

FORGET THE FLÂNEUR

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Abstract

This paper discusses the connections between the 'flâneur', Baudelaire's symbol of modernity, the anonymous man on the streets of nineteenth century Paris, and his contemporary digital incarnation, the 'cyberflâneur'. It is argued that, although the flâneur could be successfully re-imagined as the cyberflâneur in the early days of the web, this nineteenth century model of male privilege no longer fits the purpose. It is suggested that it is time to forget the flâneur and search for a new model to consider the peripatetic nature of location-aware networked devices in the digitally augmented city.

keywords: flâneur, psychogeography, Paris, situationist, locative media

Introduction

Everyone loves the flâneur, Baudelaire's symbol of modernity, the anonymous man on the streets of nineteenth century Paris- drifting through the urban crowd, strolling through the arcades as a detached observer, part of the crowd yet also aloof from it.

The flâneur has now found his way into the digital world, with the nostalgic notion of the 'cyberflâneur' surfing the (Geocities) arcades of the worldwide web, with no particular place to go. A recent op-ed in the New York Times even blamed Baron Haussmann, in the guise of Facebook, for destroying these cyber-arcades, and along with them the cyberflâneur [1]. This paper argues that it is time to forget the flâneur, as this nineteenth century model of male privilege no longer fits the purpose. As Benjamin notes, the flâneur arose from a change in architecture in Paris, and it was the subsequent Haussmannisation, with its clearing of crowded traditional neighborhoods in favor of wide boulevards, that removed his natural habitat and were ultimately to prove his undoing. Similarly, as Morozov notes, the architecture of the internet has changed, from the 1990s WWW to today's mobile internet, an architecture that I suggest is no longer adequately described by the model of the (cyber)flâneur.

Discussions of the intersection of digital media and physical space, from early Locative Media practitioners onwards, also invoke the notion of the flâneur in his new incarnation as the digital or cyberflâneur, traversing the streets armed with location-aware devices, observing and studying the augmented hybrid spaces of the city

"existing in a haze of code" [2]. However, the flâneur was essentially a detached observer, he did not engage in the commerce of the arcade, intervene in the streets he traversed, or seek to change society. A cyberflâneur following this model of detached observer, working within existing structures without seeking to change or disrupt them, is essentially a consumer, operating within the logic of their chosen platform. Indeed, for platforms such as Facebook, any possibility for flânerie has been successfully engineered out. The detached passivity of the flâneur needs to be replaced with an alternative model which is of necessity engaged, a disruptive activist who does not merely observe, but actively seeks to create alternative narratives and shape outcomes.

The Flâneur

Though the notion of the flâneur is well known, more specific details regarding who the flâneur was, and of what the practice of flânerie consisted, are elusive. We can say that the flâneur is defined by his activity, flânerie, the art of strolling and looking, commonly associated with the shopping arcades of late nineteenth century Paris. Popular understandings of the flâneur come from literature, in particular the writings of Charles Baudelaire, for example his essay 'The Painter of Modern Life', and Walter Benjamin's analysis of his work [3].

The flâneur, for Baudelaire was a man who could "reap aesthetic meaning from the spectacle of the teeming crowds – the visible public – of the metropolitan environment of the city of Paris" [4]. Characterized by idleness and acute observation skills, the flâneur read the city as one would read a text. As Keith Tester puts it, the flâneur is the man *of* the crowd, rather than the man *in* the crowd. While immersed in the crowd, his awareness of this position renders him aloof from it. Part but apart, in the words of Baudelaire "a prince enjoying his incognito wherever he goes" [5]. Benjamin's reading (and popularization) of the flâneur sees him as an historical figure, belonging in the streets of a Paris of an already historic time. If the meaning of the city is imposed by the logic of capitalism and commodification [6], then the flâneur "becomes little more than a seeker after mystery from banality" [7], and ultimately a passive spectator who cannot escape the logic of consumerism. In the contemporary

internet landscape, where business models are based on user-generated content, which includes records of the user's surfing history, it is difficult to see how the flâneur's detached passivity can render him other than the perfect consumer.

Benjamin identifies the growing rationalism of nineteenth century Paris, exemplified by the allocation of street numbers, and accompanied by a general increase in the pace of life, as a threat to the flâneur. How, he asks, if everything becomes accounted for, could there still be mysteries in the city? The oft quoted predilection of the flâneur to take a turtle for a walk [8] could be seen in this context as a protest against both the increased pace of life, and the rationalism of Taylorist clock time.

The flâneur's idleness, too, is in stark contrast with the scientific management principles of Taylorism, but is, however, also a position of privilege. To be idle implies a comfortable position, in which it is not necessary to engage in the daily grind to make a living.

The gendered nature of the flâneur, in addition, is evident in his ability as a lone male to stroll through the arcades at a leisurely pace, unnoticed and unhindered, while eschewing the temptations of consumerism. At that time, as now, this role was not afforded to all the citizens of Paris.

Some scholars see elements of activism in the flâneur. For David Harvey, the flâneur "maps the city's terrain and evokes its living qualities", with the city "rendered legible for us in a very distinctive way" [9]. This view is echoed by Rob Shields, who sees the flâneur as a figure of resistance to the "work-a-day pressure of the punch-clock" [10], with flânerie acting as a re-appropriation of the street from the logic of consumerism. In these readings, flânerie foreshadows Lefebvre's right to the city [11], or deCerteau's "art of doing" [12]. The flâneur, in these accounts, is engaged in a spatial re-appropriation, in taking back urban space from instrumentalist consumer culture.

However, is the passivity and ambiguous stance of the flâneur enough to count as activism in the context of over-defined location-aware devices, where little option for reappropriation exists? I suggest that whatever resistance can be attributed to these activities, they have been superseded by Lefebvre and deCerteau's accounts of spatial reappropriation, which are more appropriate models for considering

location-aware networked devices in urban space. The Situationist concept of psychogeography, and accompanying techniques such as the *dérive*, drew from readings of the *flâneur*, but replaced his passivity with an overt political and activist agenda which sought not only to observe, but to actively change. Their activities were more programmatic, and underpinned and strengthened by a cohesive philosophy and an acute awareness of the danger that their actions could be recuperated. Susan Buck-Morss characterizes *flânerie* as "an ideological attempt to re-privatize social space, and to give assurance that the individual's passive observation was adequate for knowledge of social reality" [13]. At a time when the mining and sale of personal data is a business model for internet companies, the cyberflâneur, rather than a figure of resistance, may in effect be complicit in masking these realities, by presenting a nostalgic view of the internet which fails to address these realities.

The CyberFlâneur

The cyberflâneur [14] emerged from the structure of the 1990s web, typified by Geocities, the web community and the proto-social network, which located its denizens in cyberspace neighborhoods modeled on real cities. On many levels this was an appropriate connection to make in the context of the early web. With no Google or Facebook to organize the internet's information, surfing the web was an art, successfully practiced by the cyberflâneur, the web connoisseur who "just surfed on in" [15]. To follow the analogy, one presumes that as the *flâneur* resisted the temptations of consumerism, so too the cyberflâneur eschewed the commercialization of the web. However, creativity was essential to early internet communities such as Geocities, in which membership was premised on creating a webpage which showcased a talent or interest. While there may be aspects of *flânerie* involved in surfing these communities, as a model it failed to account for the essential creative endeavor required.

In nineteenth century Paris, the *flâneur* was undone by the structural changes brought about by Haussmannisation. The removal of narrow streets in favour of wide boulevards led to a gradual closing of the arcades, which were replaced by indoor department stores located on the busiest boulevards. The demise of protected arcades in favor of the busy boulevards meant that the *flâneur's*

natural habitat ceased to exist, and with it, the *flâneur*. The digital world has seen similar radical infrastructure changes, from the 1990s web to today's internet-enabled smartphones.

Evgeny Morozov, in his discussion of the death of cyberflânerie [16], sees structural changes in the internet as the cause of its demise. As the internet has become fully integrated into our everyday lives, he argues, there is now little opportunity for serendipity - a condition which has only increased with the emergence of the app paradigm, which further filters the network to focus on specific, narrow tasks. Google's attempts to predict our interests and serve us the information that they know we want, and Amazon's unnervingly accurate recommendations, are indicative of trends which seek to abolish the need for exploration through data mining our online histories. The internet, once a place to explore and to discover new information by wandering through its far flung recesses, has become functionally enmeshed into our real identities and everyday lives, but is no longer a place to stand and stare.

For Morozov, the Baron Haussmann of the internet is Facebook, and it is the 'Facebookisation' of the internet that has brought about the end of the cyberflâneur. According to Morozov, at the heart of the Zuckerberg view of the internet, and Facebook ideology, is the "idea that the individual experience is somehow inferior to the collective". He argues that "everything that makes cyberflânerie possible - solitude and individuality, anonymity and opacity, mystery and ambivalence, curiosity and risk-taking - is under assault by that company" [17].

The qualities that Morozov identifies as necessary for the cyberflâneur are similarly essential to the preservation of the internet as a space for creation and free exchange, rather than solely a place of consumption, akin to a serendipitous arcade rather than a department store with all its predictability and control. These qualities encourage us to recognize the difference between a public space and a privatized pseudo-public space, which, while offering the illusion of the agora, is in reality a corporate space underpinned by a logic of consumption. However I suggest that these qualities are premised on the internet as a creative space, not only a space of consumption, and that the *flâneur's* essential passivity precludes the activity of creating new internet spaces,

and the communities which this creation fosters. This notion of the cyberflâneur is a nostalgic one which, while harking back to an increasingly idealized period in internet history, crucially omits an essential component of the period.

The Flâneur in Hybrid Space

At one level it seems that the idea of the cyberflâneur should connect to our current situation, best described by media theorist Eric Kluitenberg as 'hybrid space', a condition in which the boundaries between "physical space and informational space" are collapsing, so that it is no longer useful or correct to speak of a separation between the two [18]. As the internet has gone mobile, it has integrated what was once a virtual world into the physical space of the city. The cyberflâneur would now no longer be restricted to virtual domains, but could, as with Locative Media, extend the *flânerie* into a real yet hybrid space, characterized by the presence of ubiquitous location-aware networked devices. As the Haussmannisation of the internet, in the guise of the walled gardens of Facebook, close off the arcades, the cyberflâneur would be on the streets, attaching notes to real space [19]. However, this already represents part of the Facebook model, and it is difficult to see how a hybrid version of traditional *flânerie*, working within existing models such as check-ins, could resist Facebook's hegemony, as it must operate within the strictly defined parameters of the platform. To opt out of this vision of the internet new models are required, ones which operate outside the logic of dominant structures. The *flâneur's* essential passivity limits him to what is, at best, a curatorial role, working within these existing structures and their immanent logic, rather than creating new ones. Locative Media practitioners, in contrast, set themselves the task of establishing new modes of operating which expand the range of possibilities for location-aware technologies, thus making them available to a broader constituency [20]. While aspects of Locative Media practice may superficially resemble *flânerie* - particularly when they involve drifting through urban space - this neglects the enabling structures created, and so fails to recognize the complete picture.

The question arises as to whether ubiquitous devices serve to disconnect us from the life world [21] spaces of this real city, or do they, as Locative Media

practitioners would argue (and fight for), augment the city, by creating critical spaces, enabled through location-aware data networks, which point toward the histories and meanings of these lived spaces. The latter, it is argued elsewhere, is the trajectory of Locative Media [22]. We live in what Anthony Townsend calls the ‘contested aware city’ [23]; but what does the flâneur, cyber or otherwise, add to this? Walter Benjamin identified “the obliteration of the individual’s traces in the big city crowd” [24] as an essential quality of the city, but with the cyberflâneur operating in hybrid space, the (data) traces are never erased. Rather than pass unnoticed, the cyberflâneur amasses a considerable data shadow from the ceaseless checking-in, from merely being connected, not to mention any number of devices phoning home to Cupertino, Mountain View or who knows where. To be digital involves leaving these traces; thus the flâneur’s treasured anonymity and ability to watch unnoticed are replaced, for the cyberflâneur, with not only a *lack* of privacy, but also the commercialization of his data trace as user-generated content.

Discussions of the cyberflâneur, though, are typically associated with what might be called the traditional, rather than the mobile, internet. Mobility and networked location-aware devices characterize the internet today, bringing with them an emergent understanding of the changing boundaries between public and private space. In any discussion of the cyberflâneur, hybrid space, in which the internet permeates all aspects of everyday life, attaching context and location-sensitive information to places, needs to be considered. Whereas the flâneur was always embedded in the city, the flâneries of the cyberflâneur were, by definition, immaterial. Mobile networks have made it possible for the cyberflâneur to operate in the real spaces of the city; however, a flânerie which eschews the development of new approaches which evade the ubiquitous surveillance and data mining of companies such as Google and Facebook can never be anonymous, and is limited to operate within a predetermined mode of operation.

Forget the Flâneur

I propose that it is time to forget the flâneur. In harking back to a previous age, and indeed several re-incarnations of the notion of the flâneur, we have overextended the concept. It is hard to

see what once again retrofitting Baudelaire’s jaded dandy to a new dispensation contributes, other than the fulfilment of some nostalgic urge. While some work has been done to reposition the flâneur [25], in popular imagination he is still a detached, passive male observer. This detached passivity needs to be replaced with an alternative, more representative model, one which is of necessity engaged; a disruptive activist who does not merely observe, but actively seeks to create alternative narratives and shape outcomes.

What form this might take, as we move toward newer, more mobile structures, is the question. As the internet big four [26] wage what can be considered a war on privacy, from frictionless sharing to extensive collusion between the internet industry and the NSA’s Prism surveillance network, do possibilities still exist for alternative structures outside of this panopticon?

A detailed account of the form that this might take is beyond the scope of this paper, however several models point the way to suitable alternatives to the flâneur.

The Tactical Media and Hacktivist movements of the 1990s indicate one approach, combining an overt activist agenda with an ability to work within networks and systems over which the individual has no control. Geert Lovink [27], however, identified one limitation of tactical action, its lack of a sustained engagement capable of altering the conditions under which it operates, in effect rendering it always reactive and never constitutive.

Another approach with more potential is a rethinking of the Situationist concept of the Constructed Situation [28]. Situationist techniques such as the *dérive* have exerted considerable influence on Locative Media practitioners, suggesting that there are significant connections between Situationist thought and Locative Media practice which could be extended to the constructed situation. The Situationists believed that as human beings are “molded by the situations they go through” and “defined by their situation” [29], they needed to construct situations worthy of their desires, rather than be limited to passive consumerism of the situations in which they find themselves. Unlike the flâneur, they sought to go beyond describing and interpreting situations, and attempted to transform them. I have argued elsewhere [30] that Locative Media art practices

have built on Situationist theory, not in a nostalgic or recuperative way, but in a contemporary reworking of this influential praxis, one which addresses current situations and overcomes the limitations of the flâneur identified in this paper.

Let us forget the flâneur, and replace him with a concept more suited to today’s situations. We need now, perhaps more than ever, an activist model capable of reading our complex, interconnected and hyperconnected world. I have indicated some of the possibilities in this paper, but more work is needed to develop an appropriate replacement.

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