



Dal flâneur alla flâneuse. Evoluzione di un profilo urbano dal XIX secolo in avanti

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My thesis is focused on the *flâneur*, an urban observer whose name stems from the imagery of French poet Charles Baudelaire. One single definition of the term *flâneur* does not exist, several are the connotations attributed to the word, although the concept is often iconized with the image of someone who walks around the city, and loves to be part of the city crowds but, at the same time, also wishes to be detached and identifiable from the other strollers. Several scholars have stressed how, for quite a long time, the female counterpart of the *flâneur*, the *flâneuse*, could not exist because respectable women were not given the opportunity to freely explore the city surroundings, unless accompanied by a man. Those who did walk alone were, mostly, prostitutes.

The thesis aims to follow the birth and evolution of the *flâneuse*. In support of this theory, it could be useful to think about female writers such as Virginia Woolf, who herself was a *flâneuse* and wrote about *flânerie* in essays and novels, like *Mrs Dalloway*. In addition, the dissertation offers further samples of strong-willed women who fought in order to obtain better social, political and educational positions. Although an increased level of freedom was slowly granted to women, during the *fin de siècle* many of them continued to be subject to discrimination and bias, especially when they decided not to get married.

The current academic debate on Modernist literature stresses, amongst these discriminations, the numerical disparity between female and male writers and the almost total absence of literary accounts regarding the private sphere inhabited by



women. As a result, the so called Modern British literature, with the exception of writers like Woolf, concentrated exclusively on the public sphere, which was a privileged male domain. Similarly, even the geographical studies of the era supported the ideological separation of public and private areas and almost forgot about the possibility of radical geographical changes through a different usage of private space. Nowadays, feminist geography, also identified as the geography of gender, is a new branch of this field, which is interwoven with gender studies.

During the *fin de siècle* women were strictly marginalized into the private domestic sphere, while men were free to experience the public one. In particular, women had few opportunities to become emancipated and earn money on their own. In addition, according to the social norms of the time linked male authority with the usage of public space and female respectability with a life organized around the borders of the house. Therefore, those women who used to walk in the streets and felt free to do so were easily labelled as whores.

Despite this strong credo, at the end of the XIX century women began to spend more time in public places, thanks to the growth of the new department stores. In such places, women could freely loiter, go shopping and leave their homes to spend some time at the cinema. City parks were another one of those places where women had the opportunity to walk and wander. Moreover, subsequent to that period women had better educational opportunities, could attend high schools and later universities.

Still, some contemporary scholars, such as Janet Wolff and Griselda Pollock, argue that a real *flâneuse* did not exist at the turn of the century. However, other academic researchers, such as Elizabeth Wilson, point out that, even in this peculiar moment in British history, one can find several examples of women loitering and walking through the city, in a way comparable to that of the typical *flâneuse*.

In conclusion, my thesis offers a demonstration of the existence of the *flâneuse* during the last years of the Nineteenth century, and of her relevance within literary and cinematic works.

Among these works, I have decided to analyse Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and compare it to a specific chapter from Iain Sinclair's *Downriver*¹, trying to highlight the features of the female protagonists and the relationship these women maintain with the metropolis. Opening my research to a cinematographic perspective, I have concentrated on three main films, Richard Brooks' *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, Susan Seidelman's *She Devil* and Michael Winterbottom's *Wonderland*, aiming to show the modernity of the *flâneuse* and her current existence in a difficult and marginal social background. Despite the time lag and the different age and class position of the literary and cinematic female characters, a common profile emerges from this analysis.

¹ I referred to the third chapter "Horse Spittle (*The Eros of Maps*)" of I. Sinclair, 2004, *Downriver (Or The Vessels of Wrath) A Narrative in Twelve Tales*, London: Penguin Books Ltd.



As a matter of fact, all the protagonists live in a city and have contacts within it; both these novelists and directors offer complex icons of women who fought for their independence and who appear free from any constraints, strong-willed and aware of their lives. These women's profiles represent fictional images of women who, since the end of the XIX century and increasingly during the XX century, attained the right to freely walk around the city, just as their male counterparts.

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