectual flâneurs the monopoly over the city and the crowds. It was in their own interest to diminish this new freedom for women to walk the streets and take part in the spectacle of city life. This does not mean that the badaud-flâneuse already possessed the full capacity for female flânerie, but she embodies a first possibility for it. The link of sexual lust and shopping still survives in the New York-based TV-series *Sex and the City*, which awaits in chapter three.

An example of a male intellectual who was not “afraid” of the feminine side is Oscar Wilde. He was the editor of the magazine *Woman’s World* in 1888 (before called *The Lady’s World: a Magazine of Fashion and Society*). The intellectual Jewish author and female observer, Amy Levy, wrote for him, since, “as editor, he altered the name and subject to appeal to a more independent, educated and urban female readership.” (Parsons 2000: 94)

This approval of the feminine lifestyle by Wilde is an important given: it strengthens the connection between women and dandies, which offers us a new possibility for the next chapter where flâneuses will be presented as life artists.

### E. The first conclusion

Now that the badaud-flâneuse has taken her first, difficult, baby steps, we can only be curious for what will become of her in later years. Leaving the (impossible?) *femme flâneur* aside, I will follow the flâneuse through her “adolescence” in Weimar Berlin, where similar-but-different challenges will be posed to her. Although the nineteenth century was a problematic period for female flânerie, it also strengthened the flâneuse for what was coming next. This way, the nineteenth century was fruitful in the sense that, once the hardships were overcome, the eventual flâneuse knew where she came from. The nineteenth-century woman went from the interior of the home towards the interior of the department store, and, in some cases, to the street. Whether or not she will there adopt a flâneuse’s pose, will show from the next chapters. Like in anyone’s life, the childhood years may seem futile, but they are very important for hers/his further life. This will show through the recurring elements of the childhood in the adolescence (life-artist), adulthood (badaud/the female gaze), middle age (mobility) and old age of the flâneuse.
“Wir alle waren wie in einem Korsett eigeschnürt und wurden nun in die Freiheit entlassen.“
(Dada-artist Hannah Höch describing the birth of the Weimar Republik in Berlin, 1918/1919, in Scheub 2000:7)

“Für junge Frauen aber, und ganz besonders für Künstlerinnen und Kulturschaffende, war Berlin mit seinem freiheitlichen, von Kreativität strotzenden Klima ein Eldorado."
(Scheub 2000: 8)

III. Berlin 1918-1940: the adolescence of female flânerie

A. Introduction: the European interbellum, a period of transition.

The period from 1919 until 1940 in Berlin, the years of the Weimar Republic, was an important stage for the further development of female flânerie. The Weimar period was marked by years of (sexual) revolution and decadence (the twenties) but also by economic and political crises (the late twenties and thirties). Just like adolescents, the Weimar women struggled for more freedom, with a lust for life that made them sometimes behave in a hedonistic way. Women became flâneuses in the sense that they got more chances to become artists/writers in their own right, without adopting a completely distanced flâneur’s mode of being and seeing.

The group around Helen Hessel (a former painter who became a fashion journalist for Die Frankfurter Zeitung, after having moved from Berlin to Paris) consisted of journalists/writers/poets (Dinah Nelken, Vicki Baum, Gabriele Tergit) and dancers/artists (for example Hannah Höch, who made Dada-collages), together they formed the “Café Jadicke” group, named after their meeting place. Gabriele Tergit and Vicki Baum were the only women who held their position in the male-dominated world of publishing companies. Tergit’s novel about the entertainment industry of Berlin, Käsebier erobert den Kurfürstendamm (1931) became a best-seller and Baum’s novel Menschen im Hotel (1929) was twice adapted for the screen (once starring Greta Garbo, Joan Crawford and John Barrymore).

Herself a journalist for the Berliner Tageblatts, Tergit wrote about the revolutionary character of her contemporaries: “Verrückt nach Leben, waren sie wild entschlossen, alles anders zu machen als ihre milchsauren Mütter.”(Tergit in Scheub 2000: 9) Clearly, these flâneuses went through a rebellious phase like real adolescents.
Like the flâneur, these women turned their lives into a work of art, but, instead of remaining incognito or superior towards the spectacle, they embraced the popular. Nevertheless, they were no badauds but intellectual women with their own view on the society they lived in. The respect they needed to become real artists/flâneuses was not easily acquired. Because of their revolutionary character, they often met with resistance from the patriarchal society who still saw them as objects of desire or fear. Hence, male Weimar theorists and writers tried to push women back into their nineteenth-century stereotype.

1. Women in Weimar Berlin: still objects of desire or fear?

The nineteenth-century writers’ idea of women being sphinxes in the city was mirrored in the writings of the twentieth century sociologists. Just like Charles Baudelaire and Emile Zola, Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel tried to separate the male, solipsistic artist from a hysterical, feminine mass culture.57 Although Simmel was sympathetic to the woman’s movement, and himself a rather effeminate turn-of the-century salon-character, his writings ignored the ambiguous side of the flâneur and strengthened the male bias. Simmel was not the only theorist to deny women a chance for flânerie: Franz Hessel, the archetypical Weimar flâneur, who inspired Benjamin’s essay Die Wiederkehr des Flâneurs (1929) also adopted a misogynist stance towards female flânerie. In Spazieren in Berlin, “Hessel explicitly cautions against walking with women, claiming that they represent a potentially distractive influence on the flaneur’s solitary wanderings.” (Gleber 1999: 172) Benjamin too, in announcing the return of the flaneur in 1929, “fails to acknowledge his awareness of the numerous women whom he passes every day in the streets of Berlin and Paris.” (Gleber 1999:171)

The flâneuse, as dandy-consumer, did not enjoy the same respect as the flâneur did. The entrance into commercial/public life was not enough to be fully respected: women also had to integrate into the male bastions of the academic, artistic and political world. This was a privilege not easily conquered, since, as late as 1908, “German law prohibited women from attending public meetings or joining political organizations.” (Gleber 1999:179)

57 Simmel and Benjamin’s writings indicate the difficulties involved in asserting a dichotomy between a feminine mass-culture and masculine high/modernist culture. The neurasthenic, the city-dweller, and the consumer are all connected with traits described as ‘feminine’ such as superficiality, hysteria, and covetous desire, yet also connect with the anxiety and thus detachment of the male urban dweller. (...)The ‘spectacle’ has been connected with the ‘feminine’; presumably through the idea of women in the nineteenth-century city as displaying themselves as objects of an erotic gaze (as prostitutes, performers, debutantes) and ‘for sale’. (Parsons 2000:38)
The Weimar flâneuse had to rebel (like an adolescent) against the patriarchal structures in society in order to pave her way through (urban) life. The process of political emancipation is still going on today: although women have equal rights to those of men, they have more difficulties in securing a position in political life.\footnote{More information and statistics about women’s representation in (European and Belgian) politics can be found in: Brigitte Rys, \textit{Gerokt & gemazeld in de politiek}, Brugge, Cramars Cooperativa, 2004.}

In order to be respected as artists, women had to become active subjects in stead of inspirational muses (like the female-gendered city) or objects of fear. Whereas the twentieth-century women had more freedom to walk the streets, the nineteenth-century depiction of women as lust-objects (prostitutes) or symbols of destitution (the rag-picker, the widow, the bag-lady) had not gone out of fashion in the male modernist literature of the twentieth century. For example, Louis Aragon still associated women with the “vulgar”, they are “women” above all other qualities in his novel \textit{Paris Peasant} (1926):

\begin{quote}
so many female strollers of all kinds…varying ages and degrees of beauty, often vulgar, and in a sense already depreciated, but women, truly women, and palpably women, even at the expense of all the other qualities of their bodies and souls, so many women, in league with these arcades they stroll along. (Louis Aragon in Friedberg 1993:172)
\end{quote}

The daily business of prostitutes in Weimar Berlin is a familiar sight, it is so ever-present that it depresses the female protagonist Doris out of Irmgard Keun’s \textit{Das Kunstseidene Mädchen} (1932):

\begin{quote}
But everywhere in the evenings stand whores- on the Alex, so many, so many- on Kurfürstendamm and Joachimsthaler and at the Friedrichbahnhof and everywhere.\ldots
And there are old ones with matches and shoe laces –many,many,many- in the street all over whores, young men, and very starved voices.(Keun in Gleber 1999: 206)
\end{quote}

The association of female Weimar streetwalkers with prostitutes has put its stamp on Benjamin too: Anke Gleber concludes that “the image of the whore [being] the most significant female image in the \textit{Passagen-Werk} remains a blind spot in the enlightening perception of a long line of male critics and flaneurs.” (Gleber 1999: 183)

The only twentieth-century sociologist who did not restrict the flâneur to a male stereotype was Siegfried Kracauer. He accepted the new notion of flânerie as being not only an artistic, detached mode of observation, but integrated the notions of consumerism, display (and thus “femininity”) into the concept of flânerie:

\begin{quote}
Without the more ‘masculine’ traits assigned by Benjamin, the flâneur as defined by Kracauer in \textit{Jacques Offenbach and the Paris of his Time} (1937) is a more open concept, and commodified observation a universal act, although still dictated by leisure.\ldots (\ldots) His emphasis remains on the feminine aspects of the concept. He notes
\end{quote}
that in the apolitical commercial spectacle of the 1860s boulevards the act of display, enhanced by fashion and cosmetics, led to the mingling of bourgeois city-dwellers and courtesans, often undistinguishable from each other and, inferentially, in conceptual terms all urban observers. (Parsons 2000:38)

One way of explaining the so-called absence of femme flâneurs/flâneuses in the writings of Benjamin, Hessel and Simmel, is to see this absence as a masculine way of self-defence. The male sociologists of the interbellum were nostalgic about the special status of the distanced, artist-flâneur that had been lost in the great (feminine) consumer spectacle. So, although they did not write about flâneuses, they “seemed to emphasize the role of the feminine throughout it.” (Parsons 2000:38)

2. The depiction of urban women by other European modernists

The ups and downs of female flânerie were not restricted to Berlin, but a widespread phenomenon in the European literature of the first decades of the twentieth century. The negative approach towards female flânerie from the male writers was echoed in women’s literary accounts of their struggle for their own space, their own walk and their own gaze. Some examples of these cases will follow in a paratactic style, in order to give strength to my argument without going too deep into all the separate lives and books.

Male avant-garde writers often depicted the urban spectacle in a dystopian mode, mostly linked to the female element in it. TS Eliot’s *Wasteland* (1922) is an example of this says Parsons:

The landscape of rubble, detritus and later bomb damage that informs the urban settings of so many of the women writers of my study, testifies to the pervasive iconography of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* on modernist representations of the city. *The Waste Land* is itself a pilgrimage by a disembodied, multiple urban persona, a textual journey through a ‘city of dreadful night’ that is made up of a conglomeracy of cities, peopled by cosmopolitans, Jews, wanderers, voyeurs, and ‘odd women’, littered with waste objects, lives, and memories. Women inhabit this city more prominently than men, however, and its refuse is notably often female. (...)The urban women in Eliot’s poem ultimately remain silent, their words being superficial, occluded because filtered through the all-seeing Tiresias. (Parsons 2000:185-6)

André Breton’s novel, *Nadja* (1927) is a French surrealist example of the fate of women in the city filled with debris: whereas the male protagonist firstly admires Nadja for her special gift of surrealist perception and tries to possess her, she finally retreats to a mental hospital,

59 I will use the name avant-garde as an overall-term for twentieth-century modernist movements such as Surrealism, Futurism, Dada-ism and Expressionism.
overpowered by her own “female” brain. In Breton’s depiction of the wastelands of Paris, Nadja herself becomes a refuse object:

He roams ‘searching for objects that can be found nowhere else: old-fashioned, broken, useless, almost incomprehensible, even perverse’ (*Nadja* 52), a collection of the otherwise unwanted in which Nadja becomes another object. Indeed, if the meta-texts of surrealism such as *Paysan de Paris* and *Nadja* revere the woman as erotic object, it is moreover because she personifies for their authors ‘the most dreamed-of of their objects’, Paris itself, and is therefore regarded as equally fragmented and collectable as the city itself. (Parsons 2000:175)

*Mrs Dalloway*60 (1925), an urban tale by Virginia Woolf, gives an account of the difficulties experienced by a white, bourgeois, and diplomat’s wife. Living in the elitist circles of high society, she feels trapped in a patriarchal city (London’s Big Ben, churches and towers), searching refuge in the tumultuous crowds and city streets. She feels sympathy for the shell-shocked veteran Septimus Warren, but whereas he utterly kills himself, Clarissa Dalloway finds a way of putting up with the patriarchal structures of society/the city.

In another novel by Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography*61 (1928), the issue of gender blurring and cross-dressing is used in order to express the difficulties posed to intellectual women: whereas the seventeenth-century Count Orlando was a wealthy diplomat, his/her possessions are taken away from him/her when (s)he wakes up as a woman hundred years later. The nineteenth century is depicted as a gloomy dark cloud hanging over London, symbolizing the Victorian values which made women into lifelong child-bearers. Another hundred years later, when Orlando wakes up as a woman in Woolf’s own era, times have changed but she still cannot completely live by her own standards. The fictional account of *Orlando* has the same underlying principles as Woolf’s prose-essay *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), in which she pleas for a private room and salary for every woman writer, since a woman cannot be intellectually active when nursing children all day or working in a factory. Deborah Parsons found the same motive in an earlier novel by Woolf, *Night&Day* (1919), whose protagonist Mary Datchet is “a thorough and poignant character of a woman seeking her own independence, and, through her character, Woolf investigates the possibility for the independent woman to enjoy both ‘books and stockings’, her shorthand for profession and home life.” (Parsons 2000:117)

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The impossibility of a satisfactory love-life and successful career makes Rose out of *The Years* (1937) turn to the city as an alternative for lost love, echoing the flâneur’s inability for investing a lot of energy in love affairs:

she attacks the dualistic forces that seem to define the modern woman’s options as either marriage or career, yet she cannot offer alternatives that seem satisfactory, only recording with sympathy the irony that Mary’s modern independence should result in the loss of her individual identity. (Parsons 2000:121)

In Woolf’s most flâneuristic piece of writing, the essay *Street Haunting* (1930), we nevertheless find a positive example of a woman’s experience in the city crowds:

She epitomizes the perspective of the woman amidst the crowd, empathizing to the point of identification with strangers glimpsed in passing in the city, becoming ‘an enormous eye’ that can ‘put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others. (Woolf in Parsons 2000:27)

Here, Woolf takes on a very Baudelairean mode of perception, her *jouissance de la foule* reminds us of Baudelaire’s essay *Parisian Prowler*, in which he describes a positive immersion of the poet in the crowd, rejecting the detached, autistic position sometimes ascribed to the flâneur:

One of the most ecstatic identifications the poet performs is the ‘saintly prostitution of the soul when it yields itself entire, in all its poetry and all its charity, to the epiphany of the unforeseen, the unknown passer-by.’(…) the active and productive poet, who, unlike the egoist who is locked inside himself’, identifies with the mass, making all of its traits his own. (Baudelaire in Parsons 2000:27)

Woolf was not the only female modernist author to write about her experiences in the city, but, since she is a strong figure in terms of feminism, urbanism, intellectualism and modernism, I think we could say that her difficulties as a wandering woman/artist/wife/writer are generally representative for many other female authors from different countries. The intellectual capacity for female flânerie has grown, now the only thing left is to convince the “conservative” male artists into respecting these women as flâneuses.
B. The return and demise of the male flâneur

1. Die Wiederkehr des Flâneurs

When Walter Benjamin announced in 1929 Die Wiederkehr des Flâneurs following Franz Hessel’s bundle essays Spazieren in Berlin, he identified his contemporary thinkers with the modern subject of the nineteenth century, the flâneur. Influenced by Georg Simmel’s writings on the subject (The Metropolis and Mental Life, 1903, Philosophische Kultur, 1911), and those by Siegfried Kracauer (Jacques Offenbach and the Paris of his Time, 1937), Walter Benjamin redefined Baudelaire’s observer-artist-stroller. His two essays, The Flâneur and On Some motifs in Baudelaire led to the study Baudelaire: a lyrical poet in the era of high capitalism (posthumously published in 1969). This was in its turn the impetus for his later opus, the Arcades Work. We find a different image of the concept of the flâneur in the two essays, explicable by means of the different authors that influenced Benjamin such as Georg Simmel and Siegfried Kracauer.

1.1. Simmel’s NervenLeben

Georg Simmel, the early twentieth-century sociologist, discussed the impact of the modern and industrialised city on the intellectual capacities of the individual. He did not condemn the changes brought about by the new technologies, but, like a flâneur, studied and “read” their impact off the surfaces of the city. In his treatise The Metropolis and Mental Life, he states that “the psychological foundation upon which the metropolitan individuality is erected, is the intensification of emotional life [Nervenleben] due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli.” (Simmel in Gleber 1999: 23) The intellectual urban individual (the flâneur) reacted to the quickly changing conditions and myriad of impressions with a defensive attitude, which Simmel called the blasé attitude. In this attitude, we find an emphasis on the flâneur as being an outsider, he has lost the more social side of Baudelaire, whose flâneur rejoiced in the crowds.

1.2. Kracauer’s Nichtigkeit

For Kracauer, the age of nineteenth-century flânerie is finished because of the Neue Sachlichkeit or the New Functionalism that dominated Weimar Berlin: “Hier kann man nicht
Instead of holding on to the old concept of flânerie, Kracauer rejects the narcissistic subjectivity of the Baudelairean flâneur, making existential boredom the paramount feature of his observer. The state of boredom is comparable to Simmel’s blasé attitude. In *Das Ornament der Masse* (1927) he calls this state a “kind of guarantee that one is, so to speak, still in control of one’s own existence.” (Kracauer in Gleber 1999: 45) This need for distance and control is a restriction of Baudelaire’s mixture of immersion and distance. Everything is described from a same state of neutrality instead of alternating between euphoric and dysphoric settings. According to Kracauer’s essays on Weimar biography (*Die Wartenden 1922, Kult der Zerstreuung 1926, Das Ornament der Masse 1927*),

the literature of flânerie emerged from an experience of individual and collective emptiness and alienation, from an experience of the negligibility (*Nichtigkeit*) of the individual. Along with the resignation brought about by World War 1, the confusion of German revolution, and the uncertainty over the first years of Weimar democracy, it also reflects the insecurity provoked by technical innovations and the revolution in visual modes, both of which helped to increase the number of freely accessible images in the public sphere and external world of the Weimar metropolis. (Kracauer in Gleber 1999: 43)

The different historical context makes Kracauer’s Weimar flâneur a more melancholic figure than the nineteenth-century leisured flâneur he described in *Jacques Offenbach and the Paris of his time*, who was a mixture of all urban observers.

**1.3. The naïveté of Franz Hessel**

To Franz Hessel, flânerie was an *Existenzweise*, a way of coping with daily life, because, “das Leben ist immer das Andre, das Draussen.” (Hessel in Scheub 2000:115) He led a humble life without much possessions or commodities; he was a non-consumer, an old-fashioned flâneur. Strong-willed and not easily convinced, he insisted on being an outsider. A child of Berlin and Paris, he wrote three urban novels, *Der Kramladen des Glücks* (1913), *Pariser Romanze* (1920), and a return to his childhood in *Heimliches Berlin* (1927), in which he rejoices in the urban sights with the before-mentioned “child’s first gaze.” These writings formed the basis for the collection of essays on wandering in Berlin, *Spazieren in Berlin* (1929). Hessel’s

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63 Biographical and bibliographical material taken from Scheub 2000: 115-6.

64 “I want to gain or find again …the first gaze upon the city in which I live.” (Hessel, Spazieren in Berlin in Gleber 1999: 69) His insistence on the relations among history, home, and childhood directs his gaze most often toward phenomena that seem obsolete and anachronistic about to be discarded by modernity, a forgotten part of those fascinations that used to attract his “first gaze” in the city dweller’s childhood. (Gleber 1999:70)
writing style has changed along the way from a poetic and dreamy diary into a more journalistic account of urban life. The central theoretical exposé, *On the difficult art of taking a walk*, investigates the difficulties for the Weimar flâneur to remain poetical in a time of crisis.

An aura of indifference and complacence bestowed divine qualities on Hessel, exemplified in Charlotte Wolff’s first impression of him: “Hessel sah aus wie ein Buda”. (Wolff in Scheub 2000: 116) This balanced contentment can be compared with the child’s enthusiasm: “The tumble of children(...) is in our walking and in the blissful floating feeling which we call ‘balance’.” (Hessel in Gleber 1999: 78) Hessel distinguishes his flânerie from the intoxicated high that Baudelaire and Benjamin described.

Hessel’s flâneur is an apolitical figure, resisting the speed of the 1920s, with a special eye for the city as a source of pleasure and as a mnemotechnic device: “the real city stroller is like a reader who reads a book simply to pass the time and for pleasure.”(Hessel in Gleber 1999: 66) The institutions of Weimar Germany are transformed through his fairy-tale gaze (*Märchenblick*): he sees the Parliament Building as a “huge animal lying growling”, politics are to him “just another spectacle.” (Gleber 1999:189) His deliberate abstinence from theory and criticism aligned “his sociological efforts with a naïveté that borders on an involuntary cynicism whose only recommendation is that in these ‘serious times’ we should all simply take a walk.” (Gleber 1999: 80) Unlike Baudelaire’s vehement political stances, the Weimar flâneur Hessel always kept a distance towards the (political) spectacle. He got criticized by his contemporaries for his negligence towards the rise of fascism in the thirties: Kurt Tucholsky asked him in a 1932 review “Is not our aimless impartiality, which twelve years ago was still a privilege and license, today guilt and emptiness? Yes, Franz Hessel- that is what it is. Guilt and emptiness.” (Tucholsky in Gleber 1999: 82) In 1938, when Hessel became an exile in France, the Fascist German government had taken control over the streets, resulting in the “death” or impossibility of his apolitical Weimar flâneur.

### 1.4. From The Man of the Crowd to The Man at the Window: the transformation of Benjamin’s flâneur

The transition from Benjamin’s first Baudelaire-essay (*The Flâneur*) to the second one (*On some motifs in Baudelaire*) is marked by a different approach of the concept of the flâneur: whereas the first essay was inspired by the more fluid, imaginative flâneur of Baudelaire, Kracauer and Hessel, the second essay is influenced by the sociological and psychological interpretations of the flâneur by Georg Simmel, who called himself a “sociological flâneur” (Parsons 2000: 31). Simmel described in psychological terms the process of the aesthetic soul
being bombarded with urban impulses. According to him, it was necessary for the urban individual to keep a distance from the spectacle, in other words, Simmel focuses on the blasé attitude of the flâneur. The flâneur’s swings of detachment and complete immersion became more and more stable, immobile.

Benjamin already indicated in *The Flâneur* that this figure did not have a fixed identity, remarking that “the habitat of the flâneur was being destroyed just as he was becoming a recognizable social type, making the flâneur by definition someone who is out of place”. (Benjamin in Parsons 2000:19) Benjamin’s writings on the city are chronicles of bewildering modernity, in which the flâneur does not feel at ease. After the loss of his habitat, the arcades, it seems as if Benjamin makes a desperate attempt to give the flâneur his urban authoritative vision back. This results into a detached and overlooking position above the city streets (on a rooftop of a bus, a balcony from a Haussmann apartment, a living room). He retreats mentally and physically, nostalgic about the authority of the past, about the eighteenth-century spectatorship (incarnated in the magazine *The Spectator*, see Parsons 2000:35). The “man of the crowd” finally withdraws into the private interior, becoming a “man at the window”. Later, Benjamin recedes from his former ideas in *Charles Baudelaire: A lyrical poet in the era of high capitalism*, saying that “the man of the crowd is no flâneur.” (Benjamin in Parsons 2000: 34) The new image is that of the scopically-authoritative character who goes “botanizing on the asphalt”. (Benjamin in Parsons 2000:32) Deborah Parsons explains the need for Simmel and Benjamin, together with the avant-garde artists of the twentieth century, to retain the male authoritative mode of being and seeing:

> It seems to me that this is the ultimate end of the flâneur, originally both observer and controller of the urban spectacle, as this becomes more and more diversified and fragmentary he withdraws from it, able to assign it coherence only from a panoramic, or detached and totalizing, vantage point and subjectivity. Like the flâneur, although rejecting conventional art-forms and conventional society, the avant-garde also depended on it and remained in accordance with its male-individual-public bias. (Parsons 2000:35)
2. Male-individual-public bias?

If we restrict the theory about flânerie to the writings of the above-named theorists, it is easy to follow Janet Wolff and Griselda Pollock’s statements about the absence of female artists/observers in nineteenth-century public life. It is mainly the male bias of the twentieth-century modernists that has strengthened the female/male dichotomy of the nineteenth century in our conceptions of the era. Whereas the actual circumstances in Weimar Germany were changing for the good of women, the male sociologists and writers of the time were nostalgic for “something that was lost”, trying to re-establish the male authoritative figure of the flâneur.

In order to have a more inclusive view on the gender relations in the public sphere, we have to turn to women’s accounts of the time. It is not because these (intellectual) women are lesser known to us that they did not exist: Charlotte Wolff, a contemporary of Weimar and contemporary society, criticizes on Walter Benjamin in her biography *Hindsight*, because he neutralised the masses, giving no voice to the women he saw on the street:

> Who were we and all those other young women of the twenties who seemed to know so well what we wanted? We had no need to be helped to freedom from male domination. We were free, nearly forty years before the Woman’s Liberation Movement started in America. We never thought of being second-class citizens. (Charlotte Wolff in Gleber 1999:179)

I will try to discuss the leading female characters of the period, be they intellectual, hedonistic, artistic or political women. By turning their lives into a work of art, they were perceived as Lebensträgerinnen rather than serious artists like their spleen-filled male contemporaries. They were not fond of the flâneur’s detachment: Dorothy Richardson’s protagonist (out of Book Seven, *Revolving Lights*, from the thirteen-volume bundle *Pilgrimage*) claims “that the fate of the flâneur, protecting himself by choosing to live outside the happenings, always to forget and escape (...) was certainly wrong.” (Richardson in Parsons 2000:80) The same point of view is to be found in Anaïs Nin’s 1934-37 Diary, *Fire*, to whom the stasis of the twentieth-century flâneur is equal to death\(^{65}\):

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\(^{65}\) The placelessness and boredom of the flâneur was a general phenomenon: the Parisian flâneur, too, became awkward in his spectatorial position. D.H. Lawrence lets Constance Chatterley say about Parisian flâneurs in the 1920s: In Paris at any rate she felt a bit of sensuality still. But what a weary, tired, worn-out sensuality. Worn-out for lack of tenderness. Oh! Paris was sad. (...) Ah, these manly he-men, these flâneurs, the oglers, these eaters of good dinners! How weary they were! weary, worn-out for lack of a little tenderness, given and taken.

The moving rhythms of the city are rather the life-blood in the arteries of its streets, and the detached and still observer is a figure of death in trying to impose static order onto its flow. (…) It is not living too fast and abandoning oneself that carries one towards death, but not moving. (Anaïs Nin in Parsons 2000:168)

The mobility of these women is sometimes conceived of as fickleness, so we should try to find a mobile but “reliable” flâneuse. Djuna Barnes, an American expatriate in interwar Paris, fused “male” detachment and “female” fluidity in her novel Nightwood (1937). The protagonist explains why she escapes (= male detachment) social, sexual or familial relations by living in the dream (= female fluidity): “Awareness hurts. Relationships hurt. Life hurts. But to float, to drift, to live in the dream does not hurt.” (Barnes in Parsons 2000: 171)

The following paragraphs will show us if there were any more women in Weimar Berlin who could trespass old normative labels of gender identity.

C. Weimar Women

1. The Briefträgerin always rings twice.

Women’s liberation in the educational sphere started in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century: secondary schools (Gymnasialkurse) became accessible to girls under the pressure of the women’s rights activist Helene Lange, and in 1908 the colleges of higher education followed, ending with the universities after the First World War in 1919. In the same year, women also got voting rights and thus increased their political and intellectual potential. It is obvious that, although the First World War had catastrophic consequences for humanity in general, it was a positive phase for the emancipation of the women who stayed behind and got the chance to walk the streets and take part in professional life. Women took the places of their husbands whilst these were in the army, and often kept this place after the war (if the husband had died, or, simply, out of financial necessity):

In den strassen Berlins sahen Hannah Höch und Claire Waldorff während und unmittelbar nach dem Krieg plötzlich Schaffnerinnen, Mühlfährrerinnen, Briefträgerinnen, Schalterbeamtinnen, Droschkenkutscherinnen. Als Ersatz für die eingezogenen Soldaten arbeiteten Frauen nun in alle branchen, die bis dahin den Männern vorbehalten waren. In der Industrie sassen sie täglich zehn Stunden und länger and den Werkbanken, in den büros und Schreibstuben hämmerten sie in die Maschinen. (Scheub 2000:16)
Not only did these women become part of the street and industrial life, they also made their way into the offices of Berlin, as secretaries or civil servants. They were self-confident and fashionable, a great source of inspiration to the writers of the time:

\[ \text{die ‘Tippmamsells’, ‘Bürofräuleins’, und ‘Ladenmädchen’, Rauchend, Beine übereinander schlagend, mal selbstbewusst, mal einfach nur , niedlich’, geisterten sie als Mythos durch die Feuilletons und Fortsetzungsromane meist männlicher Schreiber. (Scheub 2000: 16)} \]

Unfortunately, their work conditions were not equal to those of men, and they got paid “ein Zehntel bis ein Viertel weniger als ihre männlichen Kollegen, nicht selten lag ihr Gehalt sogar unter dem Existenzminimum.“ (Scheub 2000: 18) The labour was not always self-willed but often obligatory, which gives this so-called emancipation a bitter aftertaste.

The fiery enthusiasm of the early Weimar women was easily forgotten by the next generation of girl students: in 1929, Gabriele Tergit read a student pamphlet saying “Wozu noch Frauenbewegung? Wozu noch diese Sonderorganisation von Frauen?“ and complained that „Nach uns ist eine generation gekommen, die alles vergessen hat, Das ist ärg.“ (Tergit in Scheub 2000: 26) She and her friends from the Jadicke group all became mothers at an early age (just like Marlène Dietrich) and together, they had six sons. They had chosen to marry (or not) out of free will, and chosen the number of children: something their mothers could not have dreamed of. The forgetfulness of the next generation, who stopped fighting for equal rights and claimed a wage for mothers to raise their child, led (according to Tergit and Dietrich) to the rise of the national socialistic party in the thirties. The NSDAP was firmly renounced by Dietrich, who lived as an expatriate in the USA, ashamed of the politics of her heimat.

2. **A new way of dressing for a new way of living.**

2.1. **À la garçonne**

Berlin was a site for female emancipation in the Weimar period, both in an intellectual and fashionable way. Women conquered the male sites of the literary and academic world, whilst also liberating themselves from the Wilhelminian, breath-taking corset (symbolising the German Kaiserreich) by adopting the *garçonne look*. The name reveals its features: women confirmed their newly gained independence by assuming an androgynous, boyish (“garcon”) pose. Ute Scheub describes the typical features, of which the trousers were the most revolutionary:

Schön die Sprichworter verraten es: Wer 'die Hosen anhat' hat das Sagen, wer 'die Hosen runterlassen muss', wird gedemütigt. Weibliches Hosentragen wurde zum Symbol für die Aneignung männlicher Vorrechte. Eine Frau in Hose beansprucht einen Teil der Männermacht, ein mann im Rock erlebt eine Degradierung. Schauspielerinnen waren die Ersten, die in Hosen auftraten (...) (Scheub: 2000: 144)

The fist actress wearing “Hosen” was Asta Nielsen in a silent movie of 1912, Jugend und Tollheit. Later, in the 1920s-1930s, Elisabeth Bergner, Louise Brooks, Greta Garbo, Marlène Dietrich, Anita Berber and Claire Waldorff followed her example. Dietrich, who preferred wearing trousers in private as well, was accosted by the police in Paris for walking (!) along the Seine wearing a men’s suit and thus, trousers. Her “crime” goes back on the idea that it used to be illegal or punishable for a woman to wear trousers/dress like a man. Many centuries after Jeanne d’Arc, and one century after George Sand (1804-1876) and the actress Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923), Dietrich still suffered penalties against “cross-dressing” women. Like George Sand, she fought society’s principles wearing a suit and smoking a cigar. Androgynous women (just like butch lesbians) are interesting figures in the search for artistic, intellectual female artist-flâneuses because they experiment with male/female positions in society. This confirms the line of thinking that I started earlier on in the first chapter with the two authors called George.

2.2. Fashion as a philosophy

The revolutionary masculine character of the women’s garçonne clothes went hand in hand with a more masculinized psyche: the garçonne became an icon of what was called the Neue Sachlichkeit, a new matter-of-factness. A journalist of the time, Walter Kiaulehn, described women’s clear rational vision combined with sarcasm in his book Berlin, Schicksal einer Weltstadt: “Die neue Berlinerin hatte klare Augen, und ihrer äuberlichen Sachlichkeit stand die kleine beigabe von Sarkasmus gut.” (Kiaulehn in Scheub 2000: 19) The statement of the garçonne look did not just concern style, it became a way of being in the world or seeing the world, a Weltanschauung: “Die neue Kleiderordnung war mehr als Mode, sie war fast schon Weltanschauung, auf jeden Fall Bekennniss, eine ‘ Neue Frau’ zu sein.“ (Scheub 2000: 21)

Fashion-journalist Helen Hessel (wife of Franz) explained the novelties in terms of the women’s liberation: not only did women wear manly clothes; they also dared to shorten their skirts and show some of their newly found joyfulness to the world, in the form of their bare legs:
Although Helen Hessel was very successful with her feuilletons and fashion articles (Adorno read her pieces “stets mit groben Interesse”, Scheub 2000: 53), to her, feminine fashionability was the unsatisfactory longing for an unreachable ideal: “Mode sei die Anerkennung der weiblichen Koketterie und die ‘Sehnsucht nach der Völkommheit’.” (Hessel in Scheub 2000: 53) This phrase is important since female fashion-ability has always been regarded as inferior to the male spleen of the artist. Hessel’s statement shows the deeper-lying, existential motive (an unsatisfiable urge for aesthetic perfection) underlying the feminine tendency towards shopping and occupation with lifestyle. When we see fashion as a never-ending and never-satisfying process of self-invention, Leopardi’s statement that “Fashion is the mother of Death” (Leopardi in Steiner 1989:48) seems wrong, it is rather a Birth-giving Mother. The reason why Helen Hessel’s literature did not survive the times (unlike the literature of her two lovers, Franz Hessel and Pierre-Henri Roché) might be her passionate and “attached” (in stead of detached) way of living: “Aber Helen Hessel war zu beschäftigt mit ihrem wilden Leben, für Literatur blieb keine Zeit.” (Scheub 2000: 54) In an imaginary conversation, Gabriele Tergit explains to Ute Scheub:

Aber wer hat literärisch überlebt? Ihre beiden Männer, nicht sie. Das lag nicht nur an der bösen Männerwelt, das lag auch an der Hessel selbst. Sie war, wie wir alle und noch mehr als wir, verrückt nach Leben, nach allen Extremen. ... Und ich weiss auch gar nicht genau, ob wir darüber traurig sein müssen,. Sie hat intensiver gelebt als die meisten anderen ihrer Zeitgenossen. Und länger. (Scheub 2000: 183)

Indeed, whereas Dietrich (91) and Nelken (88) did not do badly at growing old in a worthy manner, Helen Hessel died at age 96, leaving the world journals of a long and marvellous life instead of literature classics. She was an artist in her own right, a Lebenskünstlerin.

**Figure 5: Helen Hessel photographed by Marianna Breslauer, 1929.**

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66 Steiner, George, *Real Presences: is there anything in what we say?,* London, Faber and Faber, 1989.
67 Picture out of Scheub 2000: 52.
2.3. Lesben und Schwulen: Berlin as a meeting point for European homosexual people.

Since we know that gender-blurring types such as the butch lesbian, the garçonne and the effeminate dandy were important figures for social/sexual change, it is useful to investigate the homosexuality debate in the Weimar era.

Hirschfeld’s “Eldorado der Homosexuellen”

Berlin had been open to the idea of homosexuality for a long time, thanks to Karl Heinrich Ulrich’s nineteenth-century studies on homosexuality, and his first prom for the Third Sex (or Urnings/Urningins) in 1868. This reputation lasted and became “en vogue” again after the First World War:

Berlin in der zwanziger Jahren galt als toleranteste Stadt Europas, als das Eldorado der Homosexuellen.“Sie kamen von überall auf der Welt dorthin,“erinnerte sich die Wolff, „besonders aber aus England, um hier eine Freiheit zu geniessen, die ihnen in ihren Heimatländern verwehrt wurde.’ (Scheub 2000:133)

Magnus Hirschfeld, who had founded the Wissenschaftlich-humanitäre Komitee (the first self-help group for homosexual people) in 1897, broke through some walls in 1919 with his Institut für Sexualwissenschaft. Homosexuality now had its own scientific institution, library and museum. The status of Berlin as the “Eldorado” of gay people is today still embodied by the world-famous Love Parade in Berlin.

One of the most popular same-sex spots in Berlin was the Kurfürstendamm, also the commercial epicentre of Berlin, where people paraded and cross-dressed to their own liking. It was not the only area though:

Am Kurfürstendamm prominierten Männer in Frauenkleidung, Frauen als Männer und Mädchen mith hohen Stiefeln und Peitschen...Die Gegend rund um dem Nollendorfplatz und bis zum Kurfürstendamm war damals jedoch keineswegs das einzige Zentrum homosexueller Subkultur. Die einschlägigen Lokalitäten, schon 1922 neunzig bis hundert an der Zahl, waren auch in der Vergnügungsmeile Friedrichstrasse vom Halleschen bis zum Oranjeenburger Tor zu finden, im Scheunenviertel in Mitte oder südlich vom Spittelmarkt. (Scheub 2000:139)

Marlène Dietrich, who sang a lesbian duet on the Kurfürstendamm (Wenn die Beste Freundin mit der besten Freundin, June 1928), and has been said by many to have been bisexual, dismisses her assumed lesbianism in her autobiographies. About her status as being androgynous, she says “Androgyn! Ich verstand nicht.“ (Dietrich in Scheub 2000:80)
Marlène Dietrich’s “nicht verstehen“ of androgyny stood in opposition to the “verstehen“ of another showgirl, the dancer Anita Berber: “Geschlechtslos sah sie sich selber, obschon sie doch ’alle Geschlechter‘ in sich habe.“ (Scheub 2000: 80) This ideal of having “no sex”, or incarnating both sexes, is expressed in the film *Eldorado* (1926), in which most of the so-called actresses are actually dressed-up men whilst the women in it embodied the ideals of the garçonne.

The concept of the garçonne was used in many different forms: it was not only the name for a new way of dress, but became an icon for the (lesbian) woman of the interbellum. *Garçonne* was the title of Victor Marguerite’s post-war novel, and became later the name of a lesbian magazine, before called *Frauenliebe*.

The conservative discourse of the time described the cross-dressing men and women in a biological-scientific manner. Androgynous women or *Männin* were said to have a physical and psychical manliness, they were led by a will to power:

„Unter Männin, wird eine Frau verstanden mit sehr starkem männlichen Einschlag, sei es in körperlicher, sei es in seelischer Beziehung, oder auch in beiden Beziehungen

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68 Picture out of Scheub 2000:75.
Nevertheless, athletic women were no longer seen in a negative way (as manly or unfeminine) and the cult of sports/the outside life reigned over the twenties. Helen Hessel was admired by many for her healthy and muscular physical appearance and composure. Helen Hessel's and Marlène Dietrich’s bisexuality was apparent in their combination of feminine and masculine bodily traits:

Helen Hessel war den Andeutungen ihres Mannes zufolge bisexuell, sie liebte es, bisweilen als Mann aufzutreten, und hatte laut ihrer Freundin ’die muskulöse Figur eines jungen Mannes.’ (Scheub 2000: 131)

Dieses Phlegma, diese schlafgräte Raubtierzage, diese eisgekühlte Unfassbarkeit faszinierte ihn nur ihn. Marlene Dietrich war Soldatendisziplin und Liebeswahnsinn, Kälte und Hitze, Unerreichbarkeit und Verschmelzung. Sie war das denkbar schönste Ziel für alle Wünsche und alle Ängste vor diesen Wünschen, für alle wilhelminische Ambivalenz und Doppelmoral. (Scheub 2000:84)


Marlène Dietrich was probably the most influential icon of the time. Franz Hessel wrote a phantasmatic study, Marlène Dietrich (1931), in which he mixes his own Berlin childhood with hers, creating an evocative rather than realistic biography of this new idol of the cinema. He, too, admires her because of her childlike (innocent) qualities as well as her erotic attractiveness. He calls her a “Zauberpuppe”. (Gleber 1999:111)

Charlotte Wolff, the first lesbian and public Weimar flâneur

Charlotte Wolff, a lesser known but no less important figure of Weimar Berlin, was one of the first women to come out for her lesbianism in public. She was the first female scientist to investigate bisexual and lesbian love in an empirical manner. Her most famous writing about the subject was the study Love Between Women (1971), Bisexuality: A Study (1977). She and

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70 Helen Hessel was bisexual according to her man, or better, her two men, Franz Hessel and his best friend Henri-Pierre Rohé. She went to Paris with Henri-Pierre Rohé after her marriage with Hessel came to a crisis, but she never really let go of him. Helen was not the only bisexual person out of the three of them: the history of two friends who share a lover has been eternalised in Henri-Pierre Rohé’s novel Jules et Jim, later adapted for the screen by the famous French director of the ‘nouvelle vague’, François Truffaut. Franz Hessel’s Pariser Romanze is the literary pendant of this relationship, it is a long prose letter to his friend. According to Scheub (2000: 117) the relationship between the two men also showed signs of homosexual love, communicated between the two men through the body of a woman. The lack of a woman’s name in Jules et Jim, and the intimate revelations in Hessel’s Pariser Romanze are an indication of this to Scheub.
Claire Waldorff, who lived together with her lover Olly von Roeder, were the most famous Weimar lesbians. Life was not always easy for lesbians and homosexuals in Berlin: although there was an open spirit within the bohemian circles, this does not mean that the general public accepted homosexuality. The perception of lesbian women hung together with notions of authenticity, but also with notions of deviation. Often, the Weimar lesbian financially ensured her domestic love-life with a woman by being a prostitute on the street:


Strolling the streets as an intellectual *femme flaneur*, Wolff had been a student in and of Berlin, forced to emigrate to Paris because of her Jewish origins. Later, she went on to practice medicine and psychoanalysis\(^1\) in London. Even though she is not often remembered as a Weimar intellectual and theorist in her own right, Wolff was a prominent participant in the circles of Berlin writers, artists, and thinkers of her time. In the footsteps of Franz Hessel, she presents a distinct point of view on the secret dimensions of female flanerie\(^2\). Writings range from early poetic expressions to pioneering feminist studies in analytical theory, bisexuality and hand reading, to late autobiographical writings that commemorate the course of a (lesbian) woman’s life in the twentieth century. She was also the biographer of the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeldt.

Wolff’s early texts were examples of pure, detached flânerie\(^3\), but, amazingly enough, these texts have been omitted from her work. This shows how little interest there was for the experiences of a truly intellectual Weimar femme flâneur\(^4\).

\(^{71}\) Ute Scheub mentions Wolff’s early and exceptional psychological qualities, making her into a neurotic and depressed but highly intelligent child: “Charlotte Wolff war ein schwieriges Kind: hoch begabt, mit einer aubergewöhnlichen psychologischen Intuition ausgestattet, labil, empfindlich, zu Ängsten und Depressionen neigend.” (Scheub 2000: 131)

\(^{72}\) The information concerning Wolff’s biography and her position as a writer comes out of: Gleber 1999: 206-213.

\(^{73}\) Anke Gleber describes the effacing process of Wolff’s passages of flânerie: We can be alarmed that the flaneuristic passages are omitted from the German translation of her text. This process appears to be more symptomatic than accidental. Wolff’s experience of the city, the gaze through the eyes of a female flaneur, is considered to be of so little interest to a reading public that this gaze and experience have been erased almost entirely, and without comment, from the original version of this text. If these passages of female flanerie are regarded as nothing but redundant detours in her narrative, their erasure not only effaces them from her text but also from an important literary tradition. (Gleber 1999: 210)

\(^{74}\) I do not use the word *flâneuse* here because Wolff’s position was more intellectual and detached (more ‘masculine’/flâneur-like) than that of the other women of her time, whom I call *Weimar flâneuses.*
After four-five decades, these impediments have been washed away by the second gulf of feminism, and in 1974 Charlotte Wolff returned to Berlin as an old woman, invited by a Berlin-based lesbian group, L74. Anke Gleber describes her attempt to re-capture her old life:

One of the first flaneurs, she is also one of the last to continue her ongoing ambulatory sensitivity. (…) Her memoirs, entitled Hindsight, document a form of retrospective flânerie in which Wolff revisits her former haunts in the city that she used to know as Weimar Berlin. She returns with the perspective of a familiar tourist to the then divided city, literally assuming what Hessel describes as the “first gaze” of flanerie. (…) Her autobiography represents a hidden history of the female flaneur, an investigation of lost possibilities as well as an attempt to regain this gaze, at least retrospectively, by revisiting the imaginary city of her previous experience. (Gleber 1999: 209)

In Hindsight, Wolff describes her new experience of flânerie, forty years after the heydays of her life as a Weimar femme flâneur. She concludes with a positive note on the rediscovery of her old habitat. She is again passionate about the city, still aware of her old “haunts”:

This time I had found new ground under my feet… I had been impressed by Berlin’s new splendours, and seen some of my old haunts. I had explored town and people with a zest that I had not thought myself capable of a year or two ago… Berlin had again become a place on my emotional map.” (Wolff in Gleber 1999: 213)

According to Gleber, Charlotte Wolff can only now (or rather, in 1974) rediscover Berlin in a flâneuristic mode. She can finally enter the city as a territory that is open to women, a place that is no longer alienating her.

As this “tentative exploration of Berlin” (Hindsight, 281) presents the final destination of her biography, this female visitor from a bygone time of flanerie is again driven to register the multiple perspectives of urban spaces, the changing but nevertheless familiar places which she perceives with a renewed “first gaze”. (…) The entire text of her female flanerie stands as an answer to her rhetorical question: “Why was I drawn to wander along these streets?” (Gleber 1999: 212)

Wolff was a Weimar femme flâneur, but the artistic establishment or publishing companies did not accept this image and erased it from her writings. The difference with her later...
writings is not just her new attitude towards flânerie, but the different attitude of the reading public, which is now more appreciative of female flânerie. It is clear that the voices and visions of the Weimar women artists were present but not represented: many writings remained utopian articulations of independence rather than acknowledged freedoms. In this respect, Weimar flâneuses were true teenagers/adolescents.

Nevertheless, the writings of these women were symptoms of female flânerie gradually finding its place. Thus, when we consider Charlotte Wolff’s writings (and those of her contemporary female friends) as an integral part of Weimar literature, we could now, after almost a century, situate women’s flânerie experiences in the topography of public space.

2.4. Verrückt nach Leben.

The fashionable and decadent Weimar lifestyle was both healthy and degenerative: whereas Marlène Dietrich—who turned 91—was an example of the nature-cult (going outside, cycling, swimming, walking), the cabaret-dancers and salon-girls often led their lives as creatures of the underground, in places like “Charleston-Bars, Kokainholen, bei Theaterpremieren und Literatur-Matineen.” (Scheub 2000:21) The early death (at the age of 29, in 1928) of a contemporary of Dietrich, the promising dancer Anita Berber, was a symptom of this decay. Berber expressed her innate longing for death (the death cult as opposed to Dietrich’s life cult) through her repertoire with titles as Tänze des Lasters, des Grauens und der Ekstase, Kokain, Der Gehenkte und die Lasterhafte, and Märtyrer. (Scheub 2000:89) The lifestyles of the two women were completely opposite:

Dietrich hingegen galt als die Venus der Neuen Sachlichkeit als die vollkommene Symbiose von Unschuld und Laster, von Mutter und Liebesgöttin. Doch trotz ihres rufes als Vamp blieb Marlène Dietrich ein braves preußisches Mädchen mit eiserner Disziplin, das nie über die Stränge schlug. (Scheub 2000:71)


Berber’s shows were very popular because the people from Berlin recognised their own post-war-traumas of hunger, misery and sexual starvation in her ecstatic and dark renderings:

“Millionen von unterernährten, korrumpierten, verzweifelt geilen, wütend vergnügungssüchtigen Männern und Frauen torkeln und taumel, dahin im jazz-Delirium. Der Tanz wird zur Manie, zur idée fixe, zum Kult,...Man tanzt Hunger und Hysterie, Angst und Gier, Panik und Entsetzen”, schrieb Klaus Mann. „Anita Berber das Gesicht zur grellen Maske erstarrt unter dem schaurigen gelock der purpurnen Coiffure-tanzt den Koitus.“(...)“Berlin-dein Tänzer ist der Tod.” (Scheub 2000:23)
Weimar Berlin was not only a splendid “Eldorado” for artists and homosexuals, its atmosphere was also one of disillusionment (after the First World War) and frustration, which led in the thirties to the rise of fascism. From the ruins of the First World War arose new freedoms but also many anxieties, because “Freiheit macht Angst.” (Scheub 2000: 25) The immobility of the Weimar flâneur can be seen in this light as a nostalgic way of holding on to the past, resisting the modernity of the twentieth century. The confusion of Weimar society was at its height in 1922-23, when the Deutsche Mark’s inflation set the country in motion. The “Entfesselung” (Scheub 2000:24) of the money was expressed in the decay (or Entfesselung) of the women’s bodies in their dances of death.

The Weimar period was thus characterized by giddy dances as well as dark ballets. A typical child of her time, the writer Dinah Nelken blended both the positive and negative qualities of the Weimar mentality in her personality:


The Weimar showgirls, actresses, dancers and writers had a very specific position in society: many of them were honoured (Dietrich was called the “Unerreichbare”, Helen Hessel had many admirers) but they also suffered psychological pains in fighting their way through life. Unlike their detached male pendants (Hessel and Benjamin), they were very passionate about the bohemian lifestyle, giving themselves over to all the excesses and novelties of the time. Scheub expresses her point of view through the (imaginary) voice of Gabriele Tergit, she declares that their narcissism (a “typical illness of the Weimar women”) was the reason for not being serious enough to be canonised: “Und dieser in sich selbst verknotete Narzissmus, das ist eine typisch weibliche Krankheit. Vor allem eine Krankheit der um Jahrhundertwende geborenen Frauen.” (Scheub 2000:182) Although Ute Scheub writes her book like a eulogy on the lives of lesser-known Weimar women-artists, with this (fictive) phrase she gives in again to the age-old idea of women being “sick” with narcissism, of women being obsessed with fashion rather than philosophy. Apart from her account of the difficulties that women experienced in professional life, Ute Scheub does not consider why these women artists have not gotten the respect they deserve. Instead, she indicates that being madly in love with life,

75 This cliché is well expressed by Brentano, who sees window shopping as extended narcissism:
“Beautiful women…like to reflect themselves in display windows which are as entertaining as the magazines are.” (Brentano in Gleber 1999: 142)
being *Verrückt nach Leben*, is the main reason why Weimar women’s writings have become lesser known than their male contemporaries’.

There might be some truth in this idea, but it could be pronounced differently: Weimar women writers might have been *verrückt nach Leben*, but they were, as such, artists in all the fields of their lives. They were not ill or frivolous but gladly enjoyed the newly gained freedoms, reflecting on their own position in the city by writing short stories, columns, feuilletons, poems and novels. The women of the Café Jadicke group were, according to me, *flâneuses*: they combined a certain consumerism and dandyesque aestheticism (garçonne look) with poetic reflection and artistic observation, but they did not distance themselves from the world like the man at the window.

3. **Irmgard Keun: two literary accounts of female flâneuristic self-discovery in the Weimar Republic**

3.1. *Gilgi, eine von uns.*

An example of a respected woman writer of Berlin in the 1930s is Irmgard Keun. Her two novels *Gilgi, eine von uns* (1931) and *Das Kunstseidene Mädchen* (1932) were both bestsellers, until her work became black-listed (category “anti-German tendencies”) in 1933, because Keun refused to pledge an oath of loyalty to the Nazi’s. Nevertheless, she enriched Weimar literature with two books that focus on female urban perception and consciousness.

Her female protagonist Gilgi was not at all a political figure, but by choosing not to take a political stance she was considered as anti-German. Her passionate lust for life resulted in a gamut of different attitudes towards it:

Keun presents a disrespectful, unorthodox protagonist who proves to be provocative on all sides of the political spectrum. She is considered a politically irresponsible outsider and a modernist renegade who works against socialist and feminist causes as well as against conservative politics and ideologies. A female anti-hero for Weimar Germany, Gilgi strays from the prevailing assumptions of femininity and the place of women, and thereby defies society’s prescribed positions. (Gleber 1999:192)

The irony of the title is clear: Gilgi is not “one of us” in the German-Wilhelminian tradition, she belongs to no one, but she is “one of us” in the sense that she embodies the New Woman of Weimar society. She does not only defy traditional marriage roles, but by her complete indifference also shows no respect for the twenties feminist causes: she is so apolitical that her position becomes political, like the “neutrality” of Hessel.
Unlike the Baudelairean or Weimar flâneur, this woman is completely immersed in the city life, but she does not daydream. The imagination is left to the male writers and Gilgi becomes an icon of the cool and rational *Neue Sachlichkeit*:

The new woman becomes a cultural protagonist who manages a sachlich matter-of-factness that is generally only associated with modern men. Gilgi’s declared credo is, in her own words, that the modern woman needs “an ice-cold Sachlichkeit”. One needs a strong touch of street-boyishness as self-protection. (Gleber 1999: 192)

Gilgi has become “sachlich” out of necessity: the economical and emotional restrictions of her life make it impossible for Gilgi to assume a leisured flâneur’s pose. The real flâneur in the novel is Martin, the man:

Still, even in Gilgi, the real flaneur characteristics remain with the male protagonist, Martin Bruck, an adventurous street-roamer with typical characteristics of the flaneur. Although Gilgi is nonetheless adventurous, she finds more economical and emotional detours on her path than Martin. (Gleber 1999: 196)

Gilgi does not develop a capacity for flânerie. She cannot stroll aimlessly because she is conditioned by economic purposes: “really, that’s boring to me, to walk around so aimlessly, I very much like to walk long distances on foot but I have to go somewhere”. (Keun in Gleber 1999: 196) Gilgi’s rational self-dependence, which has freed her from society’s conventional roles, impedes her from being a day-dreaming stroller. Eventually, Gilgi withdraws from the streets of Berlin because it is “so hard outside, you see.” (Keun in Gleber 1999: 208) Anke Gleber sees Gilgi’s struggle as a general problem for twentieth-century female flânerie:

That a female writer formulates this inaccessibility to flanerie also recalls the tenuous status of female flanerie in Weimar Germany, the continuing obstacles that her project faces throughout the twentieth century despite the declared fascination and demonstrated affinities that so many women had with this disposition. (Gleber 1999: 196-7)

The evolution towards the female flânerie of Keun’s second book (*Das Kunstseidene Mädchen*) is prefigured in the feminine sensibilities of Martin Bruck. He watches women with children, looks at the colours of laundry lines and family scenes (not at any debris or scraps) and so becomes a transitional figure for Keun to practise the female perception mode through

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76 We have to remember the luxurious position of flânerie in Weimar Berlin. Because of the economic crises, only few people were able to stroll leisurely: in the 1930s the possibility for flânerie was not just a gender question but even more so, an economic one. Unemployment was very high and “blinded” people for aesthetic pleasures. Anke Gleber quotes *Gilgi*, pointing towards the difficulties experienced by most German people:

“It seems as if in this country, idleness cannot be a pleasure but rather turns into anguish.” This inability to linger, to dwell in the streets, and to observe the public sphere from a detached position, is linked- on a collective as well as individual level- to an inability to see that will soon assume catastrophic dimensions in the Nazi state. ([Keun in:] Gleber 1999: 194-5)
a man’s eyes. The “female” mode of seeing is not restricted to family-scenes only, it also implies a new, modern, filmic way of seeing: whereas the critical Weimar flâneur recedes from the cinematic spectacle of the streets, the flâneuse is fascinated by the new overflow of signs and images. She has been born in the same cradle as photography and cinema:

Keun immerses Gilgi in the life of the street and describes her intense fascination with fashion and appearances in the public sphere, a fascination that is intensified further by her dedicated ‘reading’ of images and journals. As the contemporary Kino-Debatte suggests, the practice of such visual readings leads to a new kind of literacy (an ability to interpret pictorial illustrations, for example), produces a new means of approaching reality, and anticipates an extended notion of the text that precedes filmic seeing. (Gleber 1999:201)

3.2. Doris, das Kunstseidene Mädchen.

After the adolescent, rebellious Gilgi, Keun presents us with a more mature figure in Das Kunstseidene Mädchen. The axes of fashion and femininity play an important role in this breakthrough of literary female flânerie; we can consider Doris a worthy flâneuse. Doris, a fashionable girl, is described as being a very frêle, silky, artificial beauty. This is not because she is fragile or passive, but because of her intense predilection for colours, fabrics and shades in the city, which are mirrored in Keun’s language. In her in-between position of being a spectator and an object of the gaze, Doris stylizes herself as a visual object: she has the power over the gaze that is directed towards her. She is a true flâneuse: she has an aesthetic perception of the world around her and creates and stylizes her own persona, not afraid of consumerism and passion. She does not assume a blasé attitude towards the multitudinous new perceptions she encounters: “the velocity that her novel’s persona undergoes relativizes, as it multiplies, the impact of impressions on her perceptual apparatus, with technologies, maximizing the effects of light, the effectivity of speed of its movement.”(Gleber 1999: 203)

She enjoys the city in its most recent manifestations, in which she differs from her contemporary male flâneurs. Modern technologies (matters and materials, light and design) such as the cinema (Lichtspiele) make her glow, literally, with ambition: “I want to become such a luster [Glanz]. I will become a luster and whatever I do then is right. [I will] simply be drunk.”(Keun in Gleber 1999:196) She is thus not just “sachlich” like Gilgi, but inherits the “childlike drunkenness” of the flâneur, combining matter-of-factness with a surreal vision:

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77 Within the very pace of her language, Keun reveals herself to be an eminent flaneur at the edge of surrealist perception, a drinker of images whose intoxication is translated into her syntax and into a cinematic style that is legible throughout her narration. Her unique often parodistic introduction of a feminine almost breathless style of notation, along with its increased preference for the nuances of fabrics and shades, matters and materials, light and design, diversify the attention that motivates this female flaneur’s desire to record the public sphere in its most recent manifestations, anchoring her visual perception within the perspective of a modern working-class woman. (Gleber 1999: 198)
there is a subway that is like a coffin on rails—below the earth and musty, and one is being crushed. I ride in it. It is very interesting and goes fast. There are also autobuses—very high—like observation towers that hasten. I also ride in them sometimes. At home, there were also many streets, but it was as if they were related to each other. Here are even many more streets and so many that they do not know each other. It is a fabulous city. (Keun in Gleber 1999: 198)

This experience of public transport is firstly depicted in a dysphoric mode (coffin, musty, crushed), but Doris conquers her anxiety: she rides in it. She is fascinated with the phenomenon (“interesting”). The anonymity of the streets mirrors the crowds that populate them. Doris loves this metropolitan feeling: to her, the city scene is “fabulous”. She even feels physical excitement (“anxiety in my knees”) at the sight of Berlin’s most crowded places. Like a true flâneuse, she combines indifference (“I don’t care”) and passion (“love”):

“I love Berlin with an anxiety in my knees and do not know what to do tomorrow but I don’t care— I sit at café Jostsy’s on the Postdamer’s Platz….I have always walked on Leipziger Platz and Potsdamer.” (Keun in Gleber 1999: 199)

Doris’ life offers a range of perspectives on female flânerie, incorporating three possible flânerie-related figures: Doris starts as a prostitute, becomes a bourgeois leisured woman and ends as a bag-lady. That way, she touches on the different textures of Weimar society:

Doris’s hunger for experience takes on a ‘material’, real form, acute and oppressive. Her predilection for flânerie has led the woman walker from prostitution to privilege to poverty, to marginal spaces of observation that not only grant her the critical edge of an outsider’s perspective but also lead to some of the more lucid insights into Weimar society. The female flâneur comes to experience her own version of the state of waiting that Kracauer ascribes to “Die Wartenden”, society’s homeless intellectuals. (Gleber 1999: 205)

In the course of her life in the streets, the “artificial silk-girl” observes a variety of realities, matters and fabrics, weaving together views of the city that range from the oblique vantage point of a petit-bourgeois house-wife to the more exposed angles of a homeless woman who faces a host of adverse elements without any kind of social or existential shelter. (Gleber 1999: 206)

From these literary accounts and Wolff’s biography, we can deduce that femme flâneurs/flâneuses did exist in Weimar society, but that economical, social, sexual and cultural structures impeded their development and appreciation with the wider public. Nevertheless, the few testimonies we have left, show us images of strong-willed, intellectual, passionate and rational young women.
4. Photography and film in Weimar Berlin

4.1. The (im)mobilized gaze

The gaze can only be as mobile as its possessor, so when the flâneur retreated to his window in the 1930s, his gaze also became more immobile. It is, in Foucault’s terms, the gaze of the panopticon (Foucault 1989: 270-313), in which the guard has a complete overview of the prisoners/ workers/patients. Likewise, the flâneur watched the people in the street from above, and no one was able to see him. Benjamin’s Weimar flâneur, prefiguring the existential philosophies of Sartre78, already felt the necessity to apply scopophilia from the “safe” side (at the window): he put himself in a position where the gaze could not be returned, where the “I” could not become objectified.

4.2. Towards a new visual mobility: photography and film.

In 1936, Benjamin wrote, in the midst of his unfinished Arcades Work, his most inclusive piece on film and photography, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction79. He stated that works of art had lost their “aura” through the possibility of mechanical reproduction, something that already alarmed nineteenth-century thinkers like Baudelaire and the English art-critic Rushkin (whose primary enthusiasm for photography turned into doubts):

Photography was no longer a handmaiden to art, but part of the mechanical poison that nineteenth century poured out. Although both painting and photography could be reproduced, there remained a fundamental distinction. The engraving and the print referred back to the original painting; the reproduction was a distinct process, sanctified, as Walter Benjamin notes, by the fact that around it hung the ‘aura’ of the original. With the camera, however, the very mechanisms involved in taking a picture imply reproduction. (Featherstone 1991:72)

Benjamin was aware of the “absence of presence” in a mechanically reproduced work of art: the original presence of the work of art in time and space, the aura, was lost through the new technologies of mechanical reproduction. Benjamin did not hate film and photography like Baudelaire did, but pointed towards the new possibilities of time and space configurations that

78Sartre, Jean-Paul, L’Etre et le Néant. Essai d’ontologie phénoménologique, (1943) Paris, Gallimard, 1976. The existential, Sartrian theories from the 1950s were quite similar to the nineteenth-century relations between the (male) voyeur/ (female) object. To Sartre, being was never only the narcissistic ‘being for oneself’, but inevitably also ‘being for someone else’. (Sartre 1943: 296-351) In the gaze of the other, the ‘I’ appears as an ‘Object-Other’, threatening ‘the I’ with the possibility of self-loss. The phrase ‘I am being watched in a watched world’ (Sartre: 1943: 315) was a horrible condition to Sartre. Sartre’s does incorporate nineteenth-century flâneur’s features in The Age of Reason and Nausea, but chooses to be the observer, not the observed.

these technologies offered. Rather than mourning about the loss of the aura/originality, he saw the film as an inevitable rupture with the nineteenth-century idea of history. As such, Benjamin’s flâneur, in the wake of the film industry, is left with a reassuring project to “calmly and adventurously go travelling”:

> Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go travelling. (Benjamin 1999: 78)

### 4.3. The Weimar Kino-Debatte: Cinema or the “redemption of physical reality”

The cinematic eye of the camera can be seen as the extension of the mobile eye of the flâneur, whose moving body in the city became, in the Weimar period, more like an eye observing it. The flâneur’s mode of seeing and collecting images can be compared with the montage that a director applies to moving images: “If the flâneur pursues what is akin to a cinematic gaze, he is at once a spectator, a camera, with his mind as a medium of recording, and a director who writes and edits images in a text of what he has seen.” (Gleber 1999:188)

Anke Gleber discusses Yvette Biro’s book *Profane Mythologies*, in which Biro compares flânerie with cinematic perception, as a “philosophy of modernity, in its projected redemption of the physical sphere”, and “the camera of this kind of cinema photographs what is not worth noting.” (Biro in Gleber 1999: 168) Both flânerie and cinema are a kind of visual and sensory arts, they present experiences from another point of view. The flâneur’s reading and recording of the city is materialised in filmic images that adhere to Baudelaire’s definition of modernity, being one part ephemeral and one part material:

> The process that imprints both filmic and written texts with images therefore names an impulse to record, and a desire to “make lasting what is ephemeral, to preserve in material form what passes on in time.” (…)This process of “metonymic writing” links the structures of walking and writing to those of seeing and recording, giving way to a succession of images in the cinematic chain of a text. (Gleber 1999:167)

Anke Gleber compares the flâneur’s (flâneuse’s) “hunger for experience” with that of the cinematic eye, which records images to come to “the redemption of visual reality”:

> In the absence of a meaningful integration with reality, the pursuit of experience for its own sake increasingly defines the flaneur’s effort to overcome this melancholic crisis of meaning. (…) Working to alleviate the alienation of its times, the scopophilia that informs both flânerie and film serves to satiate an underlying ‘hunger for experience’ with the inebriation of the image. (Gleber 1999:164)

Following this point of view, the phenomenon of Weimar cinema is an effort to overcome the melancholy experienced by the flâneur. The powerful position for scopophilia changes from
the flâneur in the street to the spectator in the movie-theatre. Dziga Vertov, a famous Russian experimental director, released in 1929 *Man with a Movie Camera*, based on aesthetics of flânerie as well as film-making. For Vertov, the camera (kino-eye) had the supremacy over the human eye, which had become immobilized:

> I am kino-eye. I am a builder. (...) In bringing together shots of walls and details, I’ve managed to arrange them in an order that is pleasing. (...) I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world only as I can see it. Now and forever, I free myself from human immobility, I am in constant motion, I draw near, then away from objects. (Dziga Vertov, *Man With a Movie Camera*, in Gleber 1999: 156)

The popularity of the cinema is not only linked to the negative, melancholic stance of the interwar flâneur: cinema was not just an attempt to fix images of modernity on the screen, but it created a new (positive) culture of the image, giving the “roaring twenties” their glamour and squalor. This way, the flâneuse’s adolescence adhered very closely to the development of the cinematic, mobile eye, which was, like her, hungry for experiences.

The new visual culture was met with melancholy and euphoria, resulting in the 1920s cultural debate about the positive and negative consequences of cinema, the *Kino-Debatte*. Similar to Baudelaire’s negative attitude towards photography, the poet Alfred Döblin did not consider cinema as an art-form, and in his 1909 essay *Das Theater der kleinen Leute*, he called it a merely entertaining medium (“panem et circenses”), not to be taken seriously. Still, the cinema’s influence on the masses has changed the outlook of society since the 1920s:

> While writers bemoaned the ‘loss of identity’ brought about by the giddy commercial rush of urban culture, the victims were busy discovering new identities. The popular press, advertising, cheap literature, song sheets, music hall, ‘cinema’ and the gramophone with sights, sounds and experiences unknown to the village and the crowded squalor of industrial backstreets and slums, offered a purchase on this new culture. (Chambers 1986: 36)\(^80\)

In his *Theory of Film: the Redemption of Physical Reality*\(^81\) (1960), Kracauer conceived of cinema as the redemption of visual/physical reality, which has, just like the flâneur’s montage of city images, dream-like characteristics. Still, the cinematic perception of the flâneur functions as a replacement for dreams, but is not similar to it. Like we said before, the difference with the flâneur’s perception and that of someone dreaming is the active consciousness that directs the flâneur’s montage in opposition to the unconscious reception of images in a dream:

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\(^81\) Anke Gleber (1999: 153) states that Kracauer reinscribed the history of flânerie into his history of cinema, calling flânerie the “redemption of visual reality”.

According to Kracauer’s theory of film, this way of seeing—a way of seeing to which flanerie belongs—consists in a passionate effort to redeem the infinite phenomena of reality, to preserve their presence permanently within the act of perception. What flanerie projects into the mind as a film of reality is nothing less than what Hofmannsthal has called a “replacement for dreams”. In accordance with the speed of his own pace and reception, the spectator casts a gaze towards these images that is free to observe and reflect the visual “life essence” of modernity. (Gleber 1999:165)

The gaze of the flâneur, seen as “a mobilized and virtual visuality” (Friedberg 1993: 13), adheres to the mobility of the “Blick des Flâneurs” which Benjamin described in his Passagenwerk. Benjamin’s flâneur, inadvertently male, projects his cinematic gaze onto the streets/screens of Weimar Berlin, but this does not mean that there cannot be found an alternative female gaze or glance at the same time. It is necessary to differentiate between positive images of women and images that represent a woman’s own perception, because even an appraising look is subordinating its object:

“Being looked at, I become the object of the other who casts his judgment at me with his glance. Every woman knows this situation, which Sartre describes as an ontological one: the domination through the appraising gaze that degrades into an object the one looked at, and subordinates her.” (Gertrud Koch in Gleber 1999: 184)

Apart from the representation of women on the screen, the phenomenon of movie-going (thoroughly discussed in Friedberg’s Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern) was in itself a new site for female spectatorship:

As a social and textual construct for a mobilized visuality, flânerie can be historically situated as an urban phenomenon linked to, in gradual but direct ways, the new aesthetic of reception found in “moviegoing”. (…) This use of the historical model of the flâneur will also draw attention to the gendering of power and visuality in the configurations of modernity. It is here that we can find the origins of the flâneuse, the female counterpart to the male subject in modernity. (Friedberg 1993: 3)

Friedberg addresses Mulvey’s problem of the male-gendered cinematic gaze, but offers a different view on the concept of flânerie, film and spectatorship through her interrogation of psychological and physical interrelations:

While the “male gaze”—aligned with voyeurism and fetishism—was an early staple of feminist film theory, the gendering of the gaze remains an historical problematic. By questioning the historical paradigms of the panoptic gaze, I wish to reclaim the gaze as a different form of visuality and to continue to interrogate the psychic and physiological relation between body and psyche. (Friedberg 1993: 13)
4.4. Women’s ways of seeing

The freedom for women to go to the movie theatre was not acquired easily. Gleber explains why the privilege of being a “spectatrix” was firstly a threat to the male monopoly of scopophilic positions:

In the cinema’s enclosed and privileged realms- spaces devoted to the activity of looking- female scopophilia finds one of its first hideaways. Consequently, women are initially prohibited from going to the cinema, especially when, as Koch points out, they “go alone”. (Gleber 1999:187)

One could argue that, even if women were allowed to go to the cinema, they were still passive consumers or victims in the sense that they were forced to look at the screen through the eyes of a man (see Mulvey), but, nevertheless, the female conquest of entrance into the cinema and its combination of public/private space were important developments towards female spectatorship/ flânerie:

The sites of female flanerie have been inscribed into the filmic medium from its earliest times. In its exploration of the images of physical reality, cinema focuses on the prevailing constructions of power and the gaze. In doing so, it opens unclaimed territory by enabling an institutionalized act of perception in which even a woman is free to participate. The spectatrix in the movie theater is therefore a kind of prototype of the female flaneur, a moving spectator in the streets. Early cinema can be seen as one of the first public places in which this new freedom of the gaze was available to, and exercised, by, women who had long been excluded from scopic pleasure. (Gleber 1999: 186)

Yvette Biro, too, saw the importance of the status of women in the public sphere through their presence in scopophilic spaces like the cinema. Logically, the flâneuse’s curiosity and “hunger for experience” were even greater than the flâneur's (who withdrew behind the window), since the flâneuse had almost not been able to see or read the city by herself. This way, the “Verrückt nach Leben”-mentality of the Weimar women also figured in their discovery of the cinema.

4.5. Berlin, Die Sinfonie der Grosstadt

Walter Ruttman’s film Berlin. Die Sinfonie der Grosstadt82, or Berlin, The Symphony of the City, out of 1927, is an important point of reference for the discussion of female positions in Weimar society. Although it is not a predominantly positive account of women’s positions (it eventually confirms the pattern of the woman as a passive image and the man as the active bearer of the look), it opens up new perspectives for female urban characters. The possibility

82 Berlin. Die Sinfonie der Grosstadt, Walter Ruttmann (courtesy of J. Dudley Andrew), Fox Studios, 1927.
of a flâneuse on the screen could destabilize the dominance of the male gaze and counter it with another gaze. The revolutionary fact that some women in The Symphony of the City returned the male gaze or had their own gaze, was not welcomed with applause:

In strolling, this femme flaneur fixes her gaze on the other pedestrians, and takes in the spectacle of the street through the frame of a shop window. Despite this woman’s singular courage, however, the prevailing scopic dynamics remain fanned out against the female pedestrian in the street, as the critical reception of this figure and her ‘provocative behaviour’ has shown. (Gleber 1999: 184)

The contested participation of women in The Symphony of the City coincides with the popular arrival of the cinema in the 1920s, a time when women entered a world of images that ad long been denied to them in the streets. With their new gaze at the world on the screens, they found themselves in the city, in the public sphere of Weimar Germany.(…) Via the form of flanerie that it presents its spectators, the cinema transmitted images of exterior reality to women, allowing them to begin to relate to the world as unimpeded, invisible, and respectable flaneurs in their own right.(Gleber 1999:187)

Berlin, The Symphony of the City, dating from the time of the Weimar Kino-Debatte, shows us a wide range of young women in Berlin: the omnipresent camera follows “one as she is being picked up, another as she waits impatiently at a corner, and yet another as she window shops on elegant Kurfürstendamm.” (Sabine Hake in Gleber 1999:180) The women depicted are almost flâneuses, but they remain restricted by stereotypical presentations of consumerism, employment and prostitution:

Their walking down the street opens a space for the female flaneur, develops the improbable and unheimliche presence of a woman in the street as a more complex spectacle and presence than conventions would have us expect. (…) the previously limited roles of women in the streets, circumscribed en route to department stores and workplaces, for purposes of shopping and working only, are juxtaposed and directly related to an interpretation that collapses a variety of filmic figures into that of the prostitute, a mere commodity. (Gleber 1999: 183)

The opening scene of the film establishes the city as a modern metropolis (with transport images, train tracks and telephone poles), flying over architectural shots and then singling out the first “human” figures, a group of women models behind a window. Each mannequin is frozen in a static pose, exhibiting its attire, a single slip that barely covers its puppet body.(…) a frontal view of the mannequins’ plastic surfaces on which we see, inscribed in mirrored reflections on the women’s motionless bodies, the store signs that signal ownership. (Gleber 1999: 181)

In a later scene, we find an evolution of the puppets’ stasis, in the form of a fashion show. On the catwalk, a surrogate for the street, we see “real” women walking, but it is not a self-
instigated walk, they are living dolls in the claws of the male fashion industry. Fashion is here again linked with death through the montage of a suicide scene followed by a fashion show:

(…) women circulate within the confines of their modelled and modelling walk, a form of movement that sells women’s bodies and images. This fashion scene is preceded by the film’s most desperate act, a woman’s suicidal jump from a bridge, which takes place at precisely the same location as the previous exhibition scene with its foreshadowing watershot. (…) The film pursues an implicit logic from the first scenes with women as models, instruments, and coat hangers of capitalism, images on display as well as commodities for sale, to the crucial cluster of the streets where a leisurely strolling woman is perceived as nothing but a marketable image that presumably substitutes for her body and persona. (Gleber 1999: 181-2)

It is clear that, even in the presumably emancipatory age of Weimar Germany, the adolescent flâneuse still had “to justify, assume and establish her stance of flanerie.” (Gleber 1999:181) The critical reception of the images of women walking the streets shows us that, although women got more intellectual and political power in the 1920s, the mechanisms of consumer society still objectified their images. Because of society’s resistance towards an independent, active woman-as-bearer-of-the-look, the difficulties of the Weimar years were not easily overcome. The positive and negative developments in the public arena (such as the WW1 trauma, women’s voting rights, the economic crisis of the 1920s and the rise of fascism in the thirties) caused a lot of ups and downs in these two decades. Most ironically, the drama of the Second World War offered women the most possibilities in the professional sphere. In the absence of men, German women got the chance to be truly independent, a skill that helped them after the war to rebuild Berlin with female labour power. These women have become known as Trümmerfrauen or Rubble Women.

D. The women of the Left Bank: French garçonnnes during the Weimar period.

1.  

1.1.  Paris was a woman83:

Whereas the Weimar flâneuses fought their way to independence in the city of Berlin, their “sisters” in Paris were also respected in the artistic and literary communities of the Left Bank. The famous Women of the Left Bank (for an exhaustive account of the women’s lives and writings, see Shari Benstock’s Women of the Left Bank: Paris 1900-1940) were mainly

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83 This paragraph was inspired by the documentary Paris Was a Woman, Greta Schiller, Zeitgeist, 1995.
American expatriates like Gertrude Stein, Sylvia Beach, Janet Flanner, Djuna Barnes and Nathalie Barney. Together with remarkable figures like Joséphine Baker, Pablo Picasso, James Hemingway, Jean Rhys and James Joyce, they were an influential group of expatriate artists in Paris. French figures in the same circles were, amongst others, Paul Valéry, André Gide, Apollinaire, Colette and Adrienne Monnier. All of them wrote experimental pieces, reading and evaluating each other’s works in weekly literary salons.

The main protagonist, Gertrude Stein, lived together with her lesbian lover Alice B. Toklas. Her experiments with repetitive phrases have brought about famous quotes like “a rose is a rose is a rose” (from Sacred Emily, 1913) and “there is no there there” (Stein in Schiller 1995). Well-known novels by Stein are The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (1933) and Everybody's Autobiography (1937). Alice, the slim and small femme lesbian, was Gertude’s life-long partner, and their legendary love for each other still lives on in lesbian history. The expatriate artists’ community called themselves “the lost generation”, expressing their status as immigrants in a foreign city, “who have only a visual language in common, that of the city around them.” (Parsons 2000: 123) Their universal success made cosmopolitanism and expatriatism into fashionable issues within the dominant literary culture.

The word “lost” is too negative a label, according to Janet Flanner (who rented a full-time bedroom in the luxurious Ritz Hotel). Whereas American male writers often moved back to the US after the economic possibilities of France had dwindled, the American women remained in Paris, escaping their marriage or old life (like Djuna Barnes). The Sapphic community ensured a closed realm for the female artists, who lived golden lives:

Gertrude called us ‘la génération perdue’ but we weren’t that lost, we knew where we were heading, straight to France. We were all voluntary exiles. Wine and food was so cheap that we lived grandly on nothing. A marvellous excitement reigned over the city, a city so full of literature, that every stone in it seemed to have its own literary style. It was that kind of lifestyle that attracted people like Picasso to Paris, the capital of art. (Janet Flanner, Lettres de Paris, in: Schiller: 1995)

84 Because Alice B. Toklas stands historically in the shadow of the imposant Stein, a New York-based lesbian group, The Lesbian Avengers, unveiled on Valentine’s Day 1993 a paper maché statue of Alice B. Toklas standing by the municipal statue of Gertrude Stein in Bryant Park, as a reminder of forgotten femmes and lesbian romance. (Munt 1998: 108)

85 Picasso was befriended with the Steins since the family was one of his first buyers. He was an urban artist, who lived life following fixed rules, no flâneuristic detours were allowed. In that sense, Picasso also symbolizes the retreat of the male flâneur, being locked up in set schemes and autistic patterns:

He had small, extraordinary black bull’s eyes, and from his being spoke a whole concentration of body and mind. He always carried with him a bottle of water, and had this taurean, quick look in his eyes. For an artist who is now seen as the most modern and unpredictable, he was the most normally reliable character. He always had dinner at the same restaurant, Lipps, always went to his own house at half eleven, and never changed routes. For a modernist, you would have expected him at least to change his route once. (Jannet Flanner in Schiller 1995)
The cross-fertilization between France and America was materially present in the bookstore of the French Adrienne Monnier (*La Maison des Amis des Livres*, 1915) in the Rue de l’Odéon, soon (1921) accompanied by an American/English bookstore-library across the street, Sylvia Beach’s *The Shakespeare Company*. Monnier helped Beach to get contacts and they both became influential figures for the careers of modernists like Breton, Valéry, Gide, Apollinaire and Joyce. Unfortunately, when Joyce’s first publishings became successful, he moved to a bigger publishing company, leaving his first mescenae bankrupt.

As intellectual young (lesbian) women, Monnier and Beach were not the most accessible figures for the big public, but the growth and popularity of their bookstores gave way to more chances for female writers to be published. Also, their democratic way of borrowing books for a sixth of the selling price became a principle for libraries like we know them now. That way, Monnier and Beach gave women (whose budget was often restricted to groceries) the chance to keep reading in a period of economic crisis.

The merits of the *Women of the Left Bank* have not been publicly appreciated until recently (mainly through Shari Benstock’s study out of 1986): in their own time they only enjoyed respect in their enclosed circles. For example, one of the most talented writers, Colette, was not allowed into the Académie Française, even after receiving a sign of honour, the “Légion d’honneur”. In reaction to this, Colette, together with Nathalie Barney, founded the “Académie des Femmes”, as an alternative to the patriarchal institute of the academy. Colette became a world-famous figure, as a writer, a lover and an icon of androgyny. Blurring her own gender identity by dressing in a masculine way, she also was not scared to be busied with typically “female” activities. After financial debts, she opened a beauty salon in 1925 for “women at that certain age”. Provocatively, she juxtaposed her two careers, a writer and a beauty salon manager, in her inscription: « Êtes-vous pour, ou contre le “second metier” de l’écrivain ? »
The unfortunate thing about the *Women of the Left Bank*, is that they enjoyed intellectual and sexual freedom (eluding their marital and maternal obligations) through the respect they got from male modernist writers, but they were not successful in breaking through the establishment’s walls (Académie Française) and prejudices. Also, their privileged status of financially independent, intellectual, white American women shows that there was a long way to go for any possible flâneuse who did not fit in as much.

1.2. *The Left Bank from a different angle: Jean Rhys’s “Good Morning Midnight”*

Deborah Parsons criticizes Shari Benstock’s study for pretending to give a realistic account of women artists in Paris. Parsons blames Benstock for restricting her study to white, wealthy women. She has indeed pointed towards the significance of the forgotten women of the Left Bank, but those were not the only women writers or artists Paris in the 1920s:

the ‘female modernism’ she reconstructs is thus one of aesthetic and sexual experimentation within a mutually supportive group drawn together in the interior space of the salon. Rarely questioning the dynamics of place, her study thus seems to fix women into asserting urban independence and the rootlessness of exile, but from within the limits of certain social places in a confined part of the city. (Parsons 2000:149)

Parsons mentions Jean Rhys, whose book *Good Morning Midnight* (1939) reveals Paris’ lesser known sites of female flânerie:

She may not portray the ‘Latin Quarter’ of the expatriate community- the social hubs of the Dôme and the boulevard Saint Germain- but instead she retreats into the Paris that exists on the margins of this society, its back streets and dilapidating small hotels. (Parsons 2000:139)
Jean Rhys, born in the Carribean island Dominica (from a Creole mother and a Welsh-born father), had studied in Cambridge and moved later to Paris. Although herself a white woman, she felt very sympathetic to the Negro community. She did not feel related to the American expatriate community, herself being a hybrid mixture of ethnicities:

Jean Rhys is not like the Nathalie Barney set of expatriates who chose to live somewhere else, expatriate form where? Separated from the coteries surrounding male writers and artists, and also the Nathalie Barney set, Rhys lived in the impoverished thirteenth arrondissement. There she saw the city in itself and not as a blank environment for the self-imposition of expatriate writers, and she complained that ‘the Paris all these people write about, Henry Miller, even Hemingway etc. was not “Paris” at all- it was “America in Paris”, or “England in Paris”. The real Paris has nothing to do with that lot.’ (Jean Rhys, letter to Diana Antwill, 1964, out of Jean Rhys: Letters 1931-1966 in Parsons 2000:134-5)

Her own The Left Bank and Other Stories (1927), with an introduction by her temporary lover Ford Maddox Ford, gives an account of the difficulties posed to women in post-war Paris. She describes the more marginal spaces of Paris, neglected by the Left Bank Women. The result of her protagonists’ struggles for a position in public life is not as positive as in Virginia Woolf’s and Dorothy Richardson’s novels, where the main difficulties are mostly resolved at the end:

Despite the increased independence and public visibility of women that was gained in the first decades of the twentieth century, the end of the war brought with it a backlash against female emancipation.(...)Indeed, women in public were again associated with the fallen woman. Woolf and Richardson wrote positive post-war novels trying to assert their independence in the form of a positive Bildungsroman, while the urban-based novels of Jean Rhys cut through such metaphorical flirtation with penetrative cynicism as to the realities of women’s actual position in the economic and consumer world of the city. (Parsons 2000:125)

2. Gendering the city: Mater or Pater Paris?

2.1. The City and the Female Autograph

Alex Hughes investigates in his article, The City and the Female Autograph86, the gender-specific structures of the city as being “maternal” or “patriarchal”. Recently, these dichotomies have been criticized for being artificial constructs rather than socio-spatial realities, but we find that these metaphors were very important for women writers in the Paris of the interwar period. They describe Paris in terms of public/private, intellectual/commercial,

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paternal/maternal and rigid/fluid. Although these dichotomies have been progressively weakened after the 1960s, Elisabeth Wilson today still argues that

It would be possible to say that the male and female 'principles' war with each other at the very heart of city life. The city is 'masculine' in its triumphal scale, its towers and vistas and arid industrial regions; it is 'feminine' in its enclosing embrace, in its indeterminacy and labrynthine uncentredness. We might even go so far as to claim that urban life is actually based on this perpetual struggle between rigid, routinised order and pleasurable anarchy, the male-female dichotomy. (Wilson 1991: 7)

This view denies the emancipatory role the city has played throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, by way of giving women jobs, access to the carnivalesque sites of public life, to the consumer market and more sexual freedom. Hughes is right to say that “in the end, urban life, however fraught with difficulty, has emancipated women more than rural life or urban domesticity.” (Hughes 1996:132) He gives an account of two French female authors’ process of self-discovery with the gendered city of Paris as an important structuring element.

2.2. Simone de Beauvoir: Pater Paris

Probably the best-known feminist of all times, Simone de Beauvoir experienced Paris’ intellectual Left Bank as a patriarchal bastion into which she could not enter as a female academic. Adverse to her mother Françoise’s domestic lifestyle, little Simone admired her father (a lawyer) and decided to “de-feminise” herself in order to participate fully in public life, with its institutions like the Sorbonne and the Law Court. Her education in the bourgeois milieu evolved around male figures, mainly her cousin Jacques and her father Georges. Their lives took place within the cultural (galleries and museums), bohemian (bars, cafés and theatres) and academic (the lycées, the Sorbonne) realms of Paris. The teenager Simone, trying to insert herself in the public world of boys/men, had to recognize her sexual “handicap” of being a woman. Revelling in the mystery of the masculine, academic life, from which she is excluded, she echoes Woolf’s fascination out of A Room of One’s Own:

I tried to imagine the mystery that was being celebrated behind those walls, in a classroom full of boys, and I (felt) like an outcast. They had as teachers brilliantly clever men who imparted knowledge to them with all its pristine glory intact. …and I felt I was imprisoned in a cage (de Beauvoir in Hughes 1996:121-2)

Simone acknowledges here the difficulties she had in trying to assert a detached position. Identifying with the flâneur, she has to admit that her (woman’s) life does not have any space for lingering and strolling. In Book Three of her Memoirs, she sighs:

I, too, would have liked to try that ‘hazardous and useless’ existence whose attractions Jacques and the younger novelists were praising all the time. But how could I introduce the unexpected into my life? (de Beauvoir in Hughes 1996:120)
De Beauvoir’s “prison”, her female sexuality, exiled her from the Promised Land of Paris. This drove her, after the first failed encounters with the masculine sphere, back into the arms of the natural, maternal countryside:

I no longer held sway over the world: the façades of buildings and the indifferent glances of the passers-by exiled me from life. That is why about this time my love of the countryside took an almost mystical fervour. (de Beauvoir in Hughes 1995: 121)

She rejected the indifferent Parisian crowd, looking for more warmth in the mystical love for the natural sphere. Still, this temporary love has to make place for a re-assertion of her fascination with Paris:

Eventually, however, the magnetic power of the male/cultural) urban environment reasserts itself, and Simone is driven back to it. In books three and four of the memoirs, we find her rushing off to cinemas and galleries, hurling herself into café culture, ranging across the streets and boulevards in a city that appears revivifying in her immensity. (Hughes 1995: 121)

In *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949), she will say that literature has always driven women back to the countryside, associating them with pastoral sceneries and maternal feelings rather than with the seriousness of the male urban artist. De Beauvoir, after her return to the city, rejected the all-female ENS-study program at Sèvres, outside of Paris, and made her way through the masculine trajectory of the Bibliothèque Nationale, the Sorbonne, her own school, and gets a full student status in the Ecole Normale Supérieure of the Rue d’Ulm, a privilege which was denied to women of her generation until 1927. This way, she broke the circle of maternal domesticity and cut herself off from the mother/daughter symbiosis. The break with her past is the basis for the road to singularity, which is not straightforward: “to untangle the strands of a double self, a continuous multiple being… stretched across generations.”(de Beauvoir in Hughes 1996: 122).

She not only assured her status as an academic, but also penetrated into the margins, the obscure spheres of Parisian nightlife. Her visits to bars and clubs also symbolised her detachment from her mother: “Never would my mother have set her feet in such places.”(de Beauvoir in: Hughes 1996: 122) Her noctambulations became a secret between her and her cousin Jacques, they were the basis for a boyish companionship between Simone and her cousin. Her access to the male spheres gave her the impression of being “one of the boys”, taken up in the fraternity. Simone strongly privileged the masculine way of life, ignoring her own specific identity as an intellectual *woman*. Her *Memoirs* are an intellectual peripateia of a woman in a patriarchal system. Yet, she could not deny her female consciousness, which was
always presented with a paternal, rejecting force. This sobered her in her self-assured trajectory. Her “retour au feminine” was caused by three events of phallic intrusion:

relatively early on, it is hinted at when she visits the Salle Pleyel and a bookshop near Saint-Sulpice: symbols of Paris’s status as androcentric cultural fief. Here, she must submit to the (quintessentially) female, humiliating experience of being sexually harassed.(…) A similar ‘reinsertion’ into femininity transpires when, having inaugurated her student existence with a (phallic?) ascent of the stairs of the Bibliothèque Saint-Geneviève, she finds that she is to sit in the section reserved for the ladies. (Hughes 1996: 124)

Another defeat on Simone’s side was her discussion with Sartre (Book Four), the symbol of the Parisian male intellectual, in which she had to conclude that her moral system is worthless:

Sartre’s demolition of Simone’s system- a demolition that takes place in a particularly privileged locus of the Parisian cultural/academic map- may be interpreted, arguably, as the ultimate instance of the punishment Paris inflicts on Simone, and on the inappropriately gendered intervention she has been drawn to effect within the male city space. (Hughes 1996: 125)

De Beauvoir’s trajec through Paris can also be seen as an adolescent’s struggle to be respected for his/her own qualities, cutting off ties with the mother or father, in order to find oneself. Although this account gives a gloomy impression, de Beauvoir made it very far as a respected, intellectual, wandering and writing woman.

2.3. Le Duc: Mater Paris

Violette Le Duc, who moved to Paris in 1926, finished her education in the city, having two love affairs: a pseudo-marriage (with her lesbian lover Hermine) and an official one (with Gabriel Mercier, a man she met shortly after her arrival in Paris, and with whom she enjoyed a relationship of considerable complexity). Violette went through the same alienation process as de Beauvoir: frequenting all the famous Parisian bars and galleries, she felt excluded from this milieu but also attracted by its sphere of male companionship. Still, her perception of the city was feminised in a stereotypical way; Paris looked to her as an ornamented bride:

Paris rustles in her récit as if it were clad in taffeta (…), or fluffy with ostrich feathers (…). Perfumed with Mitsouko (…), its streets are a ‘forest of shapely calves’. (Violette Leduc, La Bâtarde in: Hughes 1996:126)

Whereas Violette, the protagonist, was firstly unfeminine, both her mother and Hermine the lesbian lover imposed upon her a highly feminised gender identity. Her life took place on the other side of Beauvoir’s Paris, on the Right Bank. Leduc’s Paris was the highly effeminate fashionable Paris of the “Rive Droite”. It was not the Paris of the Mind, but of the Body,
where fashion designers ruled the consumers in a market-governed lifestyle. A place where “humans are duped and drugged into a spurious consumerly conformity and happiness which is most effective in relation to women.” (Rachel Bowlby, *Shopping with Freud*, in Hughes 1996: 126). The female-oriented world of beauty and appearance dominated the department stores, couturier ateliers and fashion galleries. Firstly, Violette resisted the attraction. She might have been gnawed inwardly by a desire for frivolities, “coveting Paris through a golden grill”, but she kept right on wearing her suits and boots. (Hughes 1996: 127) Later on, Violette has to leave her job through illness, and moves to the suburban Vincennes, where she starts to indulge in an extravagant lifestyle:

> We witness her efforts, in the chic hairdressing and beauty salons of the capital, to reinvent herself aesthetically, so that she might attain the physical perfection of the female filmstar. (Hughes 1996:127)

She took on a narcissistic *badaud*’s pose, mirroring herself into all kinds of shop windows and cars, wondering how many looks of passers-by she could attract with her mask of luxurious make-up: “Yes, she turned her head this way.” (Leduc in Hughes 1996:128)

The androgynous side of Violette felt uncomfortable with her own efforts to be stereotypically feminine: she felt like “she is being turned into a mannequin destined to drown into a quagmire of femininity, which assails her during a Schiaparelli87 sale.” (Hughes 1996:128)

In this image, the ideas of femininity and consumption are conflated into the figure of the mannequin. Behind the shop window and as a figure of female commodification/submission, the mannequin has replaced the prostitute.

Violette’s “a-natural” craving for femininity came from her admiration of her hyper-elegant mother, who encouraged her to express her feminine side. Her mother, Berthe, was described as a “brushstroke of elegance” (Leduc in Hughes 1996:129), the archetype of Parisian consumerist elegance. Violette felt unworthy to compete with this incarnation of elegance: “We were both wearing Cendre de Roses powder and the same colour rouge (...) she was the more feminine, the more beautiful of the two.” (Leduc in Hughes 1996:129)

Violette then wanted to conquer the femininity of her mother: instead of detaching herself from the maternal figure, she became a flawed copy of her. By continuously trying to mirror her mother, she further entangled herself in the mother/daughter symbiosis, strengthened by the city as maternal surface and her lesbian lover as *ersatz mother*. This impeded her in the process of becoming a grown-up individual, she felt oppressed by the womb of the city:

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87 Schiaparelli was one of the most famous and very luxurious inter-war Parisian couturiers.
Paris is a killer Paris is killing me I am walking and dying in these stream of frenzied cars(...) my bed is waiting for me the sky will tuck itself around me. (Leduc in Hughes 1996: 130)

Like de Beauvoir, Violette was also reduced to a sexualised object by the urban male characters, although in Violette Leduc’s case, the objectification was a willed one. She and her lover Hermine “prostituted” themselves when they ran out of shopping money: by displaying their bodies in an erotic scene, they got paid by a male voyeur. The male objectification was no assault, but Violette’s far-reaching sacrifice as a fashion victim makes that she has been prostituted by both the feminine consumer culture and the masculine heterosexual culture.

The attentive reader will now have understood that, altogether, the two cases of de Beauvoir and Leduc are not so different from each other: both heroines are self-defeminising subjects trying to form their own identity as an intellectual woman, impeded by the gendered city. The male city rejects them as *hommes manqué(e)s*, the female city urges them to become pure badauds, against their own character. Violette Leduc’s lesbian, androgynous body is overruled by the heterosexual demands of capitalist society, making her into someone who is always out of place, a lesbian flâneur:

> Capitalism, despite itself, has produced the lesbian flâneur: although the floppy, wandering body of the flâneur is the antithesis of the modern, mechanized, automated body, both are inscribed within capitalism’s (over)production. Each flâneur here has a central ambivalence infusing her sexual wanderings, being pulled between detachment from and insertion into city regimes. (Munt 1998: 48)

3. Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel: women’s liberation through their wardrobe

Fashionable women’s clothes[88] have been, until the start of the twentieth century, extremely uncomfortable. The nineteenth-century ideal of a bound bosom and a stuffed up “behind” forced women to wear tight corsages, remodelling their bodies into the ideal S-form. Modernist movements like Jugendstil, the Arts-and-Crafts-movement and the Art Nouveau style addressed this problem and women’s clothes became also a part of the new philosophies. The reform-fashion of the 1910s was very dark, heavy and sober to the point of ascetic. Women, who were still seen as dangerous in their artificiality, were subdued, their forms hidden under big blankets. The reform clothes did not become very popular but it was a start in the debate for more comfortable women’s clothes. After many icons like George Sand,

[88] All the information and pictures have been taken from the guide to the exposition “À la garçonne”, 04/09/04-30/12/04 in the Fashion Museum of Hasselt,
Jeanne d’Arc, and even Marlène Dietrich had been punished for wearing trousers (men’s clothes), the real breakthrough for women’s elegance and comfort came with the designs of Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel in the 1930s-1950s. She did not just want to free women from the corsage, but teach them a whole new philosophy. With a cigar in her iron hand and an army of atelier workers, she managed to sell her comfortable ensembles to the whole of Paris, and later to France and the rest of Europe. With the coming of the Second World War, women were more and more allowed to walk around in trousers (uniforms), but the New Look (with wasp-waists and rich bosoms) of Christian Dior sent women back to the old beauty ideals after the Second World War.

Nevertheless, Chanel’s designs were successful too, her elegance made the comfortable fit of her ensemble (the jacket with a straight waist, made of rough tweed, the skirt knee-long) more acceptable. A pupil of Dior, Yves Saint Laurent, re-designed the male suit for women in the 1960s, instigating a revival of the garçonne look, which turned the “provocative” pictures of Colette and Marlène Dietrich wearing suits into fashionable examples of the 1920s/30s:

![Figure 10: Colette, 1920s.](image)
![Figure 11: Yves Saint Laurent's garçonne revival, 1960s.](image)

### 4. Smoking away: Male Perception of Female Icons from the Twenties

In the context of the flâneur’s “fuddle” brought about by drugs, alcohol or smoking, one could almost speak of women’s “toxicomanic emancipation” in the 1920-30s. Long before the consequences of smoking were revealed as being a cause of early death, the women of the roaring twenties liberated themselves not only through their wardrobe (by wearing trousers) but also through their appropriation of a male custom, smoking. A state of short-lived cloudiness was seen as a break from the modern *kicks* in a bewildering habitat, and women now participated in this social pastime. A famous celebrity photographer, Jacques –Henry Lartigue, was fascinated by the smoking icons of the 1920s and made portraits of these
women, bundled in his book *Les femmes aux cigarettes*[^89]. He describes his motives and circumstances for taking the pictures:

> The photographs in this book were taken in Paris during a few months in 1927. Women had just started to smoke. To see them with lighted cigarettes in their mouths was no longer an unusual sight, but it was not commonplace either. (...) My interest has always been to do something funny, and *les femmes aux cigarettes*—that was funny. (...) I asked the famous and beautiful women of music hall and theatre to pose for me in their dressing rooms between acts. Some were friends, even intimate friends. Others I knew less well; taking their pictures was sometimes an excuse to get to know them better. Each of the pictures was posed, but not all the women had the habit of smoking. (Lartigue 1980: 4)

In this extract, we can read the transitional phase of the habit: not all of the women were real smokers, but the pictures symbolized the giddy lifestyle of the 1920s. Lartigue’s motives were not very serious, they were more a means to an end (socializing with the beautiful women) but nevertheless he presents us with portraits of influential women like Joséphine Baker and the Dolly Sisters. Joséphine Baker, symbol of the integration of black performers in Paris, was a typical example of the frivolity of the music-hall era:

> In Paris during the twenties, music-hall performers were incarnations of that gay, giddy era. Their tart-like painted faces, odd charm, their rhinestone and real millionaires’ jewellery set off by the fringes that were fashionable— all that expressed the genuine frivolity of the era. Putting cigarettes in their mouths was an accent to this feeling. I have always liked to take pictures of women, fashionable ladies, mannequins, demi-mondaines. They all have a style so unlike men. For me they are like cakes in a bakery: delicious to look at even when one is not very hungry, smelling good even if one is not tempted. (Lartigue 1980:5)

![Figuur 12: Renée Divrac and Joséphine Baker, photographed by Henry Lartigue](image)

Lartigue says further on in his book that he wanted to capture the frenzy of the Parisian scene after the First World War, but nevertheless he proves with the above statements to be a

“phallic” photographer: he only photographs beautiful women, semi-mondaines and mannequins (possible flâneuses) but objectifies them enormously along the way. The female objects are compared with cakes, tempting an oversaturated devourer. Women were perceived as the Others (“so unlike men”): their only reason of existence seemed to be their attractiveness and social status. The fact that not all the women in the pictures smoked, acquires an aftertaste now: the female showgirls were used for the projection of the male idea of glamour (smoking), by a photographer who only captured aesthetic objects, and had no eye for the obsolete or unexpected. Sontag compares his work to that of his contemporary female photographer-of-the-ugly, Diane Arbus:

Apart from the characteristic ugliness of Arbus’s subject (Lartigue’s subject is, just as characteristically, beautiful), what makes the woman in Arbus’ photograph strange is the bold unselfconsciousness of her pose. If the Lartigue woman looked back, she might appear almost as strange (Sontag 1979:37)

E. The interwar years: conclusion

In the flâneuse’s adolescence, we find the old problems returning: although women acquired more freedom and emancipated themselves in several domains, they were still objectified through men’s eyes (Lartigue) and fashion dictates (Dior), whilst not truly being respected by patriarchal institutions (l’Académie Française, the French Universities). Nevertheless, the phase also had its merits, since there are a lot more female voices (Charlotte Wolff, Colette, Woolf) from the time known to us. Many intellectual women proved to be more than badauds and became metropolitan, bohemian dandies.
“I want to wake up in a city that never sleeps. (...)If I can make it there, I’ll make it, anywhere, it’s up to you, New York, New York.”

Carrie: “If you can only have one great love, then the city just may be mine.”

Madonna: “I went to New York. I had a dream. I wanted to be a big star. I didn’t know anybody. I wanted to dance, I wanted to sing, I wanted to make people happy. I wanted to be famous. I worked really hard and my dream came true.”

**IV. New York 1960s-1980s: the adulthood of female flânerie.**

**A. Introduction**

The flâneuse’s adulthood is a metaphor for the boom of flânerie-related phenomena in the 1980s/90s, like the popularity of urban novels and stories (out of which I chose to discuss *Girls, Visions and Everything* and *City of Boys*), TV-series like *Friends, Sex and the City*, *Ally McBeal*, the film *Le Fabuleux Destin d’Amélie Poulain*, *Sidewalks of New York* and many others. These cultural products are all inheritors of flâneur-related figures, such as the badaud (*SATC*), the detective (*Ally McBeal, Amélie Poulain*), the dandy (Lila out of *Girls, Visions and Everything*) and the lesbian flâneuse (*City of Boys*). Since flânerie has become an accredited cultural phenomenon that ranges from city-strolling to city-tripping, world-travelling and cyberspace-roaming, it is useful to use a socio-theoretical framework (Featherstone, Chambers, Jameson, Friedberg) which explains the cultural mechanisms of postmodern society. The most important elements of these theories are the sign-saturated culture, the stylization of the self, new intermediaries and a shift from the social to the cultural. I will use Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker) and Madonna as two powerful feminine

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91 Sarah Jessica Parker alias Carrie, in *Sex and the City*, taken from http://www.sexandthecityquotes.com/themes/shopping-quotes.html
icons who have adopted Frank Sinatra’s *Manhattan Attitude* (the sky is the limit, live your
dream, everything is possible). That way, I illustrate the theories about popular culture with
popular examples. In the last paragraphs, I will already use some extracts out of Judith
Hermann’s *Niets dan geesten*, which announce the following chapter on *Welt flânerie*.

B. Socio-Historical context

1. **The Post-war period: a regressive development for female flânerie.**

The emancipation of women during the Second World War was followed by a counter
reaction: once the men returned from the war, women became again confined to the private
realms of the domestic sphere. Most of the intellectual female circles of the interbellum period
crumbled down after expulsions, deportations and political disputes between the women.
The 1950s were a golden age for “kitchen queens” and “mother hens”. Deborah Parsons
points towards this stage of regressive development, quoting out of Braybon and

(…) that the post-war city landscape was no longer a conductive environment for the
connective feminine spirit of the flâneuse, and wanted to indicate that it once more
became a male domain, with women losing their legitimate presence in the streets and
returning to traditional domestic roles. The dominant emphasis at the end of the war
was that “change was temporary, that women were “really” wives and mothers and
their place was at home”. (Parsons 2000: 199)

The only roles for an independent urban woman were the badaud or the prostitute in the late
1950s/ early1960s. Like Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961) demonstrated, a
well-dressed woman who likes windowshopping and glamour, could be nothing but an
erotomaniac. As *Miss Holly Golightly*, Audrey is an escort girl, a glamorous party animal, a
decadent shopper, and thus, unhappy. Only when she allows love into her life she gives up
this existence...the same old story?

The sexual revolution of the 1960s had its negative consequences, but it also created a climate
in which sexuality was no longer a big taboo. It gave a public platform to women’s rights
activists, resulting in more equal rights for men and women in professional life, and thus, in
the public sphere. The process went on for two decades, more or less coming to an end in the
mid-eighties, when new liberation groups like the “Rainbow Coalition” (LGBTQ activists)
appeared. This is why I will include lesbian flâneuses’ literature (*Girls, Visions and*
Everything, *City of Boys* and the theoretical framework of *Heroic Desire* by Sally Munt) in the context of female flânerie in the 1980s and 1990s.

2. From modernism to postmodernism

The 1960s are mostly seen as the starting decade of the postmodern aesthetic: the following twenty years were experimental, renovating and “fun”, whereas the last two decades have come to a kind of status quo of postmodernism. Within postmodern literature there have been revivals of modernist and traditional literature, engaged literature, gulfs of autobiographical literature and non-fictional works: all of them have been adopted by postmodernism under the motto *anything goes*. Without trying to give a complete overview of the transition between modernism and postmodernism, I want to underline Mike Featherstone’s argument that postmodernism comes after modernism, and thus is a kind of continuation of it as well. Instead of a clean break with modernism, postmodernism renovates/adapts many features of modern art and literature:

If ‘the modern’ and ‘the postmodern’ are the generic terms it is immediately apparent that the prefix ‘post’ signifies that which comes after, a break or rupture with the modern which is defined in counterdistinction to it. (…)Yet Lyotard, like many users of the family of terms, sometimes changes from one term to the next and switches usages, preferring more recently to emphasize that the postmodern is to be regarded as part of the modern. (Featherstone 1991: 2003)

The confusion that arises from trying to define the term postmodernism, comes out of the absence of rules or fixed conditions to define something as postmodern. Ironically, the absence of fixed rules (*anything goes*) is the most distinctive characteristic of postmodernism, which makes this label even applicable to figure of the flâneur/euse, being a “(Wo)Man with no Qualities”. Featherstone characterizes postmodernism as the “loss of a sense of historical past” (something we recognize from the modernist period), and a “schizoid culture”, which situates itself in three levels of society:

(1) the artistic, intellectual and academic fields (…); (2) changes in the broader cultural sphere involving the modes of production, consumption and circulation of

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95 The basic features of modernism (to be found in the writings of Proust, Rilke, Valéry, Gide, Joyce Kafka and Mann) can be summarized as: an aesthetic self-consciousness and reflexiveness; a rejection of narrative structure in favour of simultaneity and montage; an exploration of the paradoxical, ambiguous and open-ended nature of reality; and the rejection of an integrated personality in favour of an emphasis upon the de-structured, de-humanized subject (…)Amongst the central features associated with postmodernism in the arts are: the effacement of the boundary between art and everyday life; the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between high and mass/ popular culture; a stylistic promiscuity favouring eclecticism and the mixing of codes; parody, pastiche, irony, playfulness and the celebration of the surface ‘depthlessness’ of culture; the decline of the originality/genius of the artistic producer; and the assumption that art can only be repetition. (Featherstone 1991:7)
symbolic goods (…); (3) changes in the everyday practices and experiences of different groups, (…) and developing new means of orientation and identity structures. (Featherstone 1991:11, my emphasis)

If postmodernism is all about a transition from modernism, then New York, a city of transition, seems to be a good choice for this chapter. Boomkens calls New York the city of modernity (due to its architecture), but other theorists/writers use it as a model of the postmodern city (Featherstone, Schulman). For my analysis, the most important feature is the transition of modern avant-garde elitism into the postmodern celebration of the ordinary. We find this transition in many forms of art, such as literature, plastic arts, film and TV, fashion, architecture, design et al. Considering the many different stances on postmodernism, it is not unusual to read two different views in one book. Featherstone also advocates another interpretation of postmodernism than Lyotard’s continuity model. He quotes the architect Charles Jencks (The Language of Postmodern Architecture), explaining the transition as a break with modernism and a return to tradition: “I used the term to mean the opposite of all this: the end of avant-garde extremism, the partial return to tradition and the central role of communicating with the public - and architecture is the public art. (Charles Jencks in Featherstone 1991: 36)

Another transition took place in the subject-choice for theorists; we find a shift in focus from the sociological (modern) to the cultural (postmodern) aspects of society:

Culture, once on the periphery of social science disciplines, particularly in sociology, has now been thrust increasingly towards the centre of the field and some of the barriers between the social sciences and humanities are in the process of being dismantled. (Featherstone 1991: 11-2)

Featherstone refers in this context to Jameson (Postmodernism: or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Postmodernism and the Consumer Society), who argues that this shift, together with a consumer-oriented market production, is responsible for the over-valuation of signs, boards, ads and messages, which leads to an erasure of class boundaries, or a declassified, “depthless” culture:

This is the postmodern, ‘depthless culture’ of which Jameson speaks. (…) Jameson’s conception of postmodern culture is strongly influenced by Baudrillard’s work. (…) He also sees postmodern culture as the culture of the consumer society, the post-World War Two stage of late capitalism. In this society culture is given a new significance through the saturation of signs and messages to the extent that ‘everything in social life can be said to have become cultural’. (Featherstone 1991:15, my emphasis)

The shift in focus from political sciences to humanities opens up possibilities for the integration of women’s perspectives in historical/sociological/cultural accounts. Since women
have always been more associated with (popular) social activities concerning leisure and appearance (like gossiping, shopping, beauty-salon culture, in short: anything that leads to the aestheticization of the self), the postmodern aesthetic is a welcome boost for female experiences in the public and cultural sphere.

3. The postmodern “democratic” artist

From the 1960s onwards, not only artists, but also the idealistic children of the middle class (the hippies) celebrated an artistic-bohemian lifestyle: they loosened their dress, appearance and behaviour. Featherstone mentions that there was “both a relaxation and a higher level of control: a ‘de-controlled control of the emotions’” (Featherstone 1991: 45) Artists embraced the popular (be it in an intellectual way, like Warhol did in his factory) whilst the pseudo-artists, the new coming class, set the standard for a fashionable, artistic lifestyle:

What is of interest here is that this project of the aestheticization of life with its celebration of the artist as hero and the stylization of life into a work of art- both the expressivity of the artist’s project and the lifestyle-found resonances in a larger audience beyond intellectual and artistic circles through the expansion of particular occupational groups specializing in symbolic goods who acted as both producers and disseminators and consumers/audiences for cultural goods.(Featherstone 1991:35, my emphasis)

This democratising tendency is not wholly new: although the avant-garde artists of the twentieth century are often criticized for their elitism, many Dada- and Surrealist artists incorporated the popular in their art. Modernism does continue in postmodernism. In line with the nineteenth-century Parisian collector of debris, Marcel Duchamp 96 used rubble from the street in his art, which got him a lot of followers in the 1960s.

With the postmodern democratisation of the fine arts (under the wings of pop-art icon Andy Warhol), a reverse tendency came along: whereas the artist tried to immerse himself in popular (“low”) culture, the bourgeois, upper middle class people tried to adopt the modern artist’s project (avant-garde). People employed in art-related professions like photography, graphic design and advertising work, chose to inhabit an atelier or loft, following the artist’s lifestyle. This brought about the gentrification of old artists’ areas like the East Village of New York in the late 1980s and 1990s. The declining inner city area turned into a

96 In this context it is interesting to note that in the 1960s there was a revival of interest in the Dada and Surrealist Movements and in particular the work of Marcel Duchamp. It has also been argued that postmodernism first occurred with the 1920s historical avant-garde who effectively practised postmodernism avant la lettre. (Lash and Urry, The End of Organised Capitalism, 1987) In the 1960s we have similar and perhaps even more extreme attempts to break down the barriers between art and everyday life, to resist art becoming a museum commodity-object. (Featherstone 1991:38, title added in italics)

While the artist’s lifestyle may still have an attractive romantic ambience for those engaged in the gentrification of inner city areas and for members of the middle class in general who increasingly value the role of culture in lifestyle construction, many artists have relinquished their commitment to high culture and avant-gardisme and have adopted an increasingly open attitude towards consumer culture and now show a willingness to truck with other cultural intermediaries, image-makers, audiences and publics. (Featherstone 1991:25)

The contemporary artist is a “dandy of a new and more democratic bohemia”, a new metropolitan figure who “explores routes already travelled by avant-garde art, crossing the boundary between the museum and mass culture, but transfers the game from the art gallery to the fashion catwalk of the street” (Del Sapio, “The Question is Whether you make Words Mean so many Different Things: Notes on Art and Metropolitan Languages” in Featherstone 1991:20)

### 4. Intermediaries: a shift in power balances

The above-named intermediaries became the new trend-setters for metropolitan (and later, global) culture. No longer were major politicians/philosophers/religious thinkers (the sociological field) the most influential but the new class of cultural intermediaries (cultural field). Pop-artists, actors, singers, style-reporters, fashion designers and advertising people set the examples of “good taste” and “lifestyle”:

Hence, if we want to understand the social generation and interpretation of the experience of postmodernity, we need to have a place for the role of cultural entrepreneurs and intermediaries who have an interest in creating postmodern pedagogies to educate publics. (Featherstone 1991:5)

Like I pointed out before (pp. 45-46), this controlled and distanced reflection on the stylization of life is a phenomenon that occurs in the middle and upper classes of society, and I believe we can add here that it is most important for the “coming” upper middle class, since these people want to stand out the most whereas the highest classes do not need to distinguish themselves so much. The cultural intermediaries play an important role in the *field* of

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97 Here we could usefully employ the field approach of Bourdieu (…) and focus upon the economy of symbolic goods: the conditions of supply and demand for such goods, the processes of competition and monopolization, and the struggles between established and outsiders. (…) Here we would need to consider postmodernism in terms of a second ‘level’ of culture, what is often called the cultural sphere, and consider the means of transmission, and circulation to audiences and publics and the feedback effect of the audience response in generating further interest amongst intellectuals. To focus on this second area we need to look at artists, intellectuals and academics as specialists in symbolic production and consider their relationship to other
symbolic capital; they are the “new intellectuals who adopt a learning mode towards life.”(Featherstone 1991:44) Featherstone does not distinguish between men or women, but in his broadening of the traditional definition of middle class professions (managers, employers, scientists and technicians) to a more cultural sector (in which he does not only count people employed in advertising, public relations, media and journalism, but also in “the helping professions” like dieticians, marriage counsellors, sex therapists, play leaders etc.), he gives more weight to the role of professional women in the cultural sphere. The cliché of women being more inclined towards helping/creative professions (versus businessmen and scientists) still exists in *Girls, Visions and Everything*, where Lila asks Emily: “‘Emily, when you were a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?’ ‘A theatre designer or a fashion designer.’ ‘I’m very impressed, Emily. I wanted to be a stewardess.’” (Schulman 1999: 111)


In *Girls, Visions and Everything*, the young lesbian artist/writer, Lila (living in the East Village of NY in the 1980s) feels alienated by the new coming class of “arty yuppies”. She conceives of the gentrified classes as parasites: they produce and consume, but they are without soul. Lila observes them from a distance, adopting a dandyesque pose:

“The art types were all over America sucking its blood,” said Jack Kerouac to Carlo Marx in Denver. From Lila’s East Village vantage point, she could see that he was right. At least as pertained to the ART SCENE which was oozing its slime all over Second Avenue. The upscale New Yorkers, who cabbed it down to the fancy places to see performers on tour from Europe, ate afterwards in restaurants where Lila couldn’t even get a job. (Schulman 1999: 43)

Lila turned down Sixth Street to Avenue B. Once she got past all those stupid art galleries, it was still a nice block. With the creepy, crawling invasion of gentrification into the neighbourhood, it was becoming harder and harder to find a quiet street. Things were so bad that even Avenue A was unliveable. (Schulman 1999: 19)

Herself a poor freelance writer and artist (living the romantic ideal), she fears that the good days of her lesbian underground community will be over once the new moneyed classes settle in: the East Village becomes a site of resistance in a struggle for material and symbolical space. The rent becomes unaffordable for Lila and her friends (a benevolent jumble of would-be artists, dancers, drug-dealers and prostitutes, most of them living on the street) through the
gentrification process. They become the new Others. The roles are reversed: the new neighbours want to get rid of these poor “dirty artists”.

After the changes in the neighbourhood had started getting really dramatic, this new organization suddenly made itself known. The Concerned Neighbours for a Cleaner Block. (…) it hadn’t taken Lila very long to realize that any group of people who wanted to “clean up” another group of people were usually bad news. (Schulman 1999: 30)

These “art-yuppies” bring along a consumerist mode of life, which changes the cityscape into something that abhors Lila. She does not want to be part of this stream of so-called “life-artists”, but chooses to be an outsider (dilettante). To her, the patchwork of consuming tourists and glossy images is a nightmare. The Disneyland for consumers has become a surreal, unliveable and plastic place:

tofutti-selling teenaged boys in teased Mohawks. Polish and Puerto Rican mom and pop soda fountains featuring Breyer’s ice cream, vanilla or chocolate, bowed to the pressure of imported ices. Tanned Europeans in skimpy t-shirts sold one dollar and fifty cent scoops-du-jour. (Schulman 1999:19)

C. Consumer Culture

1. The excess of choices and styles.

According to Bataille, the notion of economic production was in the 1920s-1930s not linked to scarcity, but to excess. A similar excess of choice in lifestyles and consumer products created in the 1980s a new economy in which people choose a certain style (even if it is a non-style, or a patchwork of many different ones) to make a statement about their personality. Bourdieu states in Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, that “taste classifies and classifies the classifier”. (Bourdieu in Featherstone 1991:19)

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98 Mike Featherstone quotes Bataille (The Accursed Share) in this context: From this perspective, we should pay attention to the persistence, displacements and transformation of the notion of culture as waste, squandering and excess. According to Bataille’s notion of general economy, economic production should not be linked to scarcity, but to excess. (Featherstone 1991:21)
Featherstone further argues that someone’s taste betrays their background, and that these constellations (dress code, job, car, furnishings, background and life philosophy) are quickly changing and determined by their particular occurrence in history. The constellations are not fixed to one individual at the time; one person can also assume different styles and different poses. People become artists in the way that they stylize their own personality and appearance (aestheticization of the self), in such a way that being fashionably correct almost equals being politically/ethically correct. Novelty and kicks rule in an era where people think they have seen and done everything:

It [postmodernism] draws on tendencies in consumer culture which favour the aestheticization of life, the assumption that the aesthetic life is the ethically good life and that there is no human nature or true self, with the goal of life an endless pursuit of new experiences, values and vocabularies. (Featherstone 1991: 126)

Together with the shift from the theoretical/social to the personal/cultural, the “emphasis upon sensation, on the primary immediacy of the figural as opposed to the discursive, has led the postmodern aesthetics to be characterized as an aesthetics of the body.” (Featherstone 1991:38) The body becomes a signifier of one’s life, status and personality. The postmodern urban subject will exhibit his or hers body according to his/her moods:

Yet as Bourdieu (Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste) reminds us with his concept of symbolic capital, the signs of the dispositions and classificatory schemes which betray one’s origins and trajectory through life are also manifest in body shape, size, weight, stance, walk, demeanour, tone of voice, style of speaking, sense of ease or discomfort with one’s body etc. (Featherstone 1991: 20)

By means of jewellery, tattoos, piercings and scars, the body becomes a map of one’s interests and preferences. Mike Featherstone agrees with Iain Chambers (Maps to the Metropolis, a Possible Guide to the Present) who states that “clothes, bodies, faces, become quotations drawn from the other, imaginary side of life: from fashion, the cinema, advertising and the infinite suggestibility of urban iconography”. (Chambers in Featherstone 1991:100) The postmodern body also becomes a quotation, a parody on traditional physicality. The gender-

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99 Consumption and lifestyle preferences involve discriminatory judgements which at the same time identify and render classifiable our own particular judgement of taste to others. Particular constellations of taste, consumption preferences and lifestyle practices are associated with specific occupation and class fractions, making it possible to map out the universe of taste and lifestyle with its structured oppositions and finely graded distinctions which operate within a particular society at a particular point in history. (Featherstone 1991:18)

Rather than unreflexively adopting a lifestyle, through tradition or habit, the new heroes of consumer culture make lifestyle a project and display their individuality and sense of style in the particularity of the assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experiences, appearance and bodily dispositions they design together into a lifestyle. The modern individual within consumer culture is made conscious that he speaks not only with his clothes, but with his home, furnishings, decoration, car and other activities which are to be read and classified in terms of the presence and absence of taste. (Featherstone 1991:86)
blurring Asian she-males, transvestites, drag queens and radical butch lesbians are (rather extreme) examples of this. Between this hotchpotch of styles and personalities, the contemporary flâneuse cannot but be part of the urban flow of bodies, yet she can be aware of herself as a consciously plagiarising body. Her distanced attitude (dandyesque) is only intellectual, whilst she outwardly participates with the urban scenery. But even when the flâneuse is not distanced (e.g. Carrie), there is hope for her since the transition from distance to participation can also be said to be a sign of aestheticism:

This distanced, voyeuristic attitude is to be found in the stroller in the large cities whose senses are overstimulated by the flood of new perspectives, impressions and sensations that flow past him. Yet we also face the question of the necessity of dista ntiation and whether the reversal of it in the figural can also be described as entailing an aesthetic orientation. (Featherstone 1991:71, my emphasis)

2. A Pathology of Fashion

The multitude of paperbacks describing the lives of shopaholics and fashion victims (the contemporary equivalent of badauds) does not lie: the Western world seems to be filled with shopping-addicted women, desperately trying to get the latest hot stuff from designers, e-bay and department stores. Sex and the City, Absolutely Fabulous and many other TV-series take this as the core for their plotlines. Very often, these women’s shopping-fever leads to financial and emotional crises. A good example of this is Karyn Novak’s book, Save Karyn, One Shopaholic’s Journey to Debt and Back: Karyn got herself into a debt of 20 000$ by buying too many clothes, bags and shoes. She managed to pay off her debt with $1 gifts from co-fashionistas all over the world, after launching a website with a call for help. Obviously, this case is an extreme example, but it shows how much solidarity there is in today’s society with fellow victims of capitalism. Other books in this area include Lauren Weisberger’s The Devil Wears Prada and Sophie Kinsella’s four Shopaholic novels. Most of these stories follow the process of a classic tragedy, where the shopaholic in question faces many difficulties in her quest for the ultimate shoe/dress/bag/wardrobe, goes bankrupt (crisis), ruins her life, and when she realizes that her obsession has become impossible (catharsis), goes back to “normal” life. The shopping addiction is treated with metaphors of disease and the healing process, or even as a metaphor for life (the endless quest for ultimate happiness).

Anne Friedberg points towards the pathological behaviour of the compulsive shopper, which is compared to that of the nineteenth-century hysterical woman. After a decadent shopping spree (comparable to a hysterical fit), the shopaholic experiences a catharsis (a release of
tension together with a boost of life lust), which soon fades and makes place for a new frustrating (read: too expensive) desire. This way, femininity is again equalled with hysteria through consumerism:

Following Elaine Showalter’s [“The Female Malady” in Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980] question about the relation of feminism to hysteria (“Was hysteria – the ‘daughter’s disease’- a mode of protest for women deprived of other social or intellectual outlets or expressive options?”), one might ask: Is compulsive shopping a mode of protest for the powerlessness felt in other social or intellectual arenas? (Friedberg 1993: 256)

Showalter and Friedberg here confirm the old problem of female powerlessness (in the city, in the academic world, in life) which leads to hysteria (or maniacal shopping). Why then is it a “disease” that occurs in all the layers of society: trailer-trash-families, businesswomen and binge-shopping celebrities seem to suffer from it. Whether one has money, intellectual power or none of both, all (wo)men seem to be possible victims.

Possibly, many women behave like passive, nervous victims addicted to the stream of new trends and images which dictate them what to buy and how to look. Nevertheless, compulsive shopping can become a symptom in itself, which has not got much to do with the purchased clothes anymore. The deed of buying becomes a pathologic addiction, and, like Friedberg points out: women are more inclined towards this addiction, but men are surely not immune either. Just like women “emancipated” themselves in a bad way (the number of alcohol abusers are now almost equal between men and women), men have started to adopt this “bad” female characteristic too. The new phenomenon of metrosexual men (heterosexual men with a very stylized fashionable and cultural image, preferably living in a metropolis) confirms this:

Recent studies at USC, UCLA, and the University of Minnesota treat compulsive shopping as an addiction, not unlike gambling or alcoholism. These studies demonstrate that this addiction largely occurs in, but is not confined to, women. Compulsive shopping is one of the many disturbances based on the consumption model- binge shopping and impulsive buying are others and one can easily imagine other diagnostic terms. Shopping bulimia, for example, would refer to a form of binge-and-purge purchasing- buying and then returning merchandise- made easier in credit economies where money is only abstractly exchanged. Agoraphobia (literally, excessive fear of the market) has as its equally common converse, agoraphilia (literally, excessive love of the market). (Friedberg 1993: 256)

One out of many examples of shopping bulimia can be found in More, Now, Again100, where the protagonist (Elizabeth Wurtzel, the author herself) finds herself “going nuts” at the airport.

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consoles herself by spending a fortune. She creates a temporary dream world which shuts herself off from her problems: she buys unnecessary things (presents for imaginary cousins) just for the sake of buying. Her purchases are very expensive, stylish products, which she will have to return because her credit card is not checked:

I take my little trolley and go nuts. The stores do not have the capacity to check credit cards through to the United States, so I can spend far beyond my limit. Gucci bags, Ferragamo sandals, a Georg Jensen silver necklace, a Prada sweater, a Skagen watch for mommy, LEGO sets for my non-existent little cousins whom I ought to buy presents for, a Mont Blanc fountain pen for signing books. I also pick up a few bottles of Absolut Vodka, in Citron and Kurrant and Peppar flavours, as gifts for the people in Sweden. (...Since I am going to be almost a full day late, it seems wise to arrive with presents. I shop until the stores close down. (Wurtzel 2002: 264)

Literally, Elizabeth “shops until she drops”. Like Barbara Kruger’s ironic subscript to her untitled work of 1987 indicates, the motto of this woman has become “I shop therefore I am”. So, rather than labelling shopping-bulimia as a phenomenon confined to women (because of their powerlessness), it could be classified with more “serious”, existential and “male” addictions like gambling, drinking and drug abuse. In More, Now, Again, the link between drug abuse, alcohol and credit card abuse is very clearly marked: after the protagonist has been sober from one drug, she feels clean and ready for a new kick, the kick of buying presents:

My other responsibility is to actually buy the presents for the people who graduate. This is the perfect task for me, since I don’t know anyone who likes shopping more than I do. I love doing this, and I love picking out things that are appropriate to the person. I had always hated it that people would get these silly things they’d never use or want- you know, novelty items purchased at the last minute, or paperweights with a piece of green felt slapped on the bottom. But it’s easier to buy nice things under my aegis, because the treasury fund is so much richer. (Wurtzel 2002: 324)

Wurtzel’s autobiographical writings overtly draw on her cravings for drugs, medicines, clothes and other material things as a substitute for affection and appreciation. The ecstasy that drugs bring her is alike to the kick of wearing fancy clothes:

There is more smack and more crack. I change dresses several times because I have brought all these pretty lacy things with me, even though it is too cold to wear them. But all doped up, I feel warm and sensual, so I revel in this silly fashion show. (Wurtzel 2002: 239)

We can conclude that women’s pathologic shopping tendencies have an underlying existential motive (see Helen Hessel’s Sehnsucht nach der Völkomenheit), through which they can be added to the list of male addictions. This undermines the common sense idea that shopping is a non-intellectual activity, but rather shows that women have taken over masculine artistic
behaviour (like drugs and alcohol addictions) in the field of society which is most familiar to them for historical reasons, the shopping arena.

3. A dead end?

After the 1980s “excess of choice”, it looks like the dandy-flâneuse can no longer distinguish herself from the masses, or the arty crowds who adopt an artist’s pose: “Today there is no fashion, there are only fashions. No rules, only choices. Everyone can be anyone.” (Ewen & Ewen’s Channels of Desire in Featherstone 1991:83). The meaning of style collapses under the weight of the multitudinous possibilities and images for the consumer: “What does it mean to suggest that long-held fashion codes have been violated, that there is a war against uniformity, a surfeit of difference which results in a loss of meaning?” (Featherstone 1991:83) Differentiation allows self-identification, but becomes levelled in itself when differentiation is in the reach of everyone through the consumer-oriented culture. The cross-fertilization of the catwalk and the street blurs the origins of certain styles: it is difficult to say where the origin of the “street” style lies. Do not urban people mime the catwalk which mimes urbanites who mime…?

Fashion borrows from the street and the other way round. (...) "'Street' means no swish. It's strong, like the way people walk down a New York street." Most shows now use a near-natural street walk, described by Weir as "'Street' plus a little bit more." That means a pretty natural stride with no hands on hips or posing. But the walk is still slightly exaggerated: some extra swagger makes skirts swish dramatically and gives tailored looks a bit of extra power101.

Featherstone’s “heroes of consumer culture” make an effort to resist the levelling of the masses, which makes them resemble Simmel’s modern subject:

The concern with fashion, presentation of self, ‘the look’ on the part of the new wave of urban flâneurs, points to a process of cultural differentiation which in many ways is the obverse of the stereotypical images of mass societies in which serried ranks of similarly dressed people are massed together. If the contemporary age can be characterized as an era of ‘no style’, to borrow a phrase from Simmel’s, then it points to the rapid circulation of new styles (fashion, appearance, design, customer goods) and the nostalgic invocation of past ones. (Featherstone 1991:97)

The phrase “no style” is significant: consumer culture has outlived itself, because in New York, people can no longer shock others with their outfit. New Yorkers have seen so many styles and subcultures that no style can challenge them anymore. The aestheticization of life

101 An interpretation of styles by a fashion designer, taken from <http://slate.msn.com/id/2113109/?GT1=6082>
and of the self becomes declassified, devalued. Similar to what Leopardi said about “Fashion being the mother of Death”, Simmel states that:

“fashion embodies the contradictory tendencies of imitation and differentiation” and his assumption that “the dynamic of fashion is such that its popularity and expansion leads to its own destruction.” (Simmel in Featherstone 1991: 87)

It looks like (female) lifestyle-artists are caught up in a Catch 22: the more they try to differentiate, the more this style becomes absorbed in mainstream culture, and when they try to flee it, the old style is reasserted again, and so on. There are many ways of dealing with this problem: one is to stop trying, the other to be enslaved by fashion dictates and brand policies – in short: to be a fashion victim-, and the third (postmodern) way is to make a game out of buying and hunting down clothes. The third option seems to be the most hopeful one, because, like Anneke Semelik says: “In feite lijkt vrouwelijkheid altijd al een postmoderne conditie geweest te zijn. Wat is vrouwelijkheid anders dan een manier van kleden?” (Anneke Semelik in Bosma, Pisters 1989:58) 

In the following paragraphs, I explore the differentiation/identification problems of lesbians and try to find a way out of the dead end.

4. **Femme Lesbians**

The process of the levelling of “taste” can also be found in lesbian culture: butch lesbians show their sexual orientation (“differentiation”) through their clothes and looks, but what about the femme lesbians? Whereas the butch lesbian was the symbolic body for lesbian theories in the seventies and eighties, these days the femme lesbian is the object of attention. A remarkable element in lesbian culture is the stylization of the self by femme lesbians: they mould themselves after hyper-feminine icons of the past, such as Audrey Hepburn, Jackie O’ and Dior’s New Look models. The old images serve for a postmodern pastiche of styles. An example of this nostalgia for femininity can be found in Girls Visions and Everything: “Lila thought Emily was the cutest thing. She was at times prehistoric and then, suddenly, more Dior than Dior.”(Schulman 1999:155) Lesbians who accentuate their femininity by a dressing code (which Sally Munt calls the lesbian chic), go through a process of “being inned” by the laws of society. It is a means of reintegration into heterosexual culture:

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103 In *Girls, Visions and Everything*, Maureen represents the butch stereotype, moulded on the 1920ies-expats: Maureen had a Gertrude Stein haircut and a figure to match. She also had a great collection of forty-fives like Dinah Washington, Peggy Lee, Frankie crooning Witchcraft, very atmosphere-y. (Schulman 1999 :141)
Lesbian chic, as a fashion statement, can be read as the most contemporaneous example of the combined and somewhat contradictory discourses of the ‘pure’, white, upper-class lesbian and soft pornography. It can be interpreted as a femme pride offset against butch shame, in which the lesbian has been inned, as a subversive gesture, also as a process of reabsorption. (Munt 1998:100-1)

The differentiation (butch) differentiates itself (femme) and thus becomes a part of mainstream, heterosexual culture again. The more one differentiates, the more risk one runs to end up at the beginning. This confirms Simmel’s statement that fashion always leads to its own destruction, to a dead end. Barbara Creed\(^{104}\) explains how the lesbian chic began as a femme pride-offset and turned into a commercial image which draws on the eroticism of female narcissism (femme-femme desire) in order to sell goods:

> fashion photography which displays the look-alike bodies of female models, often in an embrace, draws on the notion of the narcissistic female double to sell clothes and titillate the spectator with suggestions of auto-erotic, anorexic lesbian desire. (Creed 1995-6: 86)

The positive representation of femme-femme desire is a consequence of the butch-femme evolution, or a development from rejection to acceptance of “feminine” fashionability in lesbian culture:

> More overt forms of lesbian behaviour (…) are now also used, particularly as younger lesbians, who have rejected the lesbian refusal of fashion associated with the 1970s, opt to explore fashion possibilities.(…) If this tradition suggests that woman, by her very nature, is vain, the lesbian couple represents, by definition, feminine narcissism and auto-eroticism par excellence. (Creed 1995-6: 99)

The femininity of femme lesbians lies not in their sexuality, but in their fashionable pose and (artificial) vanity. Although the photographic representation seems positive at first (approval of lesbianism), one could say that femme lesbians are abused in the sense of being presented as lust objects for a male public. The only reason why they are more accepted than butch lesbians (the dandies?), is because of their affirmation of the sexist cliché that women are narcissistic badauds.

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5. **Madonna and Carrie, powerful icons of urban femininity**

Madonna\(^{105}\) and Carrie\(^{106}\) are probably the most successful examples of women who mix styles and fashions to their own self-promotion and advantage. Apart from being first class trend-setters and style chameleons, Madonna and Carrie also make statements about femininity and the urban lifestyle. They show that shopping, the female body, make-up and dance can be an instrument of power; hence Madonna’s status of the most influential idol of the late 1980s/90s up to today, and the overwhelming success of the *SATC* series.

![Figuur 13: Madonna.](image1) ![Figuur 14: Sarah Jessica Parker, alias Carrie.](image2)

As a showgirl, Madonna is heiress to icons like Mistinguett, Josephine Baker, Marlène Dietrich, Mae West en Marilyn Monroe. She promotes a strong feminine (but refuses to be called a feminist) style and the *Manhattan Attitude*. In her video of the song *Borderline*, the *access sign* (the given situation, setting) is the setting of a street, where she does not feel threatened, the *discovery sign* (something that is transformed, a discovery of the self-identity) is Madonna’s experience of being discovered as a fashion model. This way, a girl from the streets finds her luck in these same streets, transforming into a feminine icon of beauty. Madonna propagates pleasure in feminine acts and “girly things” through these *discovery signs*. She shows that femininity is a construction of attitudes, cosmetics and clothes. In her videos, she sometimes assumes the pose of a power-woman with suits and whips, but then alternates this image with passive, traditionally erotic femininity. Her clothes show that masculinity and femininity are fleeting concepts, because even when she does an act of gender-bending (for example, in the videos *Express yourself*, and *Crucify my love*), she still looks hyper-feminine (e.g. her Gaultier-bra coming out of her waistcoat).\(^{107}\)

\(^{105}\) Picture taken from <http://www.madonna.com>

\(^{106}\) Picture taken from <http://www.sexandthecityquotes.com/themes/shopping.html>

\(^{107}\) The inspiration for this paragraph comes out of (Bosma, Pisters 1999: 54-7). They discuss Lisa A. Lewis’s “acces signs” and discovery signs out of *Gender Politics and MTV: Voicing the difference*. 
Carrie flaunts her femininity as well: whilst she floats around in her preferred habitat (Manhattan, of course), she and her friends are not ashamed to be interested in men and clothes only. These are the acces signs, the discovery sign of this series is the friendship between the women, who try to live their dream and help each other through bad luck, bad men and bad hair days. Manhattan is like a drug to them.

Carrie\textsuperscript{108} and her friends opt for the third way in solving the dead end of fashionista’s: they playfully buy, mix and match, but they are always aware of the comic nature of it all:

\begin{quote} 
Carrie:“If I don't stop shopping, I'll end up a bag lady; a Fendi bag lady, but a bag lady. (...) I like my money right where I can see it: hanging in my closet.”
\end{quote}

Although Carrie seems to be a badaud pur sang, she nevertheless has small insights of a more existential nature:

\begin{quote} 
Carrie: “I realized I was in the throes of an existential crisis. One that not even the sight of this season's Dolce & Gabbana strappy sandals could lift me out of.”
\end{quote}

The big success of the series could be partly explained by its comic exaggeration of NYC life, mildly parodying its white upper-middle class women, whilst it holds up a mirror for the rest of the TV-watching world. Also, it promotes an unembarrassed, feminine urban lifestyle, presenting the mix of (window) shopping, café-meetings, streetwalking, writing (Carrie is a columnist, remember the Physiologies) and self-aestheticization as an attractive way of life. It is true: Carrie and her friends are no distant characters but form a close circle of friends. Also, they make great efforts to “catch” the right man. Does that have to impede them from being flâneuses?

D. A sign-saturated culture

\textbf{1. In a Barbie World: Hyper-realism and the aesthetic hallucination of reality.}

Theorists like Featherstone, Chambers and Jameson have written about the development from modernism to postmodernism in the sense of a transition from the social to the cultural, which led to a cultural declassification and a sign-saturated, depthless culture. Just like the Baudelairian alienated individual, the postmodern subject feels placeless amongst the floating signifiers of the city. The decentred postmodern city might be less physically alienating than the industrialising nineteenth-century city, but the unstoppable flow of images, cyber-

\textsuperscript{108} Quotes taken from <http://www.sexandthecityquotes.com/themes/shopping-quotes.html>
meetings, fleeting rencontres and sensory impressions, alienate the subject in a visual/virtual way. Advertisements present themselves as reality and the web, shops and movie theatres present themselves as (superficial) alternatives to the real world. The ubiquity of signs and images “leads to an implosion of meaning and a simulational world, a hyperspace in which we live beyond normativity and classification in an aesthetic hallucination of reality.”(Featherstone 1991: 33) Featherstone quotes Jameson’s Reification and Utopia who says that culture is “the very element of consumer society itself: no society has ever been saturated with signs and images like this one.”(Jameson in Featherstone 1991:53) In this sign-saturated society, experiences become levelled and time is broken down into a series of perpetual presents\(^{109}\), a person’s sense of memory and history are lost. This way, people start to search for mystical, powerful experiences, which Jameson calls intensities\(^{110}\), a synonym for kicks. These kicks do not have to be as extreme as jumping off a building on a chord, but they translate easily into a flourishing nightlife, shopping addictions and drug-induced fuddles. Down the ages, many artistic or religious subcultures have evoked these intensities by means of religious rituals and drug use; whilst “the masses” found their entertainment in carnivals and fairs. Art and literature have always been ways to deal with alienation, or simply, boredom. Many people nowadays find an alternative world in the hyper-reality of shopping malls, movie theatres, amusement parks or anything that offers them a temporary escape. Since shopping malls, television and movie theatres are such a common part of daily urban life, these constructions have become, for many people, the reality (for example, reality-TV). Baudrillard’s statement (Simulations) that all fields of society have become hyper-real, is a logical extension of this:

As Baudrillard remarks, “It is reality itself today that is hyperrealist. Surrealism’s secret already was that the most banal reality could become surreal, but only in certain privileged moments that are still nevertheless connected with art and the imaginary. Today it is quotidian reality in its entirety – political, social, historical and economic- that from now incorporates the simulating dimension of hyperrealism. We live everywhere already in an ‘aesthetic’ hallucination of reality. (Baudrillard in Featherstone 1991:69)

\(^{109}\) Featherstone agrees with Jameson’s statement about the image-culture and loss of temporality: Jameson (…) identifies the two basic features of postmodernism as (1) the transformation of reality into images and (2) a schizophrenic fragmentation of time into a series of perpetual presents. (Featherstone 1991: 42)

\(^{110}\) Although he/she therefore does not know personal identity, no projects, the immediate undifferentiated experience of the presentness of the world, leads to a series of intensities: vivid, powerful experiences which bear “a mysterious and oppressive charge of affect”. (Jameson in Featherstone 1991 : 58)
The collective realisation of living in a hyper-real, simulational world can even be a therapeutic for the crowds, who drag themselves through the city every day. Isobel, the Jewish lover out of *Girls, Visions and Everything* explains this magic catharsis to Lila, who cannot choose between a stable love life and a wandering existence:

“I quit,” she said with an expression of pure happiness. I spent all night reading *On the Road* and I went out this morning and saw everyone in the city getting ready for another day or get pushed into another day they’ll never be ready for and, do you know what I realized Lila? Do you know what hit me?” Lila sat quietly, never moving, while Isabel danced around the roof, pointing to the skyscrapers and tenements, using the bridges as her blackboard.

“Then these individuals come here to a giant cacophony of sound and light and activity and they find out that what they imagined doesn’t exist at all. But, there is something even more frightening and holy which is the spectacle of all these people having this realization together. (Schulman 1999: 177-8, my emphasis)

According to Isobel, a roaming lifestyle is the only way to deal with the hyper-reality of the city. If Lila wants to be a flâneuse, she should not settle inside but keep walking the streets:

“Lila, you can’t stop walking the streets and trying to get under the city’s skin because, if you settle in your own hole, she’ll change so fast that by the time you’ll wake up, she won’t be yours anymore. Do you see Lila? Do you see? Lila? What’s wrong?” (Schulman 1999:177-8)

2. **Locked up in one’s self.**

The postmodern individual who does not look for kicks, risks becoming neurasthenic due to the overload of impulses. The distant flâneuse is in danger of becoming a purely solipsistic, almost autistic, person. In *City of Boys*, the protagonist lesbian character escapes her love problems by numbering everything: “I said nothing, only looked out the window and counted the steps she took toward our building.” (Nugent 1994: 375) A similar “autistic” way of escaping problems is to be found in *Girls, Visions and Everything*. Emily has been alone for all of her leave-taking life, so, in order to protect herself from emotional pain, she has chosen only to retain memories of images, signs and colours instead of people. She prefers sensory memories to social memories:

When Lila thought about Emily as a child, she saw her on a lifetime path of visual problems, spatial concerns, angles, shapes and colour matching. Her descriptions were rarely anecdotal or populated. She had almost no stories about people. In stead she talked about the way the light was in the morning, the sound of the sea, or how her own body smelled in one place as opposed to another. (Schulman 1986:111-112)

This hyper-sensorial way of seeing shapes and experiencing her environment, is Emily’s inheritance of the flâneur: she has an extraordinary eye for shapes, colours and details, but not for social contacts. Her perception has also gone from “the social to the cultural (aesthetic)”.
Her body smell changes according to its circumstances, there seems to be no essential self at the basis of Emily’s wandering existence. Emily’s uncentredness/plasticity is the essence of her person, which comes very close to the flâneur/euse definition. The same happens to Hermann’s flâneuse in *Niets dan geesten*. Perception, angles and shapes determine the girl’s more philosophic beliefs:

> maar dat was het niet wat me later liet denken dat we op dat moment verschillende wegen zijn ingeslagen. Het was het typische verschil in onze waarneming, in de dingen waarin we geloofden of bereid waren te geloven. Ik wist zeker dat het om exact die gouden rechthoek van licht was gegaan. (“Waarheen leidt de weg” in Hermann 2004: 185-216, here: 206)

To escape this kind of self-absorbed neurosis, Lila out of *Girls, Visions and Everything*, uses her imagination to escape from the boredom of the real world: “Sometimes Lila just let herself look at a lot of ordinary things in a magnificent way.”(Schulman 1999: 51) Her escapism even turns her into an allegorical poetess: “Lila’s job was so fucking boring and disruptive and ever-present that she decided to write about it as a way of turning the mundane into the allegorical.” (Schulman 1999:48) She cherishes, even sanctifies, little epiphanies as a weapon against the outside: “It gave her so many nice things to think about the rest of the day. Lila knew once again that life was holy and every minute precious.” (Schulman 1999: 64) This way she resembles the mystical flâneur who was subject to moments of profane enlightenment or le merveilleux.

### 3. Kitsch

Since the postmodern urban world is regarded as “everywhere and already an aesthetic hallucination of reality”, it is a logical consequence that, together with the “death of the social, the loss of the real leads to a nostalgia for the real: a fascination with and desperate search for real people, real values, real sex”. (Kroeker, *Baudrillard’s Marx*, quoted in Featherstone 1991:85) Aware of the simulating nature of the urban reality, people start to overvalue real, history-laden objects (e.g. family furniture and old picture frames) and imitate old-fashioned styles as an acquired aesthetic. The obvious superficiality of this style implodes the meaning of these objects. They become empty signifiers of foregone times. Kitsch is the anti-climax of the desire for the “real”, and becomes a popular, democratic style for the postmodern individual, both in art and other fields (tourism, music, design):

> With postmodernism, traditional distinctions and hierarchies are collapsed, polyculturalism is acknowledged, which fits in with the global circumstance; kitsch, the popular, and difference are celebrated. (Featherstone 1991:94)
Postmodernism develops an aesthetic of sensation, of the figural in stead of discursive. (…) In effect, art is everywhere: in the street, the refuse, the body, the happening. There is no longer a valid distinction possible between high and serious art, and mass popular art and kitsch. (Featherstone 1991:124)

In *Niets dan geesten*, the characters revel in going to markets in stead of visiting the sights of the city (Prague). As post-tourists (see chapter four), they visit the kitschy Vietnamese market which offers a phantasmagoria of colourful religious:

De Vietnamezen stonden in drommen om tonnen heen waarin vuur smellede en gedroegen zich alsof ze absoluut niets te maken hadden met de felgekleurde spullen die aan de plastic afdekzeilen van hun kramen hingen, pannenborstels, Mariabeeldjes, gebreide truien, kamerfonteinen, conservenblikken, kinderpyjama’s. (“Waarheen leidt de weg” in Hermann 2004: 185-216, here 202)

The appreciation of pop art and mass culture has become a commonplace “activity” for trendsetting people, especially that of gay people. Homosexual men were the first to *domesticate* pop culture within the homosexual sphere: examples of this are their love for female pop idols (Kylie Minogue, Marilyn Monroe, Madonna), and their idolatry of Warhol and Barbie.

After coming to terms with the commercial male-oriented attitude of the “gay pride”, lesbian women have also adopted the flavour for kitsch and pop culture. In *Girls, Visions and Everything*, Helen Hayes, the leading lady of the underground lesbian artistic community, opens her speech by saying: “Today’s kitsch is tomorrow’s collectible.” (Schulman 1999: 108) Like the flâneur, these women artists are collectors of “tasteful” leftovers: their scraps and rags are aesthetic objects for people in the know:

There were little wading pools, Hawaiian shirts and bathing suits. (…) It was tackiness as an acquired and desired aesthetic instead of tackiness because that was the only way one knew how to be. A subtle but crucial difference. (Schulman 1999: 72)

I think the phrase “subtle but crucial” reveals the charnel of the flâneur/flâneuse disposition: like the old flâneur, the contemporary flâneuse is not afraid to be contaminated by the bad taste (kitsch) of the masses. Since they have the subtle-but-crucial aesthetic judgement of the dandy, they can adopt any (tacky) style they want, without completely levelling with the masses. Their aesthetic eye shields them (like the prince-like posture) from the crowds. It is also very typical that lesbians (the Others within the Others, coming second in the homosexuality-debate) are so much inclined towards debris and leftovers. As an antidote to the masculine *Gay Pride*, Schulman’s lesbians organise a *Lesbian Shame Week*, with the *Worst Performance Festival* as its satiric anticlimax. They ridicule their own community of
underground performance artists, knowing that today’s kitsch or trash will be tomorrow’s collectible.

E. Conclusion: The flâneuse, or, the female essence of city life.

The postmodern fashion of demythologizing icons and symbols of the past has also affected the myth of the male flâneur: the literary/historical status of this figure seems to have outgrown its real-life proportions:

“the flâneur has become more visible in his afterlife than in his flourishing.”(Susan Buck-Morss in Ganeva 2004:256)

As a cultural form its status as ‘myth’ as opposed to ‘lived experience’ is irreducible.”(Munt 1998:41)

Hence the difficulty of defining flâneuses against the definition of this elusive and constructed figure: as we learnt from postmodernism, something like “thé flâneur” or “thé flâneuse” does not exist, they are only fictions which we use as instruments in order to analyse history and literature more economically. This does not mean that the adulthood of the flâneuse has to evolve into a state of meaninglessness, it just urges us to be cautious with labels and generalisations.

In unravelling the many threads which hold together the canvass of the adult flâneuse, we still come across images and figures which determined the early flâneuse’s life (e.g. the femme passante, the badaud, the prostitute, the lesbian and the dandy). These female characters are all still related to the flâneuse, who possesses the dandy’s aesthetic distance, the femme passante’s mobility, the lesbian’s courage, and is sometimes still subject to objectification like the prostitute.

Esse est percipi in a flâneuse’s life: the world exists in their own specific glance, and they exist themselves as a reflection, an image to be consumed by others. This can be in a visual mode (as a femme passante), or more directly, by the touch of a stranger (more like a prostitute). In Aqua Alta (Niets dan geesten), the protagonist is discreetly “harassed” in the crowd. A stranger touches her thighs, after the first shock, she understands the fugitive nature of the act:
Maar nu begreep ik dat het helemaal niet om die blik ging, maar om de verboden aanraking van een vrouw in een anonieme massa, om mij. (“Aqua Alta” in Hermann 2004: 96-120, here: 108)

Her reaction is delayed, and similar to the post-ponement of happiness, she misses her chance for revenge, leaving the triumph for the man of the crowd:

Ik duwde hem van me af en zijn gezicht begon te stralen, hij ving mijn blik op en hield die brutaal vast, twee, drie seconden lang. We keken elkaar recht in de ogen, vermoedelijk was dat het hoogtepunt van zijn spel, de laatste, verrukkelijke verheviging, en voordat ik kon uithalen en hem een klap in zijn gezicht kon geven had hij zich al omgedraaid en was in de menigte verdwenen. (“Aqua Alta” in Hermann 2004: 96-120, here: 109)

A similar, but maybe even more offensive experience happens to Lila in New York: just because of her lonely street-walking, she gets taken for a prostitute. Hundred years after women started to become a “normal” sight in the city, Lila still thinks it is normal for people to take her for a prostitute (or Schulman has endowed her with bitter sarcasm):

Twice in one week, Lila got mistaken for a prostitute, she was walking home on Christy Street in the middle of the afternoon through China Town’s warehouse district and two trucks drove by. “Going out? Going out?” she decided it was an honest mistake. Why else would a woman be walking down the street wearing a shoulder bag? The next day she was on the corner of Tenth Street and Third Avenue, waiting to make a phone call when a guy drove up in a cab. “Hey, you. Get in.” he yelled out the window. “I’m not a prostitute,” Lila said. “She’s a prostitute,” pointing to a woman next to the phone booth. “Oh,” he said, shifting his gaze, “Hey you. Get in.” (Schulman 1999: 141, my emphasis)

These fragments show that independent women can still not walk the city unimpeded; the male gaze still conquers their presence in the city. The masculine city (cops and taxicabs) is perceived as a danger (it is a City of Boys): it is populated with staring Puerto Ricans, whose eyes are made only to see women on the streets:

Where we live, on the Upper West side, the streets are full of Puerto Rican men watching women. Carefully they examine each woman who passes; carefully they hold her with her eyes, as if they are somehow responsible for her continued existence on the street. Not a woman goes untouched by the long leash of their looks. (…) Their eyes are made only to see women on the streets. (Nugent 1994: 370)

this is the kind of talk that won me, in addition to the fact that she took me in from the hard streets full of boys and cops and taxicabs, and everywhere I looked, the hard eyes of innocence turned. (Nugent 1994: 373)
In this masculine city, women can only rely on each other’s maternal instinct. The protagonist girl has been saved from prostitution and drugs by her butch lover:

and I remember how she found me standing just outside the porn theatre on Ninety-Eighth and Broadway, and she slipped me right from under the gaze of a hundred curious Puerto Ricans (Nugent 1994: 372)

Nevertheless, she wants to detach herself from this maternal figure: “What I do sometimes is slip out under her absent gaze.” (Nugent 1994: 370) Instead of staying with this woman, she fights for an independent, nymphomaniac existence. She wants to look for a (dangerous) boy out of rebellion towards her female (safe) lover: “Today, I tell myself, is a perfect day for losing things, love and innocence, illusions and expectations, it is a day through which I wander until I find the perfect boy.” (Nugent 1994:370) The connection between “wandering” and “finding a perfect boy” supports the cliché that women’s capacities for loving relationships are an impediment to true flânerie: the boys symbolise outlawry, they are city-sneakers who have only themselves to rely on, instead of a parental instance to “catch them when they fall”. Lesbian urban fiction seems to be torn between the (male) desire for roaming and roving, and the (feminine?) desire for recognition, for the final home-coming.

Sally Munt points towards the difficulties posed to lesbian urbanites: in their position of hate-victims, they have to turn to literary travelling fantasies in stead of real ones. The figure of the flâneur inspires her because of his mobility:

As I become a victim to, rather than a possessor of, the gaze, my fantasies of lesbian mobility/eroticism return to haunt me. As ‘home’ recedes, taking my butch confidence with it, my exiled wanderings in bed at night have become literary expeditions. As I pursue myself through novels, the figure of the flâneur has imaginatively refigured the mobility of my desire. These fictional voyages offer me a dream-like spectacle which returns as a memory I have in fact never lived. Strolling has never been so easy, a new spatial zone, the lesbian city, opens to me.’ (Munt 1998: 31, italics in original)

Munt wants to argue against these images of impossibility and alienation by representing the lesbian flâneur as inhabited by a heroic female desire to stand up against heterosexual masculine desire. In Brighton, she finds an alternative to the male gaze: the “dyke stare”:

Brighton introduced me to the dyke stare, it gave me permission to stare. It made me feel I was worth staring at, and I learned to dress for the occasion. Brighton constructed my lesbian identity, one that was given to me by the glance of others, exchanged by the looks I gave them, passing –or not passing- in the street. (Munt 1998: 31)

This stare gives her the possibility to be a femme passante when she wants to be, only being desired when she wants to be desirable.
The former examples have all shown that the lives of the flâneuse and her companions (femme passantes, lesbians, artists, dandies, badauds) are often intertwined, and their difficulties on the path of life resemble each other a lot. Nevertheless, the *Manhattan Attitude* gave rise to so many different female lifestyles, which gave women a chance to become more than just these stereotypical characters. The flâneuse, champion of ambiguity and elusivity, alternated between these roles, but also distinguished herself by her independence from all these figures: like quicksilver, she always slips through the maze of the nets. Hence she becomes the quintessential symbol of postmodern urban life: a roaming signifier in many different shapes.
“Ruth, misschien is het wel zo dat jij altijd jezelf zoekt en jezelf werkelijk telkens weer kunt zien, en dat in tegenstelling tot jou ik mijzelf wil verliezen, mij van mijzelf verwijderen, en dat kan ik het beste wanneer ik op reis ben, en soms ook als ik word bemind.”

(“Ruth (Vriendinnen)” in Hermann 2004: 7-46, here: 26)

“We worden er van Europa? Europa is een soort museum. Een pretpark van nostalgie.112

V. Welt-flânerie: the midlife crisis of the flâneuse

A. Introduction: female flânerie in a midlife crisis?

The midlife crisis is mostly associated with a crisis in one’s sense of self, a return to adolescence, followed by a flight into another way of living (a relation with a younger partner, moving abroad, or, on a smaller scale, changing jobs). This stage is also applicable to female flânerie in the contemporary era (1999-2005): there is a crisis of the concept flânerie. The old definition is too static and closed: since the city is no longer a necessary locus, it will have to be opened up. This results in a fragmentation of the narrative, we can read a revival of the adolescence (popularity of Weimar nostalgia), and a Diaspora takes place towards the no-cities or more obscure regions on the map. Judith Hermann’s two bundles of short stories are, amongst others, good examples for the Weimar revival (Zomerhuis, Later) and the Diaspora (Niets dan geesten). I will also refer to Mila Ganeva’s article on Judith Hermann and the phenomenon of Welt-flânerie.

In the former chapter, the writings were on the wall for a crisis: since postmodernism is known for its fragmentation, de-centredness, hyper-realism, post-globalisation and pastiche (amongst others), the danger lurks for flânerie to become an empty signifier. Since “anything goes” in postmodern times, cities have been replaced by a worldwide playground, the bag lady has transformed into a shopaholic and the white middle class wanderer into a cyberspace stroller. Like Deborah Parsons argues, we have to be careful with all these postmodern interpretations, or we eventually arrive at a state of meaninglessness:

112 Het momentum van vandaag speelt zich in Azië af.”, interview with Geert Buelens by Jeroen Versteele in: De Morgen Boeken, Wednesday 13/07/05, p. 2-5
Once an idle observer of the Parisian demi-monde, for contemporary theory he is an increasingly expansive figure who represents a variety of ‘wanderings’, in terms of ambulation, nationality, gender, race, class and sexuality. The *elusivity* remains, however. Used to allude to a whole range of urban social identities from shopping-mall consumer to internet surfer, it risks an overload of significance that results in *meaninglessness*. (Parsons 2000:4)

I will try to demonstrate in the following paragraphs that the problematic definition and the decentralisation of cities do not interfere with the essence of flânerie. Following Parsons, I want to stress that the flâneur and the flâneuse are constant in one thing at least: in their *elusivity* and their dandyesque aesthetic eye (be it distanced or not). The flâneuses of today still show striking similarities to the prototypical flâneur:

A. heeft gebeld en gevraagd waar je was, en ik heb gezegd dat je weer onder elke straattegel naar een boodschap zoekt, of had ik dat niet mogen zeggen? (‘Ruth (Vriendinnen) in Hermann 2004: 7-46, here: 46)

B. The crisis: A loss of a sense of narrative to one’s life, the lack of a centre. (literary postmodernism)

1. Nothing but Stories

On a literary level, the “loss of a sense of narrative to the individual’s life” (Featherstone 1991: 120) leads to a fragmentation of the storyline: bits and pieces of experiences are bundled into short stories in stead of classic novels (e.g. Judith Hermann, Beth Nugent, Sarah Schulman). Lyotard’s preference of “petits récits” over “grands récits” illustrates the shift from global to local knowledge (or from generalising to more individual, partial prose):

Instead of the *grands récits* (meta-narratives), Lyotard emphasizes *petits récits*. Hence ‘local’ knowledge in terms of the *pagus*, the space inhabited by the ‘pagan’, which takes on the cast of an anti-theological knowledge disputing its pretensions to global knowledge, is valorised. (Featherstone 1991:124)

Like Raymond Carver and Donald Barthelme (amongst others) proved earlier: qualitative literature is not irreconcilable with commercial success. The short story proves its actuality by presenting us time after time with the youngest generation of authors, through its easily accessible format. Its form is not completely new, if we relate them to, for example, the nineteenth-century *Physiologies*, the short, journalistic descriptions of characters in the city. These were often written by flâneurs who observed the inside of their city (they spied on households in their living rooms, looked into shop interiors, ateliers) from the outside (the
street). Their voyeuristic business is nowadays still present in the overload of human interest and reality-TV programs, be it on a national scale. The phenomenon of people telling their stories, and other people watching, reading or writing these stories, is one of the key concepts of literature in general. Hermann’s narrators too, are lovers of voyeurism and story-telling: “one of the few goals to which these young people appear to be committed is to observe and report on the human milieu and to ‘tell stories’.” (Ganeva 2004: 251)

The subtitle to Hermann’s second bundle (Vertellingen) reveals her intention: these are stories, nothing more, nothing less. Their characters have a compulsive need for story-telling, which is most openly expressed in Rode Koralen. The protagonist girl recounts her own biography, woven into one with that of her grandmother. The girl needs to tell stories in order to release herself from her past and history:

Ik vroeg hem belangstellend of ik hem niet een klein Russisch verhaaltje zou vertellen, en mijn geliefde zei raadselachtig dat de verhalen voorbij waren, hij wou ze niet horen en ik moest trouwens mijn eigen verhaal niet verwisselen met andere verhalen. Ik vroeg: “Heb jij dan geen eigen verhaal?” en mijn geliefde zei nee, hij had er geen. (“Rode Koralen” in Hermann 1999: 7-22, here: 15)

Her lover is a typical postmodern subject who doesn’t do stories, who has none and does not want to listen to any. She is still enamoured with old tales, and wants to shake off her past by telling the stories, by therapeutically spitting them out:

Ik zei: Luister, ik wil die verhalen vertellen! De Petersburgse verhalen, de oude verhalen, ik wil ze vertellen om door ze naar buiten en weg te kunnen gaan. (...) en ik zei: “Ik wil niet over jou praten, ik wil die verhalen vertellen en mijn verhaal is ook jouw verhaal.”Echt, we vochten met elkaar.”( “Rode Koralen” in Hermann 1999: 7-22, here:17-18)

Stories are the only reality for the characters: they turn the whole world into a story. People become stories too:

“Ik kan er niet mee ophouden de toekomst voor te stellen, Jacob. Ik kan er niet mee ophouden te denken dat ik op een bepaald moment en misschien al heel gauw aan iemand anders het volgende verhaal zal vertellen, een verhaal over jou.”( “Waarheen leidt de weg” in Hermann 2004: 185-216, here: 215)

One story follows the other: life as a deferral of happiness and meaning is translated into a bundle of short stories:

Als ik terugkom kijkt Jacob me aan. We praten veel.Ik kijk daarbij meestal naar de muur. Ik heb wel eens gezegd dat ik er moe van word altijd maar weer die oude verhalen te vertellen, over het verleden, mijn kindertijd, over de eerste verliefdheden en de laatste, de momenten waarop je tot een inzicht kwam, geluk, de dingen die maken dat ik ben wie ik ben.( “Waarheen leidt de weg” in Hermann 2004: 185-216, here: 185)
2. A centrifugal way of writing

The stories have a centrifugal structure, similar to the life philosophy of their characters, who keep postponing any chance of happiness: “geluk is altijd het moment ervóór. De seconde voor het moment waarop ik eigenlijk gelukkig zou moeten zijn, in die seconde ben ik gelukkig en weet het niet.” (“Camera Obscura” in Hermann 1999: 127-134, here: 128) Living in a world full of plagiarism and kitsch, these characters flee from authenticity, always putting off a chance for a happy ending. Like the flâneur, these women cannot grow into a state of domestic happiness:

“Niets dan geesten” in Hermann 2004: 154-184, here:188)

Like in the modernist (flânerie-related) works of Thomas Pynchon (V.) and André Breton (Nadja), meaningful communication is delayed and postponed. Just like the old flâneur who was always attracted by the next window, the post-flâneuse keeps deviating from her course, lost in a labyrinth of physical and mental ruins. A centrifugal way of writing seems to be the only method of dealing with this material:

Far from being an urban centre and the object of the quest, the Postmodern city is a place where meaning (the “vehicle” of communication) never gets to its destination, but keeps on deviating from its course. Its dispersive logic, like the allegorical war ruins in the zone and the reductive Baedeker geography in V., marks the transformation of the map into a cryptographic territory of communication where the individual is more and more physically committed and mentally scattered. (Daniele 2000:132)113

C. The return to adolescence

1. The Weimar revival

Since the flâneuse’s adolescence was set in Berlin for this dissertation, I will return to Berlin and the Weimar flâneur/euse in the following paragraphs. Like the politically neutral Weimar flâneur, Hermann’s characters are mostly self-absorbed, neurasthenic, young artists (often belonging to the class of new intermediaries: graphic designers, video artists, painters, writers, writers,

photographers et al). Judith Hermann and other new German woman writers received criticisms for not being politically engaged and only being interested in making money with their “commercial” short stories. As an illustration, Mila Ganeva quotes the criticisms on Hermann:

Many sceptics were disturbed by the fact that the grandchildren’s generation in post-war literature lacked the moral and political pathos of its predecessors and showed no signs of the youthful rebellion that one might expect from so young a crowd.(…) in the new literary debates, market sensation and profit are mistaken for aesthetic categories. (Ganeva 2004: 253)

These criticisms echo Hessel’s reviewers (lacking political awareness), and even those of Colette, who got criticized for her female flânerie-novel, La Vagabonde114 (1910):

“Colette a eu le grand tort de ne point fixer hardiment un idéal, quel qu’il fût, humain ou artistique.” (Nicole Ferrier-Caverivière, Préface à La Vagabonde. in Colette 1990: 10)

Because of their world-wide success, Hermann and other writers of her generation have been called Frauleinwunder. Like the healthy, popular German Mädchen who were very popular marriage material in the US after the Second World War, these authors win prizes and get translated, being the new German (literary) export product. In Cambridge, conferences are held to shed light on the Neuer Realismus and the Enkelkinder of Germany. The difference between the maternal, blushing soldier-girls and the Virginia Woolf-looks of Judith Hermann could not be bigger. With her image, Hermann evokes the aloof Weimar flâneur:

Hermann’s staged façade of aloof yet slightly wistful dandyism is mirrored in the stance of the narrators in the stories of both of her books. A closer look at the texts themselves will reveal that it is the flâneur who has returned in a new disguise and with a new agenda to fin-de-siècle literature. (Ganeva 2004:255)

Likewise, her characters are impartial observers of their environment and themselves, in which they resemble the nostalgic Weimar flâneurs:

as they consciously avoid engagement with recent politics and turn instead to the quotidian, works such as Hermann’s stories seem to be adapting the aesthetics of solipsistic observation and the posture of political and moral disengagement that was typical of an older, even old-fashioned form of stylized melancholy found in the flâneur literature of the 1920ies. (Ganeva 2004:252)

Although the label Neuer Realismus (referring to the Neue Sachlichkeit of the Weimar era?) does not reveal much postmodern dynamism, Hermann’s stories are also up-to-date through their filmic, or rather, audiovisual inspiration: they are “part of that new public culture which

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considers the literary text’s meaning complete only in combination with visual and audio effects.” (Ganeva 2004: 255)In this respect, Hermann is clearly a child of her time (her characters are part of the group of new intermediaries) and a child of her place (Berlin is the basic setting for most of her stories). When set in Berlin, the stories clearly evoke the Weimar era (when Berlin was “the imaginary locus of cultural vitality, social dynamics, and cosmopolitan glamour” Ganeva 2004: 255), be that a commercial trick or not.

If we accept the criticism that Hermann’s characters have no ideals or political engagement, we should not forget that they hold up a mirror for their own generation (Neuer Realismus). I think that Hermann’s and other young authors’ popularity is not only due to the commercial marketing of their nostalgic image, but also to the ad-hoc value of her stories: Hermann writes accounts of the lives of the twenty/thirty-something self-made people who live “grandly on nothing”. They have no interest for elitist literature, but they are nevertheless quite intellectual young artists. They resemble the dandy in their assumption of a neutral and dilettante pose.

Hermann’s success could be due to a mixture of modern nostalgia, postmodern fragmentation and a refreshing feminine but distanced writing style. This is her force, in which she resembles the Weimar women writers:

The writing of the female flaneurs of the Weimar Republic lies in a hidden history of strong female writing, using new forms of character representation and writing alternatives for dominant relationships. (Gleber 1999:192)

Judith Hermann and the other authors of her generation (the Frauleinwunder) meet the public’s need for disengagement in a post-modern, globalized world. By writing the stories she wants, heedless of the negative criticisms, Hermann (a former journalist) scores with her first and second novel. Her talent for story-telling is widely appreciated, by readers and critics (apart from the above-mentioned):

Because of Hermann’s pronounced predilection for entertaining and storytelling, freed from traditional political and moral discourses, she is also considered a typical representative in this body of New Berlin literature produced in the 1990s, and she is perceived by both readers and literati as a refreshing new phenomenon.(Ganeva 2004: 251)

The evocation of Weimar flânerie (Kracauer’s Nichtigkeit) is most obvious in the state of mind of Hermann’s characters: they are
global tourists who travel with ease all over the world, and what they search for in their journeys is not the authentic and ultimately transformative experience but the recurring information that existential boredom and emptiness can now be replaced on a global scale.” (Ganeva 2004:271-272, my italics)
2. Disengaged solipsists or passionate lovers?

The adolescence chapter of this dissertation concluded that the solipsistic, almost autistic stance of the flâneur seemed to be the most difficult theme to appropriate by the 1920s flâneuses. Instead, they chose to live passionately like Lebenskünstlerinnen. When Berlin is the background for a story by Hermann, the nostalgic and bohemian sphere of the Weimar era is evoked, but only now, the debris comes not from the war but from the protagonists’ own life: failed careers, lost loves and broken illusions are the main landscapes for the lives of Hermann’s flâneuses. The entropic city is no longer politically chaotic but a field full of personal stories.

Although the characteristic of distance is here certainly present\(^{115}\), these characters are still prepossessed with their (past) love-lives. They do travel the world with an ease of mind, without goals or intentions, but when their love pops up, they jump on a plain right back to him. The same happened to Carrie in *Sex and the City* and to Bridget out of the *Bridget Jones Diaries*: independent, wandering women who turn their life into a form of art, still crumble when they think they have found true love. Love affairs and domesticity seem to be the largest impediment to women’s capacity for flânerie: we find this tendency also in the arrival of the TV-series *Desperate Housewives*, which has taken over the popularity of *Sex and the City*. Nevertheless, Carrie out of SATC beautifully expresses the possibility of being a flâneuse and having a partner:

Carrie: Maybe some women aren't meant to be tamed. Maybe they're supposed to run wild until they find someone -- just as wild -- to run with\(^{116}\).

In the same line of the Weimar flâneuses, post-flâneuses distinguish themselves from the flâneur by being more passionate. Just like in Irmgard Keun’s *Gilgi, eine von uns*, the truly aloof characters are still the men in Hermann’s stories:

Hij woonde graag in Berlijn, hij gaf er de voorkeur aan de stad zo vaak mogelijk te verlaten en op vreemde, ver weg gelegen plekken te werken, voor een halfjaar, en dan weer terug te keren naar Berlijn. (“Souteneur” in Hermann 2004: 121-153, here: 121)


\(^{115}\) For example: “Ik haalde diep adem en zei ‘Ik ben juist heel dol op die eenzaamheid.’” (“De liefde voor Ari Oskarsson” in Hermann 2004: 217-253, here 233)

\(^{116}\) Carrie in *Sex and the City*, taken from http://www.sexandthecityquotes.com/themes/shopping-quotes-2.html
The men’s solipsistic behaviour shows autistic traits: outside the normal world, they live in their own imaginary world with their own rules:

Geconcentreerde zinnen, hoewel hij eigenlijk helemaal niet geconcentreerd was, niet op de buitenwereld geconcentreerd, niet op wat er om hem heen gebeurde, de toestand waarin de anderen verkeerden en hoe ze zich voelden. Eerder autistisch, aan zichzelf overgeleverd in al het geluk en al het ongeluk. (“Koudblauw” in Hermann 2004: 47-95, here: 62)


Hermanns flâneuses hover between being passionate or indifferent. In Schulman’s account of lesbian flânerie, Lila is confronted with the same problem: does she want to roam the streets forever or will she step out of her flâneuse’s life and bond? At first, she feels threatened by the diversion of a new affair, and enjoys going out alone:

With so much diversion, Lila would never be able to do the things that she loved best, like walk the streets for hours with nowhere to go except for where she ended up. She would never have the time to bump into a brand new person and give them their total attention. And with that understanding, she was happy to step out alone into the night’s heat. (Schulman 1999:47, my emphasis)

She was just walking around when everyone else seemed to have a place to go. All these years she had felt like she was the only girl in the world doing that guy-like thing. When women have no place to go, they get married or kill themselves. Only guys walked around all night. Now though, she knew that back then, somewhere Emily had been walking around too. (Schulman 1999: 133, my emphasis)

The realisation that her girlfriend Emily is also a loner, makes Lila less defensive. She knows her wandering existence is not threatened by Emily, and realises she has “found someone – just as wild- to run with”. When Lila realises that Emily is “worse” then her in terms of disengagement, this even challenges her to try to convince Emily into intimacy:

Lila had finally found a lover who could out-distance her. A lifetime of playing it cool had not prepared her for the on-again off-again affections of Emily Harrison. Emily, however, who had spent her life moving in and out of intimacy, was, by habit or caution, on the reserved side. (Schulman 1999: 191-2)

Finally, then, Lila gives in and becomes an attached girlfriend to Emily. She does not mind having to give up her flâneuse’s lifestyle, making room for romance and naïve ideals:

It had been a long time since Lila had been running out on the streets all night, alone, figuring things out, chasing girls and conversation, but she didn’t miss it that much because something special and sweet had come into her life. Maybe it was a gift to remind her that it was right to believe in love. (Schulman 1999:154)
The difference between flâneurs and flâneuses still lies in the more “social” and bonding attitude of women. Men don’t seem to need the social contact as much, or, like the biographer of George Bryan “Beau” Brummell (the stereotypical British dandy) wrote: “Brummell had too much self-love ever to be really in love.” (Munt 1998:33) Women balance between this dandyesque attitude and a more sentimental stance towards love. Their lack of pure narcissism (they are mostly able to love in stead of solely living for themselves) does not have to be a handicap towards flânerie, but it could be conceived of as a “female touch” upon a formerly male-dominant phenomenon.

3. Teenage drama: euphoric and dysphoric states

The flâneuses in both Schulman’s and Hermann’s stories often behave like real adolescents when it comes to alternating melancholic moods with moments of ecstasy. Just like Berlin in the 1920s/1930s, there is an alternation of dark moods and euphoric happiness. That way, the new flâneuses inherit the flâneur’s euphoric and dysphoric states of mind. Lila’s moments of ecstasy are oriented inwardly; she does not scream and shout but quietly rejoices in the sight of the crowds, like a true flâneuse:

They kept walking through the neighbourhood. No matter how dark the sky, it was always day from below, with the store and street lights shining off everyone’s eyes. And it never stopped. (…) They ended up sitting there until the sun came up and the club crowds turned into the after-hour crowds which turned right into the subway-bound morning work crowds. There was never an empty moment. (Schulman 1999:171)

Hermann’s post-flâneuses sometimes revel in these sad moods in an almost child-like, cathartic manner: they scream and laugh until the tears stream down their faces, whether it be tears of happiness or sadness. The book ends with an experience of le merveilleux, when the protagonists suddenly see the Northern Lights:

“het maakte hem heel erg vrolijk en ik was ook vrolijk, ongelooflijk vrolijk, en daar onder was iets dat totaal verdrietig was. En voor dat ik erbij kon komen, bij het verdriet onder de vrolijkheid, erom kon lachen, gooide Owen zijn armen in de lucht en begon te schreeuwen, en ik keek naar de hemel, en wat ik voor een groene wolk had gehouden, begon opeens uit te vloeien. (“De liefde voor Ari Oskarsson” in Hermann 2004: 217-253, here: 253)

The characters, who are stuck in an adolescent way of life, are subject to their own decadent spending sprees, a buoyant nightlife and periods of gloomy depression. It is a typical way of life for those who are unable to settle or attach, their friends are the only family allowed. Their
insecurity about the future echoes the teenager’s placelessness between the children’s and adults’ world:


D. A transition from stasis to mobility?

After the crisis and return to adolescence, a transition has to be made to solve the midlife crisis. In order to solve the crisis of a static, closed definition of flânerie (distanced attitude), we need a more open and mobile concept to work with. From the immobility of the solipsists, we have to move the definition to broader horizons. Again, Hermann’s characters balance between stasis and mobility. Their stasis (The Love for Ari Oskarsson, The End of Something) expresses their neurasthenic state of mind:

Ik ging in Trömso de deur niet uit. Bijna nooit. Ik had besloten net te doen alsof deze kamer in het Gunnarshus een plek was waar ik mijn domicilie had gekozen zonder dat het einde van mijn verblijf afzienbaar was, een plek bovendien waar de wereld langs mijn raam trok, en ik toch altijd overal kon zijn, wat er buiten gebeurde was van geen betekenis. (“De liefde voor Ari Oskarsson” in Hermann 2004: 217-253, here: 225)

Whether Hermann’s characters travel or stay immobile, both options are states of boredom (“I’ve seen it all”) and placelessness:

Reizen valt me eigenlijk moeilijk. (...) ik heb het onzinnige gevoel dat ik alles al heb gezien. Het is voor mij onmogelijk me in vreemde steden veilig en op mijn gemak te voelen, ik zou het liefst in mijn hotelkamer blijven zitten, de deur op slot doen, niet de straat op gaan. Vanzelfsprekend blijf ik niet in mijn hotelkamer en ga naar buiten, maar het gevoel van angst raak ik maar zelden kwijt. (“Aqua Alta” in Hermann 2004: 96-120, here: 107)

We find the same immobility in the stories by Nugent and Schulman: although the girls mostly wander around, sometimes all they can do is sitting by the window in the midst of New York City. Like the thirties flâneur, they are immobilised by too many impressions:

She sits by the window and looks out onto the street as though she is waiting for something, waiting for rent control to end, or waiting for something else to begin. She sits by the window waiting for something, and pulls a long string through her fingers. (City of boys 1994:381)

Frequently, one character incorporates both options: Lila out of Girls Visions and Everything enjoys the crowds and city hustle, yet she rejoices in leaning back and feeling excluded. That
way, Lila is an “old-fashioned” flâneuse: she is addicted to the city, enjoys being central and marginal, roams around at night and enjoys the phantasmagoria of buildings and people.

Most importantly, Lila needed a shot of the city, so, after sneaking out the door, promising to be more careful in the future, she was right in it again. The buildings created a shining path that led directly to safety and adventure. Sometimes she would just put her head down and whiz right through, being part of the rush and the urgency. Sometimes she leaned back as far as she could until she was outside of it. (Schulman 1999:50, my emphasis)

Lila is a good example of the basic flâneur’s disposition of ambiguity. This lesbian flâneur seems to open up the definition of the static Weimar flâneur by being passionate and dandyesque, mobile and still. The same way, Sally Munt tries to make the concept of the flâneur as open and fluid as possible, by pointing only towards its dualities. This makes it easier for her to convince us in seeing of the lesbian flâneur as more flâneur than flâneur, since Sally Munt constantly reinvents the concept of the flâneur:

The flâneur is an incongruent and complex figure suggesting a number of antitheses: motion/stasis, mastery/fragility, desire/abstinence, complacency/alienation, presence/intangibility. Singularly, perhaps, the flâneur is a symbol of urbanity. When Walter Benjamin described flânerie as going ‘botanising on the asphalt’ his turn of phrase hinted at a gender ambiguity facilitating this poet to be read as less –or more – than male. The lesbian flâneur is one step from here. (…)Within contemporary lesbian writing we encounter a specific, even nostalgic image of the stroller as a self-conscious lesbian flâneur. (Munt 1998:41)

Although Munt makes a good attempt in trying to broaden the definition to lesbian flâneurs (why does she not use a female name?), she is not completely right in saying that the flâneur is singularly a symbol of urbanity. As we will see in the next paragraph, even the city will no longer be required in the new definition. What remains, is the sanctification of the stroll (mobility) and distance (dandyism).

E. The escape

1. Post-tourists

The mobility of the new flâneuses is very clearly marked in Hermann’s Niets dan geesten, where the girls wander all over the world. In the context of travelling and postmodernity, it is useful to refer here to Featherstone’s remarks on what Urry (Cultural Change and Contemporary Holiday-making) calls “post-tourists”:

It has been argued increasingly that the contemporary tourist (or ‘post-tourist’) approaches holiday locations such as resorts, theme parks, and increasingly museums in the knowledge that the spectacles offered are simulations and accepts the montaged
world and hyper-reality for what it is. (...) That is, they do not quest after an authentic pre-simulational reality but have the necessary dispositions to engage in ‘the play of the real’ and capacity to open up to surface sensations, spectacular imagery, liminoid experiences and intensities without the nostalgia for the real. (Featherstone 1991:60)

These post-tourists enjoy the artificiality of tourist parks and have no love for cultural baggage/history. They are always aware of playing the tourist, be that in amusement parks, metropolises or unknown regions:

Here we have the typical sites for what have been referred to as ‘post-tourists’ (...), people who adopt a postmodern de-centred orientation towards tourist experiences. Post-tourists have no time for authenticity and revel in the constructed simulational nature of contemporary tourism which they know is only a game. They welcome the opportunity to explore back-stage regions and tackle the experience from many points of view. (Featherstone 1991: 102)

What is of interest here, is the demonopolization and declassification of symbolic institutions and cities: backstage regions are re-valued and a decentralization of metropolises takes place. The city is no longer a character or an influential element to the stories, but serves as a rather symbolic background expressing the characters’ state of mind:

Ik nam een kamer in een klein hotel in het noorden van Parijs, in de Afrikaanse wijk, ik liep een hele week lang van ’s ochtends vroeg tot ’s avonds laat door de stad, het was koud, de Seine modderig en groen, het regende en ik had het de hele tijd koud, wat moest ik in godsnaam in Parijs? (“Niets dan geesten” in Hermann 2004: 154-184, here: 25)

The postmodern city “allows reality to present itself as softer and more fluid, and experience to acquire again the characteristic of oscillation, disorientation and play.” (Gianni Vattimo in Ganeva 2004:59) Whereas the old European cities had an organic structure, consisting out of a centre surrounded with circles (e.g. Parisian “arrondissements”), the new world cities (e.g. Los Angeles) consist out of one stretched-out suburban area, with no centre, nor an end. Where the city stops, a new city begins:

In the space of fiction, both Surrealist and Postmodern cities reveal a mapless structure that cancels out canonical references to the organic city, or polis, which was traditionally built around a historical centre. (...) Highway cities, zones, empty places and the new babylons emerging in the most recent narratives discussed here are different forms of decentred urban fields (in both the semiotic and spatial sense of the word) explored by permanent tourists on a journey suspended between fact and fiction. Unlike Breton’s flânerie, their transit does not cast light on epiphanic submerged worlds, but opens the way to endless errance and ultimately turns the quest for supreme knowledge into a more superficial Baedeker tour among unrelated remnants of different cultures. (Daniele 2000:102, my italics)
The endless and intention-less errance of permanent tourists seems to be the basic given for Hermann’s second book *Nichts als Gespenster* (*Niets dan geesten*): “Ik ging naar Corsica- ik kan me niet meer herinneren waarom uitgerekend naar Corsica, het schijnt ook niet belangrijk te zijn geweest - (…)”. (“Aqua Alta” in Hermann 2004: 96-120, here: 99)

Travelling is a way of life: apart from the intervals to save up money, Hermann’s characters fly around the world endlessly.


The destination does not matter, but the escape. Hunter-Tompson (out of *Hunter-Tompson-muziek* in *Zomerhuis, Later*) explains it well by replying to the question why he lives in a hotel:


### 2. Welt-flânerie, or the art of taking a plane.

The lives of the post-flâneuses balance on the edge of fact and fiction, and their scattered mental state is expressed through their voyages to “mapless cities”. They take the flâneur’s/flâneuse’s disposition with them all over the world, where there are no longer organic city-centres, borders or historical sites. Flânerie turns into Welt-flânerie:

Actually, today’s flâneurs may no longer be walking around in cities because they have, instead, embraced a globalized form of flânerie: they are taking their boredom along to a variety of urban and non-urban locations. As they journey, they do not search for the extraordinary simply because there is no real home, no centre of the mundane everyday routines to which one could return or to which one could compare the exotic nature of the travel experiences. (Ganeva 2004: 259-61)

This takes them to Venice and Prague, but also to Eastern European towns (Karlový Vary in the Czech Republic), Wurzburg, the Caribbean Isles and Iceland. They travel not in order to see the sights, the cities and destinations are interchangeable:

> We schenen langs water te rijden en weer door het bos en toen een stad in, downtown, rijen lichtjes en lange rijen toeterende auto’s, het kon Trömso zijn, maar ook een willekeurige andere stad, ik wilde het allemaal niet weten. (“De liefde voor Ari Oskarsson” in Hermann 2004: 217-253, here: 237)
There is no need for “being at the right time on the right place”: like the old flâneur, they have all the time in the world, strongly resisting time schedules which would limit their movement. Cultural metropolises (New York, Paris, Berlin, London) are no longer “the place to be”. Hermann’s flâneuses do visit some of these (Prague, Paris, Berlin), but, like the post-tourists, do not search for a pre-simulational authenticity. The difference with the post-tourists described above is the flâneuses’ complete non-enthusiasm (distance); they do not playfully visit attraction parks or anything like that. Out of fear for authenticity, they avoid sightseeing in the historical centres:

Peter zat naast me, rookte sigaretten, zweeg. Ik wist dat we niet de stad in zouden gaan. We zouden niet over de Karelbrug naar de Josefstad wandelen, niet over het Wenceslasplein lopen, niet het Hradcany bezichtigen, we zouden niet in Café Slavia zitten en warme chocolade met slagroom drinken en naar de Moldau kijken, we zouden niet aan het graf van Kafka staan en niet met de kabelbaan de berg op gaan, het zou belachelijk zijn om dat te doen.Het maakte niets uit dat we in Praag waren. We hadden ook in Moskou of Zagreb of Caïro kunnen zijn. (“Waarheen leidt de weg” in Hermann 2004: 185-216, here: 200)

European cities are placed next to more foreign destinations: Paris, Venice and Prague are not especially preferred to Trömsø, Reykjavik and the Carribean Isles. All the cities or no-cities evoke the same alienation:

Ik wilde drie dagen blijven, daarna doorreizen naar Parijs, daarna terug naar Berlijn. Ik bezocht in die tijd heel vaak vreemde steden, verbleef er een ongeoriënteerde, traag verlopende week en vertrok weer.( “Ruth (Vriendinnen)” in Hermann 2004: 7-46, here: 10)

The de-valuation of Berlin and Paris as cultural capitals makes place for a wider range of possible centres for the arts. Globalisation and decentralisation have blurred the old hierarchy between metropolitan cities and changed our modes of perception and communication. Hence Featherstone’s statement:

on the global level we are witnessing the end of the dominance of a few metropolitan centres over artistic and intellectual life: Paris and New York as centres of culture, the arts, fashion, culture and entertainment industries, television, publishing and music, now face greater competition from a variety of directions. (…)New forms of cultural capital and a wider range of symbolic experiences are on offer within an increasingly globalized- (…) -field of world cities. (Featherstone 1991:109-10)

Nearer to home, in Belgium, we also find this kind of travelling flâneuses, for example in the person of Maria Tarantino, a journalist and presenter of a documentary on Canvas (De Wereld van Tarantino). Italian from birth, she has lived in England, Rumania, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Edinburgh, Leuven and Brussels.
Als zelfgekozen buitenstaander verwacht dan niemand dat je het spel volledig meespeelt. Ik ben graag een buitenstaander in Brussel. Ik wil me hier maar voor 80procent thuisvoelen. Ik wil niet de huiseigenaar zijn, ik ben een huurder en als huurder kan je altijd binnen en het huis opknappen. Geef mij maar een stekje dat Brussel heet. Eentje dat Italië heet, een ander Engeland, Frankrijk, Duitsland, eentje in Japan, China. Dat hoort bij deze tijd. Ik ben een poëtische vluchteling. Ik loop nergens van weg, maar ik hou ervan terug te keren, om met een afstand van tijd helderder te oordelen.(…) Brussel was toen wat triest, wat uitgeleefd. Dat paste bij mijn gemoedsgesteldheid van die tijd. (lacht) Heel erg fin-de-siècle. 117

3. Coffee, sex and cigarettes.

Smaller scaled forms of escapism are -apart from shopping bulimia, which threatens to become the new number one death cause- addictions to alcohol, cigarettes, coffee and sex (in lowering degree of danger). As symbols of a decadent and almost nihilistic way of life, both Hermann’s and Schulman’s characters are chain smokers, daydreaming on the blue clouds of cigarettes. Very often, the smoking ritual is a manner to exclude themselves from the outside world for a little while and ponder upon life. The cigarette-sequences in Hermann’s, Nugent’s and Schulman’s stories are almost uncountable, but it is remarkable that they are mostly accompanied with a significantly melancholic atmosphere or statement. Since Hermann’s characters fear real happiness, cigarettes are mostly accompanied with darker thoughts, almost as warning lights for the reader:

Ruth (vriendinnen) ik stak een sigaret op en hield mijn gezicht in de nazomerzon. Ik dacht ‘In een provinciested zou ik zorgelozer kunnen zijn.’ (11)  
Aqua alta p. 103 Eindelijk kwamen ze naar beneden, ik had intussen twee cappucino’s gedronken en vier sigaretten gerookt, mijn blijdschap was vervlogen.  
Souteneur p. 131 Ik negeerde de bordjes met het opschrift DON'T SMOKE en stak een sigaret op, een groep Poolse ouden van dagen deden het me dankbaar na.

In Niets dan geesten, the title story of Hermann’s second bundle, Felix, the ultimate flâneur, resembles a Buddha (like Herman Hessel) in his phlegmatic, smoking pose:

Felix leunde meestal achterover, zijn benen over elkaar geslagen, rolde minutenlang een sigaret, inspecteerde die uitvoerig, stak hem aan en inhaleerde diep, een goede sigaret, de beste van de wereld. Hij liet de sigaret uitgaan en bekeek hem heel nauwkeurig voordat hij hem weer aanstak. Hij keek ergens naar, soms iemand aan, keek soms Ellen aan, hij zat praktisch onbeweeglijk, een boedda zonder gewicht, zijn rug kaarsrecht, zijn schouders naar achteren. (Hermann 2004:173)

117 “De wereld van Tarantino”, interview with Maria Luisa Tarantino by Thomas Lowette in: Het Nieuwsblad, Zaterdag Bijlage, Saturday 29/01/05, p. 72.
Schulman and Nugent integrate their cigarette-breaks in sex-involved scenes, the cigarette smoke is an atmospheric element which underlines the afterglow of the orgasm, the inhaling becomes a process of erotic temptation:

but first, they stopped to share a cigarette, naked on a rooftop, sitting together, they both reached over and felt Emily’s wetness, while Emily smoked. Lila sat behind her, easing her into her arms, holding Emily’s head on her breasts. (Schulman 1999: 89)

the first time I had ever seen her back, walking away from me, trailing a long blue trail of smoke. (Nugent 1994: 378)

She looks at me, then looks back at what she was doing before I came in, blowing smoke rings that flatten against the dirty window. “Did you bring me some cigarettes?” she asks, putting hers out in the ashtray that rests on the windowsill. ‘A marked woman,’ I say. ‘Can’t you see the blood?’ ‘I can’t see anything,’ she says, ‘and I won’t look until I have a cigarette.’ I give her the cigarettes I bought earlier. Even in the midst of becoming a woman, I have remembered the small things that pleased her. She lights one and inhales the smoke, then lets it slowly out through her nose and her mouth at the same time. She knows this kills me. (Nugent 1994: 382-3)

F. The conclusion in which something is concluded...

This final chapter has pointed to many continuances of the old elements that characterized flânerie, but has also shown that there are new nuances in the flâneuse’s existence. The new concept of Welt flânerie has broken up the old setting of the city, but also created more space to be inhabited by a variety of flâneuses. Whether they adopt a very distanced pose (femme flâneurs), have an aesthetic eye (dandies), live life to its limit (life-artists) or travel the world like a post-tourist, they mostly have qualities which differentiate them from Baudelaire’s form of flânerie. These qualities are no deviations, but show how rich the concept of female flânerie is in order to evaluate and appreciate contemporary literature. The “female touch” has finally reached the consciousness of literature critics (Friedberg, Parsons, Ganeva), authors (Schulman, Hermann et al), and hopefully, the readers. Drifting off to the end, I hope the foregoing chapters have contributed towards engraving female flânerie into the consciousness of a (small, but important) audience.
VI. Epilogue: the flâneuse’s old age.

The End of Something (after Hermann’s *Einde Van Iets*), or a new beginning?

After humbly following the flâneuse in their peripatetic voyage throughout two centuries and more than three metropolises, there comes a time when one has to leave the subject and wait to see what follows next. In my attempt to write an alternative, female counterpart to Benjamin’s *Passagenwerk*, I could never imagine trying to approach his level and method of writing, but I was nevertheless inspired by his multitudinous articles, essays and volumes (often through other authors’ books, which only illustrates his lasting actuality). To answer the question if women can really be flâneuses, and, if so, in which exact form, it was necessary to learn and read about the lives of wandering female authors. But, even now, it is difficult to say so unequivocally, because of the everlasting (female!) elusivity of the concept. The helpers in this quest were the histories and lives of forgotten flâneuses, who made us more conscious of the un-canonised but interesting female accounts of urban life (for example, Charlotte Wolff’s biography). That way, we got a more complete overview from the hidden histories of the past, allowing us in the future to judge new writers. By giving the flâneuse her proper place in literary and cultural history, we can corroborate Baudelaire’s statement that in (modern) art, two sides are prevalent: the eternal and immobile side (male flâneur), and the elusive and contingent side (female flâneuse). By focusing on the female side, we can open up possibilities for more female authors to write their testimonies of their urban/wandering lives. Like Sophie in *Einde Van Iets*, we have to acknowledge that it is sometimes necessary to burn the past (the monopoly of the flâneur) down in order to make room for new forms of life (flâneurs and flâneuses as distinct but equally valued figures).

So maybe, one day, my PC will stop telling me that the word *flâneuse* does not exist, and, to put it in John Gay’s immodest eighteenth-century verses:

“When Critics crazy Bandboxes repair,  
And Tragedies, turned Rockets, bounce in Air;  
High-raised on Fleetstreet Posts, consigned to Fame,  
This Work shall shine, and [Female] Walkers bless my Name.”

(Gay, 2001:522)
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