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**FEMALE FLÂNERIE BETWEEN MODERNITY AND  
POSTMODERNITY. THE CASES OF DOROTHY RICHARDSON'S  
PILGRIMAGE AND RÉGINE ROBIN'S MÉGAPOLIS. LES DERNIERS  
PAS DU FLÂNEUR**

Maria Roxana Baiceanu

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**FEMALE FLÂNERIE BETWEEN MODERNITY AND  
POSTMODERNITY. THE CASES OF DOROTHY  
RICHARDSON'S *PILGRIMAGE* AND RÉGINE ROBIN'S  
*MÉGAPOLIS. LES DERNIERS PAS DU FLÂNEUR***

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by

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**In**

**Comparative Literature**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts**

**School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
The University of Western Ontario  
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## Abstract

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a revival of critical debates around, on the one hand, Walter Benjamin's understanding of *flânerie*, the practice of street walking in the nineteenth-century metropolis, and on the other hand the existence of a female counterpart for the (usually male) *flâneur*. Most of the analyses, coming from Janet Wolff, Elizabeth Wilson, Susan Buck-Morss, and Anne Friedberg, but also the contributors to Keith Tester's critical anthology *The Flâneur* (1994) returned to Baudelairian and Benjaminian depictions of *flânerie* and revealed ways in which the practice and its participants (male and female alike) were still significant for understanding a highly commodified urban existence.

My thesis is founded on Wilson's and Deborah Parson's argument that we can rightfully consider the *flâneuse* as an important participant in the life in the metropolis even if this implies a reading of the city that is more metaphorical than purely sociological. While most arguments focus on the image of the *flâneuse* as prostitute or shopper, my thesis proposes the image of the middle-class female intellectual (ethnographer, artist, sociologist) as a more fitting counterpart to the *flâneur*. Miriam Henderson, the protagonist in Dorothy Richardson's series *Pilgrimage*, and Régine Robin's narrator in *Mégapolis. Les derniers pas du flâneur*, illustrate the concepts of modern and postmodern *flâneuse* respectively and constitute useful instruments for interrogating modern and postmodern urban life seen from the perspective of a woman *flâneuring* on the streets of the big cities.

Key words: *flâneur*, *flâneuse*, Benjamin, modern, postmodern, Dorothy Richardson, Régine Robin, city, megalopolis

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## Introduction

“The eye is never neutral and many a battle is fought over the ‘proper’ way to see,” states David Harvey in the introduction to *The Urban Experience* (2). The circumstances and background from which one approaches the city—understood not as a fixed thing, but as a fluid experience reflecting above all the dynamics of capitalism—may lead to a variety of urban visions which, when all are put together, can be said to offer a more complete understanding of urban space. And understanding urban space means, as probably most will agree, understanding the mechanisms and relationships that set our society in motion.

Understanding the city implies both observation and experience—in other words, both the detached, static gaze from a fixed point in space strategically chosen by the observer, and the active, participatory analysis done *in medias res* by one who chooses to move in harmony with the flow of the city. Due to the many limitations or fallings out of fashion which arose, surprisingly, as a result of developments in the urban landscape, the significance of the latter approach has been treated with increasing suspicion over the last century as many critics have seen the act of walking the city streets as obsolete. As most critics would link this practice with the image of the nineteenth-century Parisian *flâneur*, made famous by the writings of Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, the radical transformation of urban space since then has made many consider that the art of walking at leisure in the streets of the metropolis disappeared with him. *Flânerie* could not continue to exist in spaces organized according to the erratic principles of consumerism. Or, at least not at the macro level. Clearly delimited spaces, such as department stores—and more recently shopping malls—, parks—and more recently the theme parks—,

specially arranged sites for tourism and many other microcosms have been designated to function as controlled and more secure spaces of *flânerie*, making the city itself a more or less forbidden ground.

However, as Chris Jenks argues in his work *Visual Culture* (2007), we need to expand our understanding of the term *flâneur* as the city has become much more than a real space with precise cultural, social, economic and political coordinates. Even if the figure of the *flâneur* is grounded in a nineteenth century social reality, his function has since outgrown the sociological understanding that we have of that period. The *flâneur*, argues Jenks,

is not just Baudelaire, though undoubtedly he strolled the boulevards; it is not a descriptive category of that group of the Parisian bourgeoisie who, like

Baudelaire, had the time, provided through material comfort, to walk and watch and gain interest and entertainment from the public spectacle. [...] The *flâneur*,

though grounded in everyday life, is an analytic form, a narrative device, an attitude towards knowledge and its social context. It is an image of movement through the social space of modernity. [...] The *flâneur* is a multilayered

palimpsest that enables us to 'move' from real products of modernity, like commodification and leisured patriarchy; through the practical organization of space and its negotiation by inhabitants of a city, to a critical appreciation of the

state of modernity and its erosion into the post-, and onwards to a reflexive understanding of the function, and purpose, of realist as opposed to hermeneutic epistemologies. (148-9)

As we can see, the *flâneur*'s position is not just a position of observation, but a position of



I consider Jenks' description of the function of the *flâneur* to be at once encompassing and enlightening. Modernity and postmodernity being such elusive and debated concepts, the more we interrogate them through various concepts, the more insightful our understanding will be. Nevertheless, without necessarily raising feminist concerns, it is hard not to question Jenks' reconceptualization of the *flâneur* from a gendered perspective, especially since the notion implies social experiences which have been fundamentally different from men to women, as the first chapter of this work will show.

With this in mind, I will explore the extent to which the practice of *flânerie* provides women with a significant experience of (urban) modernity and postmodernity. Provided that women can act as *flâneuses* in the public sphere, as argued in the first chapter of my work, the question arises as to how their stance differs from that of the *flâneur* in observing and experiencing the modern and postmodern city, and how their own perspective changes over time. I will be looking at the period between the end of the nineteenth century, when the *flâneuse* starts to become visible in her own right in the public sphere as part of the New Woman movement, and the end of the twentieth century when, thanks to major urban changes, the *flâneuse* finds herself questioning her function within society. The works I have chosen as representative of the two periods are Dorothy Richardson's serial novel *Pilgrimage* (1915-1957) and Régine Robin's hard-to-classify text *Mégapolis: Les derniers pas du flâneur* (2009). Chapters two and three of my thesis are devoted to detailed analyses of the way in which the narrators in both works—clear personae of the authors—interact with urban space and of the perspective their acts of *flânerie* open up with regard to women's position in modernity and postmodernity.

My hypothesis with respect to the phenomenon of female *flânerie* is that it came to support the prominent, albeit already declining, act of male *flânerie*, as the urban experience started to be seen by the *flâneur* as “bre[e]d[ing] among city dwellers a character that was rational, impersonal, alienated, unemotional, and autonomous” (Sharpe and Wallock 3). The *flâneur* regarded with anxiety the capitalist movement of people and goods because they understood that if they do not partake in the phenomenon, they will be pushed aside and the secure space for *flânerie* would disappear in the end. Economically speaking, the same phenomenon rendered visible the *flâneuse*, in an attempt to create the prototype of the faithful consumer; it is not surprising, then, that the *flâneuse* has been identified for so long with the shopper. However, she proved to be unpredictable, as despite an overall fascination with the spaces of consumption and with the promises of freedom and progress they hold out, the *flâneuse*'s observations at times subverted the capitalist message. It is when the empty places of modernity and postmodernity, or the “non-places,” the places of forgetfulness, as understood by Marc Augé, are faced with Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire* that the edifice starts to shake. Nevertheless, this shows that the *flâneuse*'s powers of observation can go beyond those of the impressionable shopper and become as useful as the *flâneur*'s gaze for making sense of the city. In these circumstances, the first chapter of my thesis will trace a comparative evolution of the *flâneur/flâneuse* notions, and try to illustrate their complex implications beyond the field of sociology. After providing an overview of the way in which the *flâneur* has been understood and received as a cultural studies concept from its emergence to the present day, I turn my attention toward the more contested notion of the

*flâneuse*. My argument is in many ways indebted to Deborah Parsons and Elizabeth Wilson's analyses of this concept, as they both admit the necessity of taking into account a gendered differentiation for discussions of *flânerie*. Both critics minimize—but do not deny—the importance of the *flâneuse* as a social reality of the nineteenth century onwards and tend to consider her more significant as a metaphor for understanding modern and postmodern urban existence. What I attempt to do is restore to the term a greater semantic precision—since the general agreement is that, due to its overuse, the term has become too generic, running the risk of signifying everything and nothing at the same time—by taking into account both its social and metaphorical implications. With this in mind, I touch only tangentially on the common belief that the *flâneuse* is by definition the consumer of pleasure/goods, as represented by the prostitute, the shopper or the tourist. I do not minimize the *flâneur's* and *flâneuse's* more or less conscious involvement in the flux of mass consumption; however, in my choice of corpus I had in mind another major characteristic of the *flâneur*—that of being a thinker and a (critical) observer of the spaces he traverses.

In chapter 2 I explore the ways in which Miriam Henderson, Dorothy Richardson's semi-autobiographical character, positions herself in the newly-conquered urban space. Despite her frequent retreats into a surreal urban space, which she creates mentally out of her desire to live the city at a more personal level than physical strolling permits, Miriam still places her informed and artistically educated gaze in the service of social observation, which led to critics seeing in *Pilgrimage* a real social and physical map of London. Social and political restrictions are still an issue for Miriam, the early twentieth-century *flâneuse*, whose ideal of *flâneuring* hardly goes beyond the boundaries



## Chapter 1

### Different appropriations of urban space:

#### From *flâneur* to *flâneuse*

The typical man [...] walks along swinging his arms, affording himself the space he needs, whereas the typical woman walks with her arms held in toward her, in order to take up less space.—Mary Ann Caws, “The city on our mind” p.5

The city has always fascinated and frightened at the same time. The voracious monster that keeps growing bigger and bigger feeding on human beings' desire for comfort and culture, or the sensual lover that lures with promises of unimaginable pleasure, this human construct perpetuates a puzzling reaction on the part of its inhabitants who are often dazzled by the sheer number of impulses to which they have to respond. “The psychological foundation upon which the metropolitan individuality is erected, is the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli,” notes sociologist Georg Simmel in one of the most influential articles written in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on modern urban life, “The metropolis and mental life” (31). “Lasting impressions [...] consume [...] less mental energy than the rapid telescoping of changing images, pronounced differences within what is grasped at a single glance and the unexpectedness of violent stimuli” (31). Torn between pleasure and pain, all sensory faculties are in constant need of a finer scale on which to inscribe the variety of impulses to which they are constantly exposed on a daily basis, and the scale needs to be redefined with every new cultural period. Is it anxiety or pleasure that urban dwellers experience, as they see how, despite efforts made toward regulating space and patterns of use, the city develops in unexpected ways? The fact that

especially after the Industrial Revolution, the city's streets were home to a wide variety of social categories that included consumers or idle walkers, only augmented the general feeling of anxiety.

Indeed, the period following the Industrial Revolution instilled great turmoil in the hearts and minds of urban dwellers as urban designers such as Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann decided to open up the crowded spaces of former medieval cities with an abundance of new boulevards and streets meant to dilute the traffic of merchandise and people. Metaphorically, the shift in urban planning was supposed to reflect and encourage the transition to a new era in which rigid rules established as a result of cautious historical behaviors were challenged by previously unimagined changes. Nevertheless, although the transformation aimed to bring more order to a rather chaotic and narrowly-designed urban space, its inhabitants "experienced it as more fragmenting and disorienting," according to sociologist Elizabeth Wilson (*The Sphinx* 53). Not only were the old social conflicts not resolved, they were transplanted in a space aggressively marked by production and consumption, economic behaviors which acquired an almost divine status over the course of the nineteenth century. The lower and upper classes, men and women, Caucasians and non-Caucasians accessed the urban space with an almost identical purpose: to see, to feel, to experience all that the city had to offer.

It would be an exaggeration, however, to see the emerging modern metropolis as a space characterized only by production, consumption and individual functionality. If for the Ancient or Medieval urban dweller, to be out in the street for no purpose whatsoever, just for the enjoyment walking and observing could provide, seemed rather anomalous—the natural world outside the city gates was considered a more appropriate environment

for philosophical conversations or for strolling—for the modern city dweller it proved to be a recognized activity. The city became a site worth exploring in its own right, as people became aware of its function in understanding history. In these circumstances, the city-as-text needed a dedicated reader, one whose function would be not only that of overseeing the crowds as part of a movement to secure stable socio-political conditions (or simply to secure the political power of certain classes) but also that of reflecting on changes in social structures with the purpose of providing a better understanding of the (modern) self. It is from within this space and in the wake of these socio-economic changes that the figure of the *flâneur* starts to emerge, a masculine persona *par excellence*, whose female counterpart's existence has been a matter of debate. Women's social status in the nineteenth century made their aspiration toward the freedom of idly walking through the city a dream that would be fulfilled only much later in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, as the *flâneur*'s reluctance to leave the secure space of the (Parisian) arcades became evident, and with the gradual replacement of the arcades with the department stores, the question arose of whether the male gaze could record all the many facets of modernity. Critic Griselda Pollock posits that "the *flâneur* embodies the gaze of modernity which is both covetous and erotic" (94) but to her observation Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough add that the lack of real engagement of this gaze makes the *flâneur*'s social or artistic representations of the fleeting urban modern experience incomplete.

The division of spaces (public/private) based on gender has long been a recognized fact, but what has interested critics since the late '80s is whether it is justified or valuable to consider a gendered approach for social space, particularly the city sphere.

This question gave rise in the '90s to a debate between critics Janet Wolff and Griselda Pollock on one side, arguing for the urban monopoly of the *flâneur* and the impossible existence of the *flâneuse*, and Elizabeth Wilson on the other side, arguing that modern space was characterized primarily by mutability rather than clear-cut (gendered) distinctions, thereby changing the parameters of the *flâneur/flâneuse* debate. For his part, Kevin Hetherington argues that “while the figure of the *flâneur* might work well with thinking about the arcades of the 1830s, he does not sit easily with the department store of the 1860s and especially not with the world of consumption after about 1890 [...]. This is not a space for his heroic, yet troubled male gaze. Rather, it is his female counterpart and successor who made her home in that space” (114). Hetherington’s observation, based on scholarship around the *flâneur/flâneuse* debate, highlights a number of important points. First, it positions itself against scholarship from the late '80s by arguing that one can talk about a *flâneuse* in the nineteenth century, albeit not during the *flâneur*’s peak time, that is, the first half of the century. Even if a number of female artists could claim this status earlier—George Sand, George Eliot—the disguised manner in which they could enjoy the act of *flânerie* places them in a separate, somewhat intermediary category. Second, the *flâneuse* is a successor to the *flâneur*, claiming at first a space and an activity that were less attractive to men: the department stores and shopping. The rest of the city, though, still kept many of its doors closed to the *flâneuses*. Third, Hetherington suggests that the *flâneuse* limited her observation to this space, the department store, which seems somehow unjust. Although the department store’s importance for modernity cannot be ignored or minimized, confining the *flâneuse* to this space would diminish her significance. In my thesis, I will show that one can talk about a



closer female counterpart for the *flâneur* starting with the twentieth century and going into the twenty-first century, despite the general conception that *flânerie* is no longer practiced in our super-technologized society. By comparing British writer Dorothy Richardson's protagonist in the *Pilgrimage* (1915-1957) series, Miriam Henderson, to University of Montreal sociology professor and writer Régine Robin's autobiographical persona from her faux traveling-memoirs *Mégapolis. Les derniers pas d'un flâneur* (2009) I plan to map out the specificities of female *flânerie* between modernity and postmodernity. The reference figure will still be the *flâneur*, since he sets the tone for the complex endeavor of observing the modern city, the metropolis and, later, the megalopolis, but my argument will center on the novelty and specificity of a feminine gaze in the modern/postmodern urban space and on the way in which the *flâneuse* has perpetuated the act of *flânerie*.

And since the axis of any discussion on *flânerie* is the *flâneur*, a clarification of the term and its implications is necessary, since, as many critics have pointed out, the term has run the risk of meaning everything and nothing at the same time. A rather Gulliver-like character, in the sense that he bridges worlds despite the fact that he is prone to changes in status when transitioning from one space to another, the *flâneur* secured himself a place in the field of literary and social studies primarily through Charles Baudelaire's city poetry and Walter Benjamin's critical analysis of 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris. It was the latter's works, included in his famous *Arcades Project*, which made the already moribund historical figure—the *flâneur*—a prominent theoretical urban concept.

Both Baudelaire and Benjamin base their character on the historical figure of the Parisian dandy who appeared at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and gained in reputation with

his inclusion in the popular literature of the 1830s, despite, or perhaps because of being “a young, dissolute figure not quite at home in the world of the bourgeoisie” (Hetherington 114). Not confined to the socio-historical sphere, the *flâneur* has gained currency within the broader field of the arts, where he has functioned as one of the embodiments of the modern artistic consciousness, through whom one can access the experience of modernity. Disengaged from and at the same time a part of the crowd which was in a continuous state of bustle as a result of the changes occurring in the city after the French Revolution, Baudelaire’s *flâneur* provided the first glimpses into a particular attitude toward existence which will later become one of the hallmarks of modernity: an attitude of alienation from a society that was becoming increasingly concerned with mass consumption. His connection with a particular locality (the Parisian arcades before the emergence of department stores in the 1860s) and a rather short moment of literary fame made many critics consider him just another fleeting figure among those that materialized in the wake of modernity. Nevertheless, it was through Baudelaire’s poetry that the *flâneur* consolidated his status by coming to embody the male artistic gaze in the wake of capitalist mass culture. The emphasis the new socio-economic reality placed on the eye and its power to persuade consumers made the *flâneur* a vantage-point for reflection on the ways in which the individual interacted with architectural space, with others and with merchandise.

In *Les Fleurs du mal* (1861), *Le Spleen de Paris* (1862) and in the essay on the French painter Constantin Guys, “Le peintre de la vie moderne” (1863), the Baudelairian *flâneur* takes readers on long walks through the city, experiencing what were, at the time, spaces accessed mostly by males—streets, cafés, brothels—leaving one wondering what

the same spaces would look like from a woman's perspective. The *flâneur* thus delineates a new terrain for the modern artist-observer who at times identifies with the alienated city dweller, in the sense that they are both at once drawn towards and repulsed by the urban realities around them. The two contrary impulses often accentuate his ennui, his incapacity to commit to a more proactive attitude, which leads Deborah Parsons, one of the most significant scholars arguing for the importance of female *flânerie*, to point out that the *flâneur* does not bring to his walks any past experiences: "Walking through the city and bombarded by the vivid spectacle around him, the artist seems something of a passive figure, his mind a tabula rasa open to sensory impressions" (Parsons 22). And, indeed, it is this passive, detached attitude toward the realities of the landscape he is traversing that persisted in subsequent critical studies as one of the main characteristics of the *flâneur*. On the other hand, what is paradoxical in the *flâneur's* attitude toward the city is that the crowds or individual passers-by elicit an uncontrollable feeling of attraction on his part, functioning as a temporary shock treatment which makes the *flâneur* shudder ("A une passante," "Les foules," "Les petites vieilles").

As some of the poems show, the poet seems to be empathizing with the more unfortunate denizens of Parisian society: the sick, the old, the prostitutes. The identification, as observed by Parsons, is reflected first of all by the shift from the third person to first person plural when referring to these "fragile, alienated souls" (28). It is an identification based on feelings of estrangement that takes place in Baudelaire's city poetry and prose: "Multitude, solitude: termes égaux et convertibles pour le poète actif et fécond. Qui ne sait pas peupler sa solitude, ne sait pas non plus être seul dans une foule affairée" ("Les Foules").

The relationship with the crowd is, in both Baudelaire and Benjamin, an uneasy one, shaping the *flâneur* as an elusive figure. As Keith Tester points out, the *flâneur* is not a “man in the crowd” but a “man of the crowd” and it is the tension between these two terms that creates a dialectics between “being” and “doing,” a dialectics of “control and incompleteness” (5). What helps the artist maintain his sovereignty over the crowd resides in his very condition of being both an artist and a “man of the world,” in the words used by Baudelaire himself when depicting Constantin Guys, the *flâneur*’s avatar; that is, his devotion to a purpose that rests above the objects or people that he encounters in his walks. “I ask you to understand the word *artist* in a very restricted sense and *man of the world* in a very broad one,” follows Baudelaire’s distinction between the two. “By the second I mean a man of the whole world, a man who understands the world and the mysterious and lawful reasons for all its uses; by the first, a specialist, a man wedded to his palette like the serf to the soil” (“The Painter” 6-7). Even the way he dresses, remarks Baudelaire in an attempt to defend dandyism, is designed not to secure for himself the image of a superior social position, but to emphasize his distinctiveness among the great masses of which he is part. His rejection of the private sphere and his lack of commitment to the urban scene suggest that the dandy-*flâneur*’s inner structure is suited to the period of transition (not democracy and not aristocracy, as pointed out by Baudelaire) in which he circulates. “The disorder of [...] times” thus accentuates the *flâneur*’s detached, empty state of being, which is not, however, without a certain nobility, as emphasized by Baudelaire at different times in his “The Painter of Modern Life” essay (28-29). Despite his “frenzied romantic love affair with the spectacle of the public” (Tester 7), the *flâneur* can never engage fully with public space; but it is precisely

in this “air of coldness which comes from an unshakeable determination not to be moved” that one can find traces of a certain heroic stance which, according to Baudelaire, belongs to lost times (“The Painter” 29).

Benjamin seems to prefer to suspend partially the *flâneur*'s artistic function and to build his critical ideas around the socio-historical significance of the concept. He preserves as central to his analysis the *flâneur*'s interaction with the crowds, but does not confer on him the almost heroic stature that Baudelaire alludes to in his prose and poetry. Perhaps this is due to Benjamin's failure to perceive the *flâneur* as another representation of the modern poet/artist. The critic is fascinated with the capitalist relationships taking shape in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the emergence of mass culture, and this is reflected in his treatment of the *flâneur* and *flânerie*. Keith Tester's astute analysis of Benjamin's Parisian stroller provides useful insight into the (lack of) function of the *flâneur* within the new socio-economic structures:

For Benjamin, then, the *flâneur* is almost the humanization of the bad faith in the commodity. The *flâneur* becomes little more than a seeker after mystery from banality. The *flâneur* is a passive spectator who is as duped by the spectacle of the public as the consumer who is duped by the glittering promises of consumerism. The *flânerie* which features in the work of Benjamin is soul-less and truly empty, just like the commodity forms it represents. (14)

If Baudelaire announced the *flâneur*'s imminent disappearance, Benjamin seems determined to bury him. In his essays, the German critic places the *flâneur* next to the storyteller and the collector, two other figures that emerge from the critic's attempts to

understand the various aspects of public life. "Drawing on Benjamin, historians, urban sociologists, and literary critics have used the *flâneur* to explain the tumult of metropolitan life, to trace the class tensions and gender divisions of the nineteenth-century city, [and] to represent alienation and the detached relationship between individuals characteristic of modernity" (Shaya 47). In fact, as Esther Leslie points out in "Walter Benjamin: Traces of Craft," each of the concepts mentioned allows the critic to engage with different senses in experiencing modernity: the *flâneur* provides an optical approach, the collector a tactile one and the storyteller an oral or verbal one. Benjamin, Leslie further remarks, places the *flâneur* and the storyteller in opposition to the collector, which suggests that "the epoch of the optical, characterized by contemplation and perception at a distance [and that of experience transmitted through storytelling—*Erfahrung*] is on the way out as the epoch of handling comes in" (10). The collector, as opposed to the other two figures, survives in the world of mass consumption due to his attachment to things, his feelings of ownership, his desire to accumulate objects of all types, including "reproducible and reproduced cultural artifacts" (10), all of them features of commodity culture, which reduces the space for *flânerie* and storytelling significantly.

According to Susan Sontag, Benjamin, a melancholic temperament who found things more reliable than people, believed that "the nihilistic energies of the modern era make everything a ruin or fragment—and therefore collectible. A world whose past has become (by definition) obsolete, and whose present churns out instant antiques, invites custodians, decoders and collectors" (16-17). Hence, those who cannot fit the pragmatic roles of the new era will remain caught in the ruins of the old one. The same "melancholic [...] sorrowful engagement" with the city that characterizes Benjamin is

highlighted by Elizabeth Wilson in "The invisible *flâneur*" (1992) where it is explained as a result of an ambivalent attitude toward the destruction and attraction that the metropolis radiates.

The (modern) commodity space is of central importance for Benjamin. In fact, in the articles on the *flâneur*, the critic's conclusions seem to target more the crowd and the space it occupies than the individual. The *flâneur* thus becomes more like a point which vanishes in time, engendering through his inward swirl the actual subjects of interest: the new urban space of mass consumption and the big-city crowds. It is not that Benjamin dismisses the *flâneur*, although the critic does confine him to the space of the arcades, but he associates him with a world that is sinking into myth and is thereby different from the increasingly fragmented modern space of the early twentieth century. For Benjamin, the actual act of strolling the city or the urban Parisian landscape of the mid-nineteenth century is not as important as the process of re-integration of mythical times in the present, through the act of walking and contemplating. This idea is less emphasized in Baudelaire, which would lead one to believe that this nostalgic turn toward the past comes from a personal predisposition of Benjamin's. He represents the *flâneur* as the figure through whose footsteps present and past try to reconnect:

To depict the city as a native would call for other, deeper motives—the motives of the person who journeys into the past, rather than to foreign parts. The account of the city given by a native will always have something in common with the memoirs [...:]; each street is a vertiginous experience. Each leads downward, if not to the Mothers, then at least to a past that is all the more spellbinding as it is not just the author's own private past. (Benjamin "The return," 262)

This is one of the reasons why the *flâneur* has been understood as a figure of the past first of all rather than one that grows in importance together with the expansion of mass culture; although even here opinions are divided, since it has also become common to argue that, despite his moribund condition in the works of Baudelaire and Benjamin—in the sense that neither author admits the possibility of the *flâneur* moving from the arcades to the busy city streets and thus into modernity and postmodernity—the *flâneur* continues to survive in the urban landscape, albeit in forms slightly different from those of the nineteenth-century Parisian dandy. It has been argued by Zygmunt Bauman and Barry Smart, among other critics, that, in a chameleon-like way, he always seems to find opportunities for osmosis; in the shape of the (mall) shopper (and there's a certain irony in the fact that although he opposes mass culture, he ends up functioning as a part of it), the theme park visitor, the journalist, the tourist, the ethnographer, or the sociologist, to name but some of the ways in which *flânerie* continues to exist in the twentieth and even twenty-first centuries.

Gregory Shaya in “The *Flâneur*, the Badaud, and the Making of Mass Public in France circa 1860-1910” argues that “mass culture in France was made [...] not through *flânerie* [...] but through the image of the badaud [...] (i.e., ‘the curious observer, the rubberneck, the gawker’)” (46). I would argue in turn that this was precisely Benjamin's goal: to prove that the *flâneur* has a tense relationship with consumerism, as opposed to the mainstreaming and blurring of cultural memory. If one were to go back to the original meaning of *flânerie*, one would have to distinguish the *flâneur* from the other figures with whom he has been associated: the rag picker, the stranger, the detective, to name but a few. What I deem to be characteristic of the *flâneur*, aside from the capacity to observe



during his strolls the various transformations in the urban landscape, is the ability to invest his observations with aesthetic meaning. Important, in this sense, are an affiliation to the middle class, a certain financial stability, and an education allowing him to position himself not only socio-historically but also aesthetically in relation to city life. While the rag picker or the detective can only “dream that [they are] like an artist” due to their inclination toward “catching things in flight” (Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire* 41), the *flâneur* actually has the opportunity and the eye to register the urban spectacle of modernity.

Even Benjamin was, perhaps less consciously, uneasy about the *flâneur*'s lacking a useful purpose, so he attempted to see him in relation to the detective by making frequent references to the investigative characters in Edgar Allan Poe's and Honoré de Balzac's short stories. Nevertheless, the *flâneur* does not seem to be willing to give up on his bourgeois leisure all that easily and resists any spark of interest that would shatter his attitude of superior detachment in relation to the crowd. In fact, this is one of the reasons why critics such as Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson have argued that we cannot have a perfect female counterpart for the *flâneur*, given the social limitations: “women [...] compromise the detachment that distinguishes the true *flâneur*. [...] No woman, it would seem, can disconnect herself from the city and its enchantments. No woman is able to attain the aesthetic distance so crucial to the *flâneur*'s superiority. She is unfit for *flânerie* because she desires the objects spread before her and acts upon that desire” (27). The *flâneur* himself feels the pressure and attraction exercised by the things and people around him and he is often close to succumbing to that desire—in “A une passante” for

example—but controls himself and retreats into his gentlemanly detachment. Or so it seems.

Keith Tester points out that the incursions of Baudelaire's *flâneur* into the public sphere represent a way of escaping a personal, inner void. The dandy would not have continued the experiment if he hadn't taken some pleasure in the act, whatever its nature. Based on his analysis of a fragment from *Paris Spleen*, Tester argues that the *flâneur* derives a certain (erotic) pleasure from being among the crowd. "The man who loves to lose himself in a crowd enjoys feverish delights that the egoist locked up in himself as in a box, and the slothful man like a mollusk in his shell will be eternally deprived of" (Baudelaire qtd. in Tester 3). The pleasure and the detachment come from the fact that the *flâneur* desires to be part of the crowd (despite the danger of being reduced to anonymity) while at the same time *knowing* the danger. The consciousness of the act isolates him and brings him pleasure at the same time.

Benjamin speaks of a slightly different type of pleasure when he compares the *flâneur* with the commodity. There is a certain enjoyment in his abandonment of self to the flux of people, found even in the shocks that accompany every encounter with other individuals. The *flâneur* perceives the crowd as a "narcotic" which "permeates him blissfully [and] that can compensate him for many humiliations" (*Charles Baudelaire* 55). Benjamin names this "the intoxication of the commodity around which surges the stream of consumers" (55). If we accept this relationship between the *flâneur* and the crowd, then we can also argue that, despite his apparent composure in the face of existence, the *flâneur* also burns with the desire to meet his "consumers;" hence, he finds repeated opportunities to expose himself to the crowd, letting himself be filled with their

fleeting personalities and life experiences. In this respect, a more encompassing definition of *flânerie* comes from Tester, who argues that, "Flânerie can [thus] be understood as the observation of the fleeting and the transitory which is the other half of modernity to the permanent and central sense of self. *Flânerie* is doing through and thanks to which the *flâneur* hopes and believes he will be able to find the truth of his being. *Flânerie* also, then, is the way of avoiding arrival at the funeral pyre of being. It is a way of going on precisely because it is ultimately so utterly futile. (7)

While it becomes evident that *flânerie* is significant as both an incursion inside oneself and an external exploration in the modern urban space, its function surpassing the socio-historical setting of nineteenth-century Paris, the question worth asking is whether a gendered approach to *flânerie* is at once possible and productive. Is it important to talk about the *flâneuse*? Moreover, the question must extend beyond the possibility of (female) *flânerie* to address its continued existence in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

As I mentioned above, Baudelaire and Benjamin claimed in their works that the *flâneur*'s place was in the arcades and that taking him out into the traffic would be the end of this iconic figure. "Even in those days," says Benjamin, referring to nineteenth-century Paris, "it was not possible to stroll about everywhere in the city," suggesting that, in the times he was living idle walking in the city was made even more difficult. "Before Haussmann wide pavements were rare, and the narrow ones afforded little protection from the vehicles. Strolling could hardly have assumed the importance it did without the arcades [... where] both sides of the passageway, which are lighted from above, are lined

with the most elegant shops, so that such an arcade is a city, even a world, in miniature [...]. The arcades were a cross between a street and an intérieur” (*Charles Baudelaire* 37). The fact that this micro-universe was a unified, coherent space gave the *flâneur* the certainty that he could control it with his gaze. The organized and uniform space reinforced his male authority. By contrast, once this space starts to be fragmented and expanded into a frenzied system of streets under the influence of industrialization and growing commercialization, the *flâneur* falls prey to the anxiety of being thrown hither and thither without reliable bearings to hold on to. As Deborah Parsons posits, “the fate of the *flâneur* after the loss of his arcade habitat is a desperate attempt to retain an authoritative urban vision, which he attempts through a retreat to the detached and overlooking position above the city streets, implicitly a retreat to the authority of the past, the spectatorship of the eighteenth-century urban dandy” (35). And this is the condition with which most readers are familiar through Baudelaire and Benjamin.

Modernity does offer the *flâneur* an option for surviving, according to Parsons, by rendering himself immobile, renouncing his own physicality and becoming a fixed eye, an observer who does not have to move, but around whom the city itself moves. But here another difference in perception between Baudelaire and Benjamin seems to take shape, since if the former invests his dandy with certain characteristics applicable to the artist in general (restlessness, subversiveness, and ambiguity) the latter portrays him as an authoritative bourgeois who can no longer act as a master of his domain when faced with the fragmented nature of existence. Instead, the rag-picker replaces him in the city, feeding himself with the “refused objects of everyday life and forming a connective relationship with the city” (Parsons 36). While the *flâneur* seems to engage with the city

on a temporal axis going backwards, as he is lured by the promises of security coming from the past, the rag picker does not find it problematic to explore the city geographically and physically. Parsons invests him with creative abilities, asserting that the rag picker (re)creates the city "from its own fragments," which makes him a type of bricoleur, but I believe that this observation is insufficiently developed. The critic does not offer a more complete analysis of the way in which the rag picker is, in a self-assumed way, better prepared for modernity and of why he does not owe his survival to the fact that his marginal social position makes him the first victim and at the same time the last 'dead body' in a new regime. What Parsons desires to achieve by shifting her argument toward this new figure is to ensure a more appropriate ancestor for the focus of her work—the *flâneuse*, whom she sees as a direct descendant of the rag-picker rather than of the *flâneur*.

Baudelaire manifested great interest in the condition of the rag pickers, whom he considered another type of outcasts, just like the *flâneur*. The difference in habitat and class make the two categories irreconcilable, nevertheless. Lurking on the margins of the big cities, the rag pickers "represented the 'Other' of Paris, the underside of the city of gaiety and pleasure" but at the same time "the forgotten or unnoticed treasures of urban life," which drew writers like Charles Baudelaire (Wilson *The Sphinx* 54). While the middle and upper classes were engaged in consumerist madness (compared by Baudelaire to the act of prostitution), the rag pickers, argues Parsons, were "concerned with the old myths of the city rather than its new phantasmagoria" (36). Nevertheless, this assumes that the entire social class has the artistic inclinations of the bohemians of Paris, which is not true. At the same time, in "Assommons les pauvres," for example, Baudelaire also

suggests that through the beggars the problem of urban violence and danger is brought to the fore. When the narrator meets a beggar asking for charity and beats him up on the advice of the demonic voice (the voice of consumerism) whispering that men are equal only when they prove it (through competition), the boredom brought by consumption and the violence of impotent desire clash. The beggar, in the end, proves the narrator's theory by returning the blows, which shows that the modern urban space is also a place of violent (ideological) clashes, a menacing space but one from which new opportunities can nevertheless arise.

On the other hand, arguing that the rag picker entirely supplanted the *flâneur* in the activity of creating an everyday aesthetics on the streets of the metropolis would involve a certain degree of injustice to other forms of *flânerie* that continued the legacy of the middle-class *flâneur*. Replacing the bourgeois city stroller with the rag picker would mean perpetuating the idea that an exclusively masculine perspective on the urban space is the only possible and desirable one. Can the *flâneuse* succeed the *flâneur* in his task of making sense of modernity? It is true that in the case of male city strollers there seems to be a certain evolution from those marginalized by choice (the *flâneurs*) who find it more difficult adjusting to new environments to those marginalized by society (the rag pickers), whereas in the case of women, the first ones to engage with the city in a less regulated way were the socially marginalized, the prostitutes and the working women and only much later the middle and upper-class women. Nevertheless, the latter were a reality of the modern urban landscape and ignoring them would mean denying ourselves a more thorough understanding of modernity and postmodernity.

The violent representation of the metropolis mentioned earlier completes the image of a physically fragmented and historically discontinuous urban space shaped by Benjamin, a space which is “too dangerous for middle class women to negotiate by themselves while threatening working class women with loss of virtue or even of life” (Wilson, *The Sphinx* 65). The open access of women to the public sphere gave rise to a lot of anxiety among men first of all (who feared that the sensuality women would bring to the public sphere would undermine their authority), but among women also (because of their own fear of being mistaken for prostitutes). “Distinctions of rank of every kind [started to be] blurred,” posits Wilson in “The invisible *flâneur*” and when that happens, usually new social categories are in the making. One of them is, arguably, the *flâneuse*, whom I see as continuing the task of the *flâneur*: that of reading the city as text and making meaning of the “phantasmagoric” changes brought about by industrialization and mass consumption and also negotiating the masculine and feminine identity in the metropolis.

The right of the *flâneuse* to a name and a place in literary and social studies has been greatly contested. Janet Wolff in “The invisible *flâneuse*: Women and the literature of modernity” (1985) and Griselda Pollock in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (1988) argue that there could never be a female *flâneur* around the same time as Baudelaire’s portrayal of the Parisian urban landscape as, due to their economic and social status, women were still confined to the private sphere. The experience of modernity in the metropolis remains, in the opinion of these two critics, a masculine one *par excellence*. Wolff bases her argument on the ‘separation of the spheres’ theory and suggests that even if women were allowed access to certain public

spaces, such as department stores, those places were exposing them only to one aspect of modernity, that is, mass consumption. She goes on to add that “although consumerism is a central aspect to modernity, and moreover mediated the private/public division, the peculiar characteristics of ‘modern’ which I have been considering—the fleeting, anonymous encounter and the purposeless strolling—do not apply to shopping, or to women’s activities either as public signs of their husbands’ wealth or as consumers” (“The invisible *flâneuse*” 153). The only exceptions to this rule of ‘non-existence’ are, according to Wolff, the marginal women (the prostitute, the widow, the lesbian, the old woman, the unknown woman), but they are a counterpart of the rag-picker rather than of the *flâneur*.

Pollock’s argument is based on an analysis of modernity shaped by the canvas of Impressionist paintings. She brings into the spotlight women painters of the period, such as Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt and uses the same feminist critique of the gender division of spaces to criticize the monopolizing gaze of the male artist (the *flâneur*) in the nineteenth century. Pollock’s argument is that, although there were spaces that women could access—she seems to be attracted by the idea of the in-between spaces that made belonging to a particular gender ambiguous—the fact that they did not have the freedom to wander at will made it impossible for her to acknowledge a real counterpart for the *flâneur*. It should be noted that both Wolff and Pollock base their theories on a socio-historical understanding of the *flâneur/flâneuse* pair and from this perspective their theory stands, as, indeed, the nineteenth century woman—be she of middle or upper-class upbringing, an artist or a prostitute—enjoyed limited freedom. Social or safety constraints always had the power of second thought for these women.



On the other side of the argument I have already identified Deborah Parsons and Elizabeth Wilson who regard *flânerie* as a more symbolic act of experiencing the city, but one that is indispensable to the modern artist. "As a metaphor for the experiences and aesthetic styles of an increasingly urban society; characteristics of *flânerie* (adaptability, multiplicity, boundary-crossing, fluidity) place it prominently within a well-established critical debate on masculine/feminine art forms" (Parsons 41). Parsons argues that by rejecting the possibility of the existence of a female *flâneur*, of the *flâneuse*, during the late 1800s and the beginning of the 1900s, Wolff and Pollock fail to consider that women can experience modern urban space not only socio-historically, but also aesthetically. Wilson goes so far as to contend that the *flâneur* as an individual never existed, but was invented as an expression of the emotional response of people to the changes in the new metropolis. "When singled out," adds Wilson, "he vanishes. He is a figure to be deconstructed, a shifting projection of angst rather than a solid embodiment of male bourgeois power. [...] He floats with no material base, living on his wits, and, lacking the patriarchal discourse that assured him of meaning, is compelled to invent a new one" (*The Sphinx* 65). Only in this sense can Wilson agree with Wolff and Pollock that one cannot talk about a *flâneuse*. But even as concepts, are the *flâneur/flâneuse* void of significance for modern/postmodern life?

While refraining from making such radical statements, Parsons prefers to adopt a less sociological and a more literary approach in her analysis of the *flâneuse* in the nineteenth century. Basing her theory on the idea that *flânerie* goes beyond the time referred to by Baudelaire and Benjamin in their works, she points out that Wolff, Pollock and Wilson alike "disregard the fact that the post-Benjaminian *flâneur* is more

influentially a conceptual metaphor for urban observation and walking that extends even to the present day and the *flâneur* of de Certeau's postmodern city" (41). The *flâneuse*, for Parsons, is neither the shopper, nor the prostitute, but the urban female artist-observer, more of a concept or metaphor than an actual person.

My understanding of the *flâneuse* is indebted in many ways to Deborah Parson's ideas; nevertheless, I attempt to restrict the rather general ways in which the term has been used and continue, based on her affirmation that one can find instances of female *flânerie* in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, to explore its significance for modernity and postmodernity. I do not exclude the existence of the *flâneuse* as a socio-historical reality, but I argue that her emergence should be situated rather later, around the beginning of the twentieth century and the "New Woman" movement. For me, a female counterpart of the *flâneur* is neither the prostitute nor the *passante* (both figures that inhabit Baudelaire's city poetry) nor the disguised *flâneuse* à la George Sand, but someone who enjoys the same social and financial freedom as the *flâneur* and has artistic inclinations and interests. It is important that women's access to the city not be accidental, hidden or ephemeral, but a determined and consciously internalized experience of the public sphere which, I argue, is more achievable from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on. Dorothy Richardson's character Miriam Henderson, an unusual figure with both working and middle class affiliations, is still vexed by a subtle nagging feeling that she is putting herself at risk by walking alone in the streets of London or by entering restaurants unaccompanied by a man or a group of women, but she accepts the challenge because with every such occasion she is reminded that she is indeed an independent woman. From the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on, the *flâneuse* will not

face the same social limitations as her predecessors, but the question arises whether the major changes in urban planning and technology still leave opportunities for *flânerie*. And even then, can *flânerie* still function in postmodernity as an appropriate tool for interrogating social life? Is Régine Robin's *flâneuse* a disappearing species, as the title of her book seems to suggest?

Parsons points out that at the end of the nineteenth century, "women as observers and artists seem to have increased access to the city as the male artist withdraws from it," a claim which undercuts the image of women as objects that are only being looked at. Instances of female *flânerie* are even more justified around this time, as the identity of women as public actors is also emerging.

*Flânerie* can thus be interpreted as an attempt to identify and place the self in the uncertain environment of modernity, what Dorothy Richardson has termed 'pilgrimage' and Virginia Woolf 'street haunting.' Yet a 'pilgrimage' suggests a positive step, the breaking into new territory, whereas 'haunting' is perhaps more forlorn and an attempt to return to something that is lost. To continue this comparison, the 'pilgrimage' is a physical activity that combines walking and hardship over ground and personal fulfillment, the 'haunting' an ethereal one in which the specter floats above the ground and is detached and immune from the dangers of the cityscape. (41)

In my opinion, these two images provide also an adequate description of the distinction between female and male *flânerie* at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>. If the *flâneur* seems to be pushed away from the streets into the arcades and even further into obsolescence once department stores open, the *flâneuse* self-consciously

accepts the adventure and ventures forth into the increasingly busy city life. The new territory that is won by the female street walker is not secured without struggle but at the same time it will always be a sign of her achievement. The *flâneuse* continues to owe some of her attributes to her male counterpart, but over time, the ties have started to weaken to the extent that the *flâneur* seems indeed to be driven into a spectral background from where he haunts each attempt at *flânerie*.

On the one hand, I agree with Parsons that, although denied open access to the public sphere, women found other ways in which to participate in the construction of urban space and that art forms gave them this chance. On the other hand, if we consider a physical presence within the crowd and in the street as a fundamental condition for *flânerie*, then I would agree with Wolff and other critics who argue that a true female counterpart to Baudelaire's *flâneur* was invisible (although not non-existent) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the time frame for the emergence of the *flâneuse* (embodying the features mentioned earlier) would then have to be moved into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And it is because I acknowledge instances of female *flânerie* before this period, though not a self-conscious and open form of *flânerie*, that I refer to the *flâneuse* emerging at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—in the image of Miriam Henderson—as “the modern *flâneuse*.” An important aspect of modernity was an overt emancipatory move away from traditional models, making it at once a statement of freedom, of denial of crystallized structures and of creative nonconformism. The openness with which the modern *flâneuse* inscribes her identity in the urban landscape and the readiness with which she embraces the challenges and dangers of being a woman in the streets of the metropolis make her a true agent of modernity. In these circumstances, Miriam Henderson is, I argue, one of the first and best

examples of the female *flâneuses* deriving fairly directly from the *flâneur*. She is independent enough financially to have the time and the means to walk freely around London; her act of walking on the streets is, albeit without an obvious purpose, an intentional act. At the same time she positions herself as an artist-observer with respect to the city, trying to create an authentic and voiced identity for herself in her daily urban life.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, society is still adjusting to the idea that not all women rambles are fallen women and that the emergence of the new sex openly into the bustling metropolis is not conducive to decadence. A single woman in the crowd, walking without an evident aim, will, even at the end of the twentieth century, be more noticeable than her male counterpart and this will always make the *flâneuse*'s role an uneasy one. As pointed out by Deborah Epstein Nord, "if the Rambler or *flâneur* required anonymity and the camouflage of the crowd to move with impunity and to exercise the privilege of the gaze, the too-noticeable female stroller could never enjoy that position," which makes "the relationship of women to spectatorship itself [...] a vexed and nearly irresolvable one" (4) but I would add that it also functions as one of the features of female *flânerie*. In her analysis of Victorian women as city strollers, Nord focuses on the prostitute and argues that it is particularly her "consciousness of transgression and trespassing, [...] her vexed sexuality and [...] her struggle to escape the status of spectacle and become a spectator" that inspire her specific urban vision. The critic adds that the middle-class women (mostly artists, writers, office workers, or other kinds of investigators) who emerge on the city scene in the twentieth century will have to negotiate, even if adjacently, their identity with their predecessors.

It is this latter group of *flâneuses* that forms the focus of the second part of my analysis. With their affiliation (either through status or aspiration) to the middle-class, they are a category less courted by critics, especially since the general opinion is that the middle-class, having access to the latest technological advancements and being engaged with demanding jobs regards *flânerie* as something dangerous, outdated or plain tiring, and this is valid from a contemporary perspective. In fact, the relationship of postmodernity with *flânerie* is for the most part a belligerent one. My analysis of Régine Robin's *Mégapolis* will address the ways in which *flânerie* adapted to the space of non-places, negative spaces, spaces of consumption and of the visual and auditory assault on the senses. The question of whether there is a city walker in postmodernity shows, surprisingly, that the concept is as controversial now as it was more than a century ago. I have encountered difficulties in finding material on the postmodern *flâneuse*, although the more general topic of 'postmodern *flânerie*' has generated some interest, especially in the field of urban and cultural studies.

As urban space becomes more and more fragmented, Zygmunt Bauman argues that "the street is no more the *flâneur*'s hunting ground. The 'outside' is but a traffic-flow-support-nexus" (149) which turns *flânerie* toward enclosed, limited, but promising places such as shopping malls, theme parks and hotels, museums and other small and medium size simulacra, catering to the desire of the *flâneur* to escape reality.

"*Flâneurism*," argues Bauman, "did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the post-modern consumerist order" (153) and now it has fallen victim to it. There seems to be general agreement in the discussions around *flânerie* in the postmodern city that this activity has undergone mutations and hybridizations in order to survive because, for

reasons of traffic, safety, time, and lack of landscape authenticity, *flânerie* in the traditional sense becomes almost impossible.

However, the narrator in Régine Robin's *Mégapolis* tries to show that the *flâneur* has not yet disappeared and that he or she can still function as a metaphor for the artist or the professional with an interest in postmodern urban life, who can still afford the leisure of strolling. Robin has no expectations of authenticity from the places she sees during her walks and seems to want to live according to the same rhythm as the city itself. She feels the same attraction Richardson's character felt toward the undiscovered fragments of these megalopolises, the memory of which she then preserves for a future palimpsestic creation of what passes for the global city. Images of Rio de Janeiro, Shanghai, Tokyo, Berlin, Moscow, Cairo, Addis-Abbeba, New York, London are put together to form a continuous succession, as if they were all part of a bigger city. Robin's *flânerie* seems to be reaching the final and most encapsulating stage, taking the form both of virtual strolling, with the aid of books, films, and online maps, and of physical strolling.

La poétique des mégapoles que je cherche à traquer n'est en rien une saturation du regard. J'aime les néons, les décors kitsch, le carton-pâte et cette collision entre le passé et le présent, l'authentique et le pastiche, le postmoderne et l'ancien. Le trop plein ne m'empêche pas de voir, de penser, de comparer et je m'épanouis dans ces excès et rencontres des contraires. (*Mégapolis* 19)

It is, I argue, precisely this acceptance of contradictions and of the mélange between the authentic and the fake that is characteristic of postmodern *flânerie*. The *flâneuse* continues to act as the moving artist-observer that Parsons referred to in her work. She seems to surrender to the excess of images, of colors, of sounds for a moment,

only to gain back her creative control the next and start her *oeuvre*, expanding the actual cityscape according to the luggage of literary and cinematic representations that she carries with her in her memory. The main focus, as pointed out also by Helen Scalway, is to go beyond the stage of observing or identifying a place and to actually build a space. The critic considers that, despite the social freedom that women have gained since the nineteenth century, the number of obstacles hasn't diminished. She mentions the "aggressively fast boy cyclists on the pavements—and all the stopped people: unemployed youths claiming space by their demeanor, probably because they have no space anywhere, really; all the homeless, the beggars, the drugged, drunk, deranged, predatory; other victims of care in the community" (165). The frustration she feels comes from the need to detach herself from the previous identities taken on by the different *flâneuses*—the streetwalker, the shopper, the female victim—as she sees herself "reduced to someone else's idea of what [she] should be" (168). The only way in which Scalway envisages her dwelling in the city is, like Régine Robin, by "constructing a city within the city that is full of meaning and significance for [herself]" (169). This city is created as the *flâneuse* is struggling to slow down from the accelerated walk in which the megalopolis throws her against her will almost, and to contemplate not only the actual images and signs, but also their emergence on the temporal axis.

The result of this type of city strolling seems to be the exact opposite of what de Certeau saw as the phenomenon of city mapping, in the sense that it averts forgetfulness and revives the act of remembering in a creative way. When the "operations of walking" are reduced to points touched and trajectories drawn on a city map, the "act itself of passing by" is pushed into the background from where it slowly vanishes. This process of



replacing the practice by the trace, continues de Certeau, encourages forgetfulness (98).

In these circumstances, it can be argued that the act of *flânerie* in postmodernity can

counterbalance that, which makes it not an obsolete practice, but one with an added

significance in relation to the female *flânerie* of the end of the nineteenth century. As the

next chapter will show, the act of walking in the streets of the metropolis at the turn of

the nineteenth to the twentieth century will make the *flâneuse* a visible and important

participant in urban modernity whereas, as discussed in chapter three, more recent acts of

female *flânerie* will testify not only to a presence, but to a creative power which will

contribute to a better understanding of a global, cosmopolitan world.

## Chapter 2

### No more invisible street-haunting.

#### Traversing the city-as-world in Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*

If women have been considered absent or 'invisible,' it is partially because they have been removed from the street.— Anke Gleber, *The Art of Taking a Walk*, 175

Except for those scholars with a particular focus on the psychological novel written in the "stream of consciousness" technique, Dorothy Richardson might be an obscure name. Considered to be a precursor of Virginia Woolf and an admirer of James Joyce's and Marcel Proust's styles, which she seldom tries to appropriate in her own writings, the British writer never achieved the fame these authors enjoyed during or after their time. As Horace Gregory rightly observed in one of the many studies linking Richardson's own life experiences to those of the protagonist in her long series *Pilgrimage*, "[n]ot unlike her heroine, Dorothy Richardson had a way of standing in her own light, and when in fashionable company, of looking 'dowdy'. Like Miriam, she was quick to voice unpopular opinions" (vii). Knowing that she wrote a thirteen-novel series in a new and often inaccessible style, was a Germanophile during the first half of the twentieth century but at the same time a devout nationalist, a feminist, and a Lycurgan, one could understand most of the critics' reactions to her work and personal choices.

Interest in her writing increased for a short period in the '70s and '80s as literary critics acknowledged Richardson's importance in several literary directions: the "stream of consciousness" writing style, the psychological novel, the feminist critique of a (still) Victorian society which perpetuated the "hopeless condition of being [an independent]

woman" (*Pilgrimage*, v.ii 222), and a feminine urban literature resulting from women's increased access to the city sphere. Despite the lack of recognition, Richardson never gave up writing, and her writing indeed became one of the hallmarks of early feminist urban literature.

Her case is not exclusive, nonetheless. Deborah Parsons mentions another less known name, that of Amy Levy, as "one of the first women writers to consistently adopt the perspective of a female writer-observer or *flâneur*" (87). In her novel *The Romance of a Shop* (1888), Levy prefigures the way in which in the years to come the modern woman enters the public space—looking for a job which would allow her to pursue her more artistic inclinations. The London that Levy's female characters discover functions in a way that differs significantly from the way male writers of the same period described it. Gertrude and Lucy, each engaged with the city in similar, yet technically different, ways (the former takes up writing, the latter photography) find London an inspiring city and live its smells and sounds to the fullest. This is quite different, as Parsons also notes, from the way in which male writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries portray the urban space: as anxiety-provoking and lacking opportunities. In other words, the city is perceived as threatening the authoritative position occupied by the male urban observer.

In *Country and the City* (1973) Raymond Williams talks about the "stress of the change" as one of the effects of the rapid development of London starting with the eighteenth century. The example can be easily generalized to encompass all aspiring metropolises. As primary cause, Williams names, as one would expect, the growing industrialization of cities which made "the 'insolent rabble', 'the insolence of the mob', the 'idle, profligate and debauched' workmen [...] commonplaces for middle-class

observation" (144). The critic explains the anxiety that was taking over common men and artists alike as resulting from a feeling of physical insecurity experienced in the "contradictory [urban] reality" by the middle and upper-class individual who had to confront daily other characters growing in prominence—for example, the crowd and the independent woman.

The contrasts of wealth and poverty were not different in kind from those of the rural order, but were more intense, more general, more evidently problematic, in their very concentration into the feverishly expanding city. The 'mob' was often violent, unpredictable, capable of being used for reaction, but it was also a name that overlaid [...] 'movements of social protest in which the underlying conflict of poor against rich' was clearly visible. (144)

Among the writers that Williams names as critics of capital's impact on city life are William Blake and William Wordsworth, followed by Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy, George Gissing and H.G. Wells up to the beginning of the twentieth century, and then T.S Eliot into the twentieth century. In either social or religious pessimistic tones, these artists painted London almost unanimously—James Joyce is one notable exception—as a "wasteland" and preferred to turn their eyes back to a much safer and familiar past or to a less compromised space, the countryside. All in all, "at the turn of the century," argues Jean Radford, "this anti-urbanism played a key role in the construction of the idea of 'Englishness', the English way of life, the English character. In brief, the best of English traditions was deemed to be in the past and the past was to be found in the countryside" (63).

Most critics agree that one of the most notable reasons, if not the most important, for the negative reputation created around city life is man's loss of control over a space that was assumed to belong to him. Few are the sociologists, historians or literary critics who do not see space as divided along gender lines into private and public spheres, and the ones who do—such as Elizabeth Wilson—approach it from a class perspective, considering more the social tensions that engendered the bourgeois experience than just the male/female habitation of urban spaces.

In these circumstances, as discussed in Chapter 1, the *flâneur* for “embodied the undecided, the uncertain, in bourgeois experience of the city” (9) as Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough explain in the Introduction to their anthology *The Invisible Flâneuse?* In other words, the *flâneur* was important for describing the individual subject whose form of authority was put at risk, on the one hand by the increased changes in patterns of production and consumption which now targeted men and women alike, and on the other hand by all too frequent street encounters with the emancipated woman, the New Woman of the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth. The prostitutes do not pose a threat because they exist in order to satisfy men's needs, whereas the growingly independent woman presented a challenge. As Parsons points out, “the middle-class woman walking in the city is a problematic figure for the threatened male [...] as she is not a sexually available object and her economic security protects her from punishment as a fallen woman” (85).

It can be argued that consumerist practices brought women into what is generally considered the public sphere, although according to Wilson and Griselda Pollock it was more of a marginal public space that women had access to at first, a space “that included

the cafés, the department stores, the arcades, the boulevards of the city, spaces in which the commodity had full sway” (D’Souza and McDonough 10). Carol Watts names the places in which women at the beginning of the twentieth century started to enjoy city life “places of interconnection” (48). They placed the woman in front of meaningful situations for “transformation in her identity or in her perception of those around her” (48). What critics observed, nevertheless, was that even these small conquests of public space were met with an attitude that differed from the “hegemonic *fin de siècle* pessimism of the male urban mind” (Parsons 88). The beginnings were timid since they were developing in tandem with an entire network of facilities—such as means of transportation, places for entertainment, lodgings or even public lavatories—that accommodated women. Indeed, concludes Parsons, it was “largely due to the increased provision of such non-familial, semi-public spaces within the city that women were able to develop a legitimate position in the urban environment and to enjoy greater freedom in its streets” (111).

These promising opportunities starting to open up to women around the end of the nineteenth century still could not convince Janet Wolff that another gender inequality could be annulled through arguing in favor of the existence of a female counterpart for the *flâneur*. Even in a much later essay on the legitimacy of early female *flânerie*, Wolff stands by the argument advanced in the '80s that throughout these beginnings, the *flâneuse* remains invisible. In “Gender and the haunting of cities,” the critic names the “aimlessness of the strolling and the reflectiveness of the gaze” as defining attributes of any figure aspiring to *flâneur* status (21). By contrast, the feminine street walker is lacking precisely idleness in her walking because, argues Wolff, a Mrs. Dalloway always

has a purpose when starting her urban journey. She always has to be somewhere—to visit a (sick) friend, go to the cinema, go shopping or, later, go to or come back from work—and these “duties” are perceived by the critic as constraints. In these circumstances, continues Wolff, contrary to the general opinion that the act of (feminine) *flânerie* was possible primarily in the form of shopping activity, “the department store cannot be the scene of urban strolling not only because it is an enclosed or circumscribed space, but, more importantly, because shopping is a pre-defined and purposeful activity” (21).

Therefore, “for women in the city, negotiating the geography and architecture of public space in the early twentieth century, the role of the *flâneuse* remained unavailable” (22).

What Wolff and other critics overlook is the fact that, in the same way as the *flâneur* could take various identities—that of *badaud*, detective, dandy—the *flâneuse* might emerge as a variety of characters as well, each of them taking over and modifying certain traits of their male counterparts. As Karen Van Godtsenhoven points out, the *flâneur* survives in time thanks particularly to his multiplicity of traits; he continues to exist in the era of mass consumption mainly as *badaud*, who is in many respects the ancestor of the postmodern consumer.

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*. (14)

In these circumstances, could it be argued that what Wolff dismisses—the shopper-*flâneuse*—is in fact the descendant of the *badaud*, but that there is also the artist-*flâneuse* who aesthetically consumes the city and who takes up the legacy of the artist-*flâneur*? The *flâneuse*'s resources for engaging with urban life are not exhausted or already consumed, as are those of the male stroller, as her open activity in the public sphere is a fairly new adventure. It is here, therefore, that Miriam Henderson, the protagonist of Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* series, fits. She is a peculiar apparition for her time, but then peculiarity and paradox were among the words that characterized the *flâneur* as well. Other than the fact that her existence, ambiguous as it is, testifies to the increased visibility of women in the public sphere, she also depicts the way in which the increasing number of independent, working women negotiate their existence within the modern urban space. Despite the fact that she seems to be deeply rooted in a single physical space, London—as expected, given the social limitations imposed on a woman of that time—and her walks help create a very complete and real image of this particular metropolis at a particular point in time, the paradox is that this female stroller also experiences a “state of homelessness” as “the archetypal figure of modernist exile” (Watts 54). This might be due, in part, to a subtle apprehension of the mix of freedom and limitations that still govern her life and actions, and also to the freshness of the wound created by the break with tradition, which, all in all, functioned as a secure, albeit coercive, cultural space. The other level of the paradox is, as I will show in the next



chapter, that the situation in the case of Régine Robin and her postmodern *flânerie* is one of opposition.

Paralleling the life of her author, Miriam is shown from the first novella, *Pointed Roofs*, to be a character who is continuously wandering between spaces and social circles; between memories of a sheltered childhood and a more troubled adolescence due to her mother's mental problems on the one hand, and the present realities of a rented attic room in London's East End and a secretarial job in a dentist's office on the other. In a similar fashion, Dorothy Richardson herself struggled with the new lifestyle she had to craft for herself as a result of her father's financial losses and her mother's death when Richardson was still an adolescent. Forced to earn an income from the age of nineteen, Richardson had to work first as a governess in Switzerland, in keeping with the fashion of the day, then as a secretary in a dental office in London while gradually developing her career as a writer. Through Miriam, Richardson illustrates her own difficult negotiations with space—East London instead of West London—, time—between past and present—and identity—being visible under the “New Woman” umbrella or invisible as a Victorian woman.

Going back to the question of whether Miriam Henderson can be considered a representative of a definable social category of her period, which, according to Wolff, would give the term *flâneuse* a real anchoring in a collectivity, the answer is no. She becomes part of the working class though her job, although through her education and her upbringing she does not identify with it. She no longer belongs to the bourgeoisie as a result of her father's poor financial moves, but her interests and demeanor speak to her bourgeois background. Nevertheless, after she starts living among the working classes,

she realizes that she becomes critical of the upper-middle class, from whose ideals and preoccupations she distances herself. In these circumstances, it is risky to posit that Miriam's case is representative of an entire social class, either the middle or the working class, and this would, at first sight, reinforce the argument that her authentic instances of feminine *flânerie* are too isolated and case-specific to count.

However, one should not forget that the exceptions and isolated cases have often engendered new rules, new structures, and new social categories. Moreover, there are other factors that need to be considered when rejecting or accepting the existence of the *flâneuse* and, as I argued in the first chapter with regards to the *flâneur*, a socio-historical lack of representation does not exclude artistic visibility. Critics have included Dorothy Richardson's (and Miriam's) case within the larger "New Woman" movement arising at the end of the nineteenth century as a result of the suffragette movement in the first place and, secondly, of the new opportunities for mobility opened to women, such as bicycle, bus or train rides. This means that, although she was one of the pioneers, Richardson also promoted a new attitude toward a woman's place within the urban landscape, an attitude which, according to Carol Watts, was not all that new, but which, "for the woman reader of that time [...] may have produced a shock of self-recognition" (39). Thus, women's longstanding desires found a clear expression in Miriam Henderson's city walks. Along the same line, Watts even argues that Miriam is "in some sense 'typical' of her sex and her class" as she finds characteristic of the new woman of that time "Miriam's taste for reading Ibsen and Zola, [...] her love for smoking cigarettes in public, her thoughts on marriage, on free love, and on riding a bicycle without a corset" (39). Moreover, continues Watts, the literature of the time made the reader familiar with stories of women

who had to leave their families in order to find employment in the city and who, eventually, came to realize that their identity suffered significant mutations as a result of their contact with the metropolis. And Richardson is undoubtedly one of the early representatives of this category of urban women writers.

From the moment Miriam arrives in the heart of London in order to start her job at Mr. Orly and Mr. Hancock's dental office, she will develop an intimate rapport with the city. In fact, even from the first day, when she installs herself in Mrs. Bailey's house on Tansley Street<sup>1</sup> she personifies the city, pointing out that her room was so much a part of London that the city "could come freely in day and night through the unscreened happy little panes; light and darkness and darkness and light" (v.ii 16). For Miriam, the city joins the three dimensions of her life—"low-paid work, solitariness, and lots of walking"—corresponding to the three spaces she inhabits—the office, her room, and the street, which defines "the everyday life of the modern city woman" (Parsons 114). However, it does not function, as Thomas Stanley tried to argue, as a mere background for Miriam's often disorganized introspection<sup>2</sup>. Stanley grants Richardson the credit for having been able to render so masterfully the correspondences between the outer world, London, and the inner world, Miriam's consciousness. This alludes to an idea that

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<sup>1</sup> As explained by George H. Thomson in the annotated volume of Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, Tansley Street stands for the real Endsleigh Street, next to Euston Station, where Richardson lived for a longer time while she worked in London.

<sup>2</sup> In his study of Dorothy Richardson's life and work, Thomas Stanley approaches in traditional terms the role of the "setting" in *Pilgrimage*. He argues that "London is not so thickly woven into the texture of Miss Richardson's fiction as it is in Virginia Woolf's who was endlessly fascinated with the myriad impressions of the city; but London imagery is important to Miriam's moments of illumination because the apprehension of a particular place [...] often provides her with moments of insight" (71).

Simmel and, later on, de Certeau and other critics share with regards to the concept of the modern city—that the metropolis is, besides a real space and a text, a state of mind as well, ever-changing according to one's structure of feelings and imagination, which justifies Benjamin's term of "urban phantasmagoria."

From this point of view, Miriam's case could seem rather complex. On the one hand, aware of her role as woman writer opening the more or less imaginary gates of the city of London to her female readers, Dorothy Richardson aimed at first to create a work that would rival, through its realism, the urban descriptions belonging to male writers. This would explain, perhaps, why the fragments depicting London's street life are written in a clearer style compared to the rest of her work, where Miriam's intricate thoughts, poured out in "stream of consciousness" fashion, complicate any expectations of a straightforward narrative. The details offered are so precise and the references to real things so easy to follow that it does not take a strenuous attempt on the part of the reader to create a mental map of (Miriam's) London. It is only when the flow of intricate thoughts which accompany Miriam in each of her strolls pours over this clear map that the images become confusing. The two impulses—realism and something much more subjective—create, at times, a degree of tension, which leads James Donald to remark:

[a]lthough Richardson's London is as thoroughly internalized as Joyce's Dublin, the flux and force of the city are nowhere centred into the consciousness of the observer walking through it. Rather, the woman's very being is dissolved into the enveloping, liquefying spread of the city. This might be read as a contrast between centripetal, taxonomising maleness and centrifugal, feeling femaleness.

(4)

This, argues Donald, is the effect of the modern city on the—and here the big question is worth posing—*flâneur* or *flâneuse*? As urban modernity is understood as a state of mind expressing humanity's fragmentariness and decentredness, the observers of this phenomenon, the strollers of the city, while trying to maintain a pragmatic attitude in the face of it, are ultimately the ones that get drawn in. Miriam tries to preserve a detached and sensible gaze during her urban adventures, one that would rival the male vision, but the way in which she perceives the things and people around her creates a level of observation of the modern metropolis that is quite distinct. As I argued above, male and female writers have a different attitude toward the modern metropolis, which renders important the distinction between *flâneur* and *flâneuse*<sup>3</sup>. As Rachel Bowlby points out, "the woman in the street is not the equivalent of the man in the street, that figure of normal representativeness; and her sexually dubious associations give to her stepping out a quality of automatic transgressiveness that is also the chance of her going somewhere different" (viii). In fact, it is one of the distinguishing features of (post)modernity that it disturbs the long-established perspectives and discourses by encouraging the marginalized and minorities to voice their own experiences. In other

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<sup>3</sup> In her article "Gender and the haunting of the city," Janet Wolff invests James Donald's question with a rather mocking and rhetorical tone: "Why on earth should any woman want to be a *flâneur*?" In fact, despite the tone implied, Donald's argument about the identity of a *flâneuse* is part of a bigger interrogation of the authenticity of any gendered experience of any form of identity. Referring to citizenship and to the fact that for a long time "citizen" meant "male citizen," Donald posits that "masculine and feminine enactments of citizenship embody different ways of experiencing the impossibility of identity," the 'full identity of Man' (116).

words, modernity could not be read by a single eye—the masculine one—but would necessitate a plurality of visions that could render an authentic experience.

In Miriam's case, as in the case of other New Women, *flânerie* goes hand in hand with freedom and trust in the great changes that would balance out gender roles. Especially for the turn of the century, female *flânerie* represents an act of hope, of feminine assertiveness, of power. To be able to turn tables and to become a spectator after being part of the spectacle for so long was more than just an occasional adventure; it was part of mapping a new [modern] subjectivity for the turn-of-the-century woman<sup>4</sup>. Her walking in the streets of London is as much a real act as it is a symbolic one, which “situates the woman in the wider world” if we imagine her breaking into new spaces—first her room, then the city of London and then the world, as a bigger circle that contains the other two—as steps taken toward achieving a state of visibility for all the women Miriam represents (Radford 52). This is what makes her both an exception as a *flâneuse* at the beginning of the twentieth century and the rule for the new woman of the 1920s, who negotiates her identity between interior spaces—her room, other people's houses—and the city.

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<sup>4</sup> In the Introduction to *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture* (1997), Katharina von Ankum argues that the enthusiasm accompanying these social changes did not last very long at that time because “the emancipated young women of the 1920s [...] have begun to expect a hitherto unimaginable mobility and independence, but have also had to adjust to the idea of having to support themselves and stand on their own feet in the hectic and aggressive urban environment” (2). Nevertheless, this does not change the fact that the new ground of freely walking on the streets of the metropolis was broken, even if it led later to disillusionment.

Despite the fact that in the end Miriam will return from her city strolls to her room, as the place in which her thoughts can be put in writing, and she will embrace the writing career, her relationship with interior spaces is an uneasy one. From the moment she arrives in London, perhaps less so with her room but most certainly with other interiors, she finds private spaces unsettling. They trigger strong emotions and lead to a disarray in her thoughts that can only be soothed by a subsequent walk through the streets of London. Nevertheless, the escapism sought by Miriam is of a different nature than that experienced by Baudelaire. If, in the latter's case, critics talk about a need to escape from one's (bored) self, in Miriam's case the street functions as a medium in which she can meet her own (excited and creative) self. If one were to look more closely at the flow and coherence of the narration—already hard to follow as a result of the stream of consciousness writing technique—one would notice that while she is inside, especially in foreign places, her thoughts are increasingly disorganized while coherence is somehow regained once those reflections are taken into the street.

Miriam's leaving the family home and renting her own place in the city without being married form, as Radford points out, the first version of what Virginia Woolf will later call "a room of one's own" or at least "a room with a view." Radford signals not only the social importance of this act of moving out, but also its economic significance. Miriam is no longer "the daughter of a gentleman" but "a wage earner" who can, in turn, turn a profit (Radford 50)<sup>5</sup>. Despite her enthusiasm about her new social and economic

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<sup>5</sup> In fact, the reason why critics connect the modern *flâneuse* almost exclusively with the department stores is that it was the possibility of seeing the woman as a commodity-buyer that brought her into the visible, public sphere.

victory, Miriam does not idealize her situation, trying to provide the most detailed and accurate description of her living conditions. The room at Mrs. Bailey's warrants, therefore, a three-page description into which Miriam blends her own uneasiness about her condition. As Elisabeth Bronfen observes, "this room becomes a seismograph of her changing moods. Miriam views it as light and liberating when she is happy, and as small, dirty and stifling when she is discouraged" (19). It is not coincidental, therefore, that the first impressions she forms about the room are that it is a mix of light and darkness, of coolness and warmth, as she is trying to break away from a past which she wants to forget, that is, her mother's death and her father's bankruptcy.

She closed the door and stood just inside it looking at the room. [...] She was surprised now at her familiarity with the detail of the room...that idea of visiting and the places in dreams. [...] The room asserted its chilliness. But the dark yellow graining of the wall paper was warm. It shone warmly in the stream of light pouring through the barred lattice window. In the further part of the room, darkened by the steep slope of the roof, it gleamed like stained wood. [...] Close against the window was a firm little deal table covered with a thin, brightly coloured printed cotton table-cloth. When Miriam drew her eyes from its confusion of rich fresh tones, the bedroom seemed very dark. [...] Shutting the quiet door, she went into the brilliance of the window space. (13-14)

The description goes on for another page in which the images seem to shift constantly between light and darkness, with almost obvious associations: light comes from the outside, from the city life, and whatever is touched by it instantly wins Miriam's

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favours, while darkness and dust are associated with those places that are the most remote from the window. This makes London, throughout almost all thirteen novellas that are set in the city, one of the pivotal characters despite the fact that, as Bronfen points out, Miriam will return in the end to her desk and her writing as “the centre of her life,” while “actual material spaces fade and are exchanged for remembered and imaginative ones” (27). But this is, nonetheless, the desired outcome of *flânerie*: giving the walking an artistic expression.

What makes Miriam, despite her gender, an authentic descendant of the *flâneur* is, first of all, her social position, which allows her to “wander, observe and lose herself in the streets of a beckoning London” (Heron 6). The *flâneur* was part of the middle class, but at the same time he occupied a marginal position due, on the one hand, to his activities—idle walking and observing, with occasional artistic outcomes—and to his deliberately detached attitude toward those around him on the other. Miriam represents a mix of middle-class upbringing and working-class status which allows her to be a sensitive observer of the changes in her surroundings while having the financial independence—as scanty as her wage is—to afford exploring them. As a working-class woman, Miriam is aware of her marginal position in society, and has moments when she is melancholic about the social advantages she has lost as an upper-middle class child, but she understands at the same time that her position and time period are ideal for her ambition to explore the metropolis.

The beginning of the twentieth century was a time of interesting mixes on the streets of the metropolis, which generated much confusion. Not only did women start to occupy the same public spaces as men or compete with them with their own semi-public

places, like teahouses, clubs or even lodgings, but it was becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate amongst them according to class or social position. In other words, there were fewer clues to indicate whether a woman was a respectable, middle-class participant in urban life, a working woman in one of the few jobs available to them, or a prostitute (Parsons 84-85). As means of transportation became more diverse, women could take their exploring interests even further away from their homes while developing, at the same time, an urban consciousness.

Miriam is seen at various points in *Pilgrimage* riding a bicycle, a bus or a hansom cab when her ventures out need to accomplish specific things, like visiting a friend or attending a gathering, or going back to work. In all other situations, walking is preferred, even at night, as it opens up a dimension of leisure that suits Miriam's aimless thoughts. Without being a prostitute or a shopper, Miriam can still be present in the city streets or most public places, which makes her exclaim to two of her friends, Mag and Jan: "Aren't you glad you are alive to-day, when all these things are happening?" (v.ii 149). Her fears and insecurities are not completely gone though, as she still feels very nervous when riding her bike, or when entering a dining place all by herself. Nevertheless, shortly after the first steps are taken in that direction, the fear is replaced by an encouraging feeling that she is winning a victory.

Such is the case when she goes out for a ride on her bicycle, enjoying the solitude of her ride on the empty street, when all of a sudden she sees a drunken man whose appearance inspires a sense of danger. Richardson describes the mix of panic and attempts to regain a composed detachment on Miriam's part as she approaches the man. She keeps to her path, "pressing steadily and thoughtlessly forward, her eyes fixed on the far-off

spaces of the world she used to know, towards a barrier of swirling twilight” (v.ii 232). Her first thoughts are to call the police, while she reflects that it is because she is a woman that she reacts like this because “a man would not have been afraid” (233). This illustrates some of the dangers that single women in the streets of the metropolis have had to confront ever since they have been able to inhabit this space. What Miriam shows, however, as a strategy of coping with these situations, is the ability to switch between the menacing reality and a more comforting, although surreal, mental projection of her surroundings. A similar scenario recurs when she goes to see a theater play unchaperoned or when she enters diners. The commonality between these acts is that the victory and the feeling of accomplishment are always celebrated in the street. In fact, walking in the street becomes, almost paradoxically, a therapy for the bruises produced by gender and social divisions. It is in the street, for example, that she takes the letters she doesn’t want to read inside—like that from Mr. Hancock, her boss, which makes clear that she is only an employee in the dental office, despite her education and familiarity with the employers—and the act of stepping outside is equated, both metaphorically and literally, to that of walking “into the sunshine. The way down to Euston Road was very long and sunlit. It was radiant with all the months and weeks and days” (v.ii 208).

One of the arguments that are brought against women being authentic counterparts of the *flâneur* is that, while the male stroller observes everything with a hidden interest in an attempt to detach himself from the decaying surroundings, women display toward the city a strong, emotional excitement. At the same time, their lack of previous training in the art of urban observation might make women unable to distinguish

“the movement of impressionable impulses,” between commodities and consumers, if we are to employ terms more adequate to the shopping activity with which the *flâneuse* has been so often identified (Gleber 4). The blasé attitude of the observer, analyzed by Simmel in his article, is necessary in order to “‘read’ the faces of passersby and to decipher the mysteries of his age from the images of store fronts, facades, and street signs” (12).

The *flâneuse* cannot have this attitude, partly because there is no history of overt *flânerie* for her to rely on. The relationship developing between her and the urban space rejects, through its novelty, the boredom and disappointment experienced by the *flâneur*. The city exercises on women, as Richardson’s *Pilgrimage* shows, an attraction that is often eroticized. Thus, when on a summer night Miriam ventures out again, she perceives the city as a lover who also comes out to meet her:

This was the true harvest of the summer’s day; the transfiguration of these northern streets. They were not London proper; but to-night the spirit of London came to meet her on the verge. Nothing in life can be sweeter than this warm and welcoming—a cup held brimming to her lips, and inexhaustible. What lover did she want? No one in the world would oust this mighty lover, always receiving her back without words, engulfing and leaving her untouched, liberated and expanding to the whole range of her being. (v.iii 272)

While Baudelaire’s *flâneur* vibrated in the same way to the undertones of desire radiated by the French metropolis, his covetous glances had mostly material objects, women—the *passante*—whom he would first observe and then try to recreate in his imagination. Miriam is not attracted by the men that she meets in the streets—in fact,

they are mostly seen as undesirable presences, which makes *Pilgrimage* a harsh feminist critique—but by the atmosphere created by the street life, the buildings, the public places that open up to her. In general, her gaze is aesthetic and reacts promptly to the combination of shapes, colors and smells that form London at the turn of the twentieth century, rather than to the economic changes that affect the city. “This configuration of street names and lights, neon signs and urban locales, conjure up an aesthetics of ‘asphalt and light,’ an atmosphere of impressions that, filtered through the *flâneur*’s impressions [but also, as shown, the *flâneuse*’s], help form the scriptural character of the modern city” (Gleber 194).

The aesthetic gaze is not the only one employed in *Pilgrimage* though, despite the fact that the more pragmatic significance of Miriam’s strolling seems to be replaced by a “sensory perception [...] steeped in sensual awareness” (Gleber 196). A more socially critical stance is also adopted, as Miriam reflects on the changes that made her family lose their status and on her “hopeless condition” as a woman. Despite the surrealist brush, a result of the stream-of-consciousness narrative technique, Miriam’s observations are strongly grounded in reality. As Celena E. Kusch points out, through her protagonist, Richardson “offers a careful and detailed portrait of the material realities of modernity down to the prices of meals and stationery and the street and bus routes,” which makes *Pilgrimage* almost a cultural guide for foreigners (41). As she discusses the price of diamonds brought from South Africa or as she admires all the artifacts brought to London from all over the British Empire, she also assesses the superiority and power of her nation, which makes her perspective a colonial one. She does, indeed, in the third volume, toy with the idea of becoming a socialist and a Lycurgan and has lengthy

discussions with her friends about the implications of such social and personal commitment, but she never takes the step. Socialism is particularly alluring to her because of her mixed attitude with respect to bourgeois lifestyle and values.

Symbolically, these mixed feelings are revealed through her relationship with the spaces and streets she traverses. Thus, despite her feeling that certain streets in the richer parts of London (the West End) smile in a friendly way at her, or that the pavement meets her tapping with joy, she often feels driven away from these sites (v.iii 287-88) and as she moves away, her emotions are again reflected by the play of light. On her way back to her room on Tansley Street, the street starts to lose its brightness, becoming first misty and then darker and darker.

Within it [the dark byway] was the figure of an old woman bent over the gutter. Lamplight fell upon the sheeny slopes of her shawl and tattered skirt. Familiar. Forgotten. The last, hidden truth of London spoiling the night. She quickened her steps, gazing. Underneath the forward-falling crushed old bonnet shone the lower half of a bare scalp...reddish...studded with dull, wartlike knobs....Unimaginable horror quietly there. [...] The head turned stealthily as she passed and she met the expected sidelong glance: naked recognition, leering from the awful face above the outstretched bare arm. It was herself, set in her path and waiting through all these years. (v.iii 288-89)

This is not the first time that Miriam takes note of the living conditions in London and the grimmer social aspects of the city. During her walks, she also notices drunken men, the working class forming an amorphous sea of hurried legs "drifting about on the edge of catastrophe," between jobs, homes and stores, trying to make ends meet, just like

herself (233). But Miriam also knows how it is to live on the other side of town, in the “established, unchanging world of Wimpole Street, linked helpfully to the lives of the prosperous classes” which makes her gaze even more informed.

The preference for landscape rather than crowds, “the trooping succession of masked life-moulded forms” as Miriam calls them, can be understood as resulting from the disappointment Miriam feels toward the economic and social dynamics that led to her family losing their position (240). Her gaze succumbs to the beauty of the surroundings in the West End—“a little blue-lit street ; lamps with large round globes, shedding moonlight; shadows, grey and black [;] glimmering roadway, narrow between the narrow pavements skirting the high-façades, flat and grey, broken by shadowy-pillared porticoes; permanent exits and entrances on the stage of the London scene; solid lines and arches of pure grey shaping the flow of the pageant and emerging, when it ebbed away, to stand in their own beauty, conjuring back the vivid tumult to flow in silence”—but it is not the gaze of the shopper who is lured into the flow of consumerism. On the contrary, Miriam displays the same critical stance regarding poverty, homelessness, injustice as the Baudelairian *flâneur* did. Her attitude is, however, more ambivalent toward industrialism and mass consumption, as she understands that it was through these phenomena that women were brought into the public sphere. Moreover, her bourgeois upbringing and her nationalist convictions make her cautious when it comes to embracing more socialist points of view, of which Benjamin might have approved, and render her, as Watts point out, a still privileged person who speaks from the “metropolitan centre” (56).

At certain points, however, Miriam feels drawn to the same crowd from which she tries to detach herself. Her experience, translated into a feeling of identification with

the people she meets, is similar to what Baudelaire's *flâneur* described as his encounters with certain passersby, whatever their gender. If the *flâneur* could observe individuals and create in his mind a story for each, trying to participate through them in the flux of city life while still preserving his own identity, the *flâneuse* is more involved in the process and actually sees herself in many of the people she meets: the woman in the gutter, the drunken man, the male passerby. The identification with these people is much more overtly stated than in the case of the *flâneur*. Miriam is almost shocked to discover in them fragments of herself and the shocking encounters make her reconsider, again and again, her own identity. The effect of these encounters resonates with Baudelaire's characterization of modernity, which he describes as being the clash between what is new and different and what has always been there. Miriam recognizes in the people she meets in the streets something familiar, something that is also a part of her in the same way that modernity has to acknowledge, despite its radical shifts, a source in traditional structures. Through their character, the *flâneur*, Benjamin and Baudelaire tried to illustrate the effect of the increasingly fragmented modern metropolis on individuals' mental lives, while attempting to bring back to life or retrace through the *flâneur*'s strolls a more secure and enchanted past. The shock of bumping into the other engendered in them feelings of alienation, whereas in the *flâneuse*'s case, the confrontations have the effect of asserting a woman's right to rub shoulders with the lower classes and with men. The shock does not alienate her; the shock empowers her.

*Pilgrimage* being a feminist text, it is no wonder that, aside from the harsh criticism reserved for men, the work also points toward the suspension of gender divisions. Androgyny and linguistic neutralization—when a term covers the masculine



and feminine realities at the same time—are mentioned as alternatives by Miriam. When she recognizes herself in the drunken man—“he is myself” (v.ii 232)—or in the woman by the gutter, by whom she passes during one of her many walks, she is, in fact, transgressing gender and class alike. Her mobility thus becomes not only horizontal, from one physical space to another, but also vertical, up and down the social ladder. And during these changes of space, she likes to think of herself not as a woman, nor as a man—although a certain imitation of masculine attitude can be detected in Miriam’s approach to people and places—but as a “Londoner.” To be called a Londoner implies freedom of movement, status and power, which are the most desirable things for an intellectual woman such as Miriam. They are rewards bestowed as a result of the connection with the city, this abstract and at the same time personal, concrete entity, and are not solely dependent on the relationship with people, which is always a difficult one for Richardson’s protagonist.

In Baudelaire, the fleeting encounters with the few individuals who have detached themselves from the crowd do not result in a communion with the other, but rather in creating or taking the other’s identity in an effort to forget one’s own. The *flâneur*’s desire, and inability, to lose oneself in the crowd can be interpreted in the same way. Miriam’s identity, albeit under construction, is not something she is trying to disregard; on the contrary, there is in her a certain openness toward both the city and its inhabitants, through which she tries to make up for the time when her freedom to be out in the public space was limited. It is in this light, I believe, that one should see the critics’ observation that there cannot be a *flâneuse* because she lacks the detached observation that characterizes the *flâneur*. While the majority of critics have in mind a shopper-*flâneuse*

who is mesmerized by the opportunities offered by a society based on mass consumption, Miriam shows that the artist/intellectual-*flâneuse* is just as authentic and involved in the urban landscape, albeit for different reasons. Her involvement does not diminish her intellectual capacities, which are put to use in the reflective stance she adopts when faced with her surroundings.

Georg Simmel oversimplifies the difference between metropolis dwellers and the inhabitants of smaller towns at the beginning of the last century, arguing that the former use their reason to “create a protective organ [...] against the profound disruption with which the fluctuation and discontinuities of the external milieu threaten [them],” while the latter are more exposed to “feelings and emotional relationships” (31-32).

Nevertheless, he convincingly conveys the idea that, faced with the infinity of different stimuli forming the metropolitan life, the individual has to create a certain protective foil around his inner life so that he or she does not become completely alienated. The blasé attitude that Simmel talks about leads not to an ignorance of the surrounding elements, but to a willful “indifference toward the distinction between things” (35). Thus, the *flâneur* observes, but decides not to interfere.

From a certain point of view, this is also valid for the *flâneuse*, Miriam. Of course, I am not arguing that, faced with the city, she maintains a detached pose; she is very emotionally involved, but not with the people she sees, with the exception of her feminist critique, and not with the material things to which she has access, but with the city as abstraction, with her newfound freedom on the streets of the city. On many occasions, Miriam shares, however, the *flâneur*'s detached attitude towards the crowd. As in the *flâneur*'s case, the detachment comes as a result of both exterior observation and

interior analysis. Confronted with increasingly industrialized and commoditized spaces, the *flâneur* withdraws and at the same time is bored with himself. The *badaud* might not loathe the city's commercialism, but his impatience to be outside and to lose himself in the crowd of consumers comes from a lack of acceptance of his own person.

Miriam knows that she does not fit entirely in any of the human settings because her own social and personal identity is one of ambiguity, and this is why empty spaces are an attraction for her and she generally keeps away from the crowd. She loathes her status as a woman, but does not shy away from what her incursions into her consciousness bring to the surface. In fact, what she rejects about the world around her are the social injustices and inequalities she notices during her strolls that society perpetuates. With respect to the condition of women, both religion and science are considered "abominable" as they reflect or create (wrong) mentalities and lead to injustices; streets and buildings do not. This is why Miriam maintains a certain distance from the crowd. At the same time, she perceives its homogenizing effect as something threatening which contaminates the usually welcoming parts of London.

Here was the wilderness, the undissembling soul of north London, its harsh unvarying all-embracing oblivion.... Innumerable impressions gathered on walks with the school-girls or in lonely wanderings; the unveiled motives and feelings of people she had passed in the streets, the expression of noses and shoulders, the indefinable uniformity, of bearing and purpose and vision, crowded in on her, oppressing and darkening the crisp light air. (v.ii 313)

This reaction targets in general middle-class spaces and people, and one could justifiably argue that there is also a slight envy in Miriam's response. She weighs in the

same way the houses in which these people live, and experiences a feeling of clutter and imprisonment when she has to attend meetings there. Watts argues that there is an influence of Kracauer and other Marxist philosophers in the way Miriam sees the “sunken middle class” (Kracauer qtd. in Watts 47). In general, she sees her expulsion from this social class as liberating and this is why the return to her “grey, wide Bloomsbury” is accepted as part of the process of earning her independence. “It assures Miriam of her individuation;” and in this light, every street and building gathers an increased significance. Euston Road, for example, separating the north part of London from Bloomsbury, “is experienced as a kind of territorial boundary: ‘her unsleeping guardian, the rim of the world beyond which lay the northern suburbs, banished’ (ii 15)” (47).

Her personal triumph is when she meets a former suitor on the street and is able to return his gaze from an equal position of power. The man is obviously waiting for a rendez-vous, and what makes the sight of him waiting for a woman even more interesting for Miriam is the fact that he can be surprised in an “unconscious repose, with [a] look of a motionless unvoyaged soul encased in flesh,” as his usual social mask is set aside (v.iii 277). There is a great sense of enjoyment and power that Miriam derives from this encounter, as she is able to see the man unobserved. Her gaze borrows for a short time something of the authoritative gaze of Baudelaire’s *flâneur* when he admires the *passante*, without our knowing if she is aware of it or not. For a short time because Miriam also feels a slight sense of insecurity, as she knows that, when he sees her, he might take her for a prostitute. Indeed, when he finally recognizes her, Miriam feels that the stupefaction on his face is not so much the effect of the meeting per se, as of the place

where the meeting takes place; in a street and probably not in one of the best areas of London, which highlights the fact that, despite their incipient freedom, women's social status is still not free from prejudices.

Through his stupefaction smouldered a suspicion that she wished to avoid recognition. He was obviously embarrassed by the sense of having placed her amidst the images of his preoccupations. She rushed on, passing him with a swift salute, saw him raise his hat with mechanical promptitude as she stepped from the kerb and forward [...]. It was done. It had always been done from the very beginning. They had met equally at last. (v. iii 277)

This scene captures well the reaction of anxiety that both women and men felt within an environment that was rapidly changing for both of them. Old traits linger in the 'new world,' such as the judgment that a woman walking alone at night on the streets has to bear from men and women alike, but the restrictions are less important. What Miriam feels is described by Susan Buck-Morss, even if her comment applies to Benjamin's construction of modernity in his *Arcades Project*; "The rupture of tradition now frees symbolic powers from conservative restraints for the task of social transformation, that is, for a rupture of [...] social conditions of domination' (*The Dialectics* 279).

Starting around the period in which *Pilgrimage* is set, women can walk, at least in theory and in books, unaccompanied and at leisure and enjoy what the city has to offer in terms of material realities, but also in terms of inner transformations. "Up to this point," points out Parsons,

the concept of 'woman' and 'search/voyage/pilgrimage' had been largely incompatible, the *Bildungsroman* being an exclusively male activity. In the

modern urban environment, however, the *Bildungsroman* shifted from its traditional form of exotic travel or the Grand Tour to travel within the city itself, the journey becoming oriented inwards as a searching of the consciousness and self. From the complex associations of woman and city [...] a female *Bildungsroman* was able to be conceived; an exploration of the female consciousness based in the urban environment. (70)

Although the real, physical exploration of the city is also highly significant for women at the beginning of the twentieth century, instances of the “voyage in” open up another way of perceiving the modern city and its inhabitants, especially for women: the city becomes an extension of human consciousness. It is in these circumstances that Miriam’s close relationship with the street, among all the things that form the metropolis, should be read. The street is not associated with danger, as it stereotypically is, but with possibilities that await to be explored both physically and imaginatively. In fact, because of Miriam’s fragmented stream of consciousness, the reader finds it difficult at times to distinguish between real images and mental projections. Miriam sees the street in a certain light which she associates with a state of productivity, of creativity; wherever she goes, she sees the potential in spaces and is intrigued by the way in which they could be changed. She is enthusiastic—an enthusiasm envied by Hypo, her friend’s husband and an admirer<sup>6</sup>--even about the grimmer aspects of London, such as the poor neighborhoods, which were notorious for their gloominess.

You go there, worn out, at the end of the day, and have to walk, after a long tram-ride through the wrong part of London, along raw new roads, dark little houses on

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<sup>6</sup> Hypo is believed to be, in fact, writer H.G. Wells.

either side, solid, without a single break; darkness, a street-lamp, more darkness, another lamp; and something in the air that lets you down and down. Partly the thought of these streets increasing, all the time, all over London. Yet when someone said walking home after a good evening at Taylors' that the thought of having to settle down in one of those houses made him feel suicidal, I felt he was wrong; and saw them, from inside, bright and big; people's homes. (v.iii 371)

Despite her enthusiastic perception of spaces, Miriam never really takes her imagination all the way to transform them. Instead, she is more interested in the transformations that take place inside her and her strolls are constant opportunities for inner analysis, for self-discovery. Thus, if the *flâneur* was more interested in the changes happening outside of himself, to the society transformed by consumerism and the alienating experience of modernity, the *flâneuse* substitutes herself and her own inner development at times for the outside world. During her walks, Miriam not only reads the city as text, as the *flâneur* did, but she also reads her own life, as her interactions with different places and people bring back memories.

The independence she feels in the streets of London and the attraction toward the noise and the hustle and bustle of the city can be psychoanalytically interpreted as effects of her desire to forget about a past with which Miriam has not come to terms. At first, the city seems to promise protection from bad memories—significant in this sense is the fact that the first couple of novels that form the “London series” make fewer incursions into her past—but gradually city life starts to bring out half-buried images. Benjamin argues that “the city landscape ‘confers on childhood memories a quality that makes them at

once as evanescent and as alluringly tormenting as half-forgotten dreams” (qtd. in Buck-Morss *The Dialectics* 278).

There is, in Miriam, a perhaps unconscious search for past spaces, as there was in the *flâneur*, but for different reasons. The *flâneur* did not recognize the environment and saw it degenerating in comparison with the golden eras in which he felt he fitted better. Miriam is looking for a certain feeling of security and inclusion that is linked to her childhood and which certain spaces can help recreate: “when she was alone, she moved...toward a single memory. Far away in the distance, coming always nearer, was the summer morning of her infancy [...]. Beyond this memory...a marvelous scene unfolded...” (v.iii 197). The garden and certain interiors, although the latter case is very rare, accomplish this, but only temporarily because any memory is quickly charged with darker tones. Thus, as Bronfen argues, many encounters with gardens along her way trigger the experience of a state of bliss, as “the garden is [...] the space of her earliest experience of permanent essences” (77).

To wake suddenly and fully, nowhere; in paradise...In the instant before her mind had slid back...she had been perfectly alive, seeing; perfect things all around her, no beginning or ending...there had been moments like that, years ago [...]. But the moment she had just lived was the same, it was exactly the *same* as the first one she could remember, the moment of standing alone, in bright sunlight on a narrow gravel path in the garden of Babington, between two banks of flowers, the flowers level with her face, and large bees singing slowly [...], many sweet smells coming from the flowers and, amongst them, a strange pleasant smell like burnt paper. (v.iii 75-76)



What is evident with regard to Miriam's walks in the city is that they do not sink the protagonist into amnesia, but that the city takes part in her recollections, playing the role of a *confidante*. As Bronfen argues, London is more of an addressee of Miriam's recollections and experiences and it also plays the role of putting her in contact with other people or places. "London allows Miriam to disregard her worldly problems in favor of a state of metaphysical wonder, for her dialogue with the city [during her many walks] allows her to shut out all that is threatening and disturbing in the material world" (86). In these circumstances, *Pilgrimage* becomes a testimony of wandering in space and time and, as the title suggests, a movement toward a sense of personal and social completion.

In her study, Parsons provides an intriguing analysis of the difference between the symbolism of pilgrimage, specific to Dorothy Richardson's protagonist, and the "street haunting" we find in Virginia Woolf's eponymous essay. Although she agrees that both metaphors describe a way "to identify and place the self in the uncertain environment of modernity," she also sees pilgrimage as "a positive step, the breaking into new territory," while "'haunting' is perhaps more forlorn and an attempt to return to something that is lost" (41). In a way, the two distinguish the specific attitudes that characterize the *flâneuse's* and *flâneur's* interactions with the city: the former steps forward lured by its promises of freedom and growth, while the latter prefers to detach himself from a present reality which he finds hurtful. The *flâneur*, thus, can be imagined as "floating" over the city while his fleeting presence—there, but not there—becomes imbued, as Benjamin suggests, with a mythical charisma. The fact that Benjamin talked, in the first decades of the twentieth century, about the return of the *flâneur* reflects the need the critic felt for a (re)enchantment, a return of the myth instead of a disappointing and often threatening



### Chapter 3

#### *Flâneuring in the World-as-City.*

#### **Régine Robin's *Mégapolis. Les Derniers Pas du Flâneur***

**Dans les villes-patchworks [...] fait[e]s de bric et de broc, je m'épanouis, je m'insinue dans les interstices, je crée mon espace. (*Mégapolis* 224)**

**La ville réelle, cela dans laquelle je m'installe pour de nombreux mois, m'intéresse moins que la ville rêvée, que a ville fantasmée, que la ville-écran, celle que je porte en moi. (*Mégapolis* 46)**

Since the publication of her first book, the semi-autobiographical narrative, *La Québécoise* (1983), Régine Robin's work has been a testimony for the intricate connections existing between space and identity in what has been commonly termed postmodernity or, in Marc Augé's terminology, supermodernity<sup>7</sup>. An immigrant to Canada herself, like many of her characters, having been born and raised in Paris into a family of Polish Jewish origins, Robin entrusted her search for and questions about the (im)migrant's space of belonging to her writing, which is often qualified as "écriture migrante."<sup>8</sup> Her work in general defies clear classification in the sense that the author

<sup>7</sup> Terry Eagleton, in *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996) differentiates between postmodernity and postmodernism as he sees the former as standing for a cultural period rooted in a specific historical time, while the latter refers to a pattern of thought based on, among other things, parodying the "grand narratives" as Fredric Jameson names them, of modernity. Augé is also interested in the accuracy with which one should qualify the space and time we experience in the present. He chooses supermodernity instead of postmodernity as he contends that the term reflects better the idea of (accelerated) addition and not replacement (one historic period or ideology coming *after* a previous one) that is inherent in the concept.

<sup>8</sup> Still a rather controversial concept among francophone literary theorists, *écriture migrante* became a statutory term in the 1980s in an attempt to qualify the writing produced primarily by Québécois writers of non-Canadian origins who could not call themselves either "immigrant writers" or "Québécois writers," as mentioned in Clément Moisan and Renate Hildebrand's seminal study *Ces Étrangers du dedans. Une histoire de l'écriture migrante au Québec (1937-1997)* (qtd. in Pruteanu). Different from the related concept of *littérature immigrante*, which emphasized more the political implications of the act of border

seems determined to embrace an array of genres and styles, from novel to travel writing, to sociological report, to lyrical prose. As Véronique Fauvelle puts it, Robin's approach to writing is to marry "les genres afin d'aboutir à une nouvelle poétique; mettre en relation les différences, l'hétérogène, le disparate, afin d'aboutir à la création du différent, du nouveau, de l'imprévisible" (197).

This eclectic style is in fact an inspired choice for the recurrent main theme in Robin's books, which is the quest for identity in a "space [that] is accepted to be multi-layered, multiply coded and subjectively constructed" (Jones 63). And when *la quête identitaire* becomes a more subtle presence in Robin's (later) prose, what remains permanently there and gives a sense of connection and continuation to her writing is the movement itself, *la migration* between physical or virtual spaces, between past and present, between cultures, between texts, between languages. This negotiation of spaces more or less real leads Fauvelle to compare the process of creation in Robin's novel with what Édouard Glissant calls *créolisation*, understood by Fauvelle as "le processus par lequel des éléments hétérogènes de culture et d'existence sont mis en contact sans que l'on puisse prévoir la synthèse" (193-94). In short, the idea of movement and negotiation with space and time is, from the beginning, one of the main characteristics of Robin's prose, and also one of the main attributes of *écriture (trans)migrante*<sup>9</sup>.

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crossing, *littérature migrante* tried to zoom in on the actual movement of migration within the act of traversing cultural and political boundaries. Thus, the newly conceptualized term aims to designate the experience of living and writing "in-between," "inside" and "outside" at the same time. It places a special emphasis on the flux of cultural experience, on the movement between cultures, the original culture, the host culture, and other cultures. It comes closer, in this way, as observed by Simona Emilia Pruteanu in her doctoral dissertation, to the travel writing genre as the journey, movement, and intercultural negotiations become common trademarks of the two genres. Robin's *Mégapolis* seems to me to represent a skillful combination of the characteristics of both genres.

<sup>9</sup> I choose to further complicate the initial concept of *écriture migrante* by expanding the movement within Robin's prose beyond the spaces of the culture-of-birth and host culture. In some of her later works,

As shown in Robin's early fictions, this condition of movement between here and there, this continuous situation of the (im)migrant between places, *l'entre-deux*, is engendered at first by "a feeling of disorientation and lack of a clear home space" or, in other words, by the (im)migrant's uprootedness (Jones 220). This is also one of the trademarks of *l'écriture migrante*, borderland writing, and/or immigration and exile literature, and it enriches the broader and older concept of homelessness<sup>10</sup>. In Robin's case, the feeling of transcendental homelessness central to Lukács's theory of the novel is very much doubled by her condition as an immigrant Jew who carries with her, under the guise of a genetic nostalgia, the wandering spirit of an uprooted people.

In this way, the resemblances between the (im)migrant condition foregrounded in Robin's writings and what Jean-François Lyotard describes as the postmodern condition are easy to trace. In *La condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir* (1979), the philosopher places in the center of his theory the concept of the fragmentariness of space, time and identity, while he stresses that everything enters the "exchange-value" stage. Knowledge is the last thing to be turned into commodity, all the rest having long been broken down into measurable units which, in turn, have facilitated the disintegration of

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notably *Cybermigrations* and *Mégapolis*, Robin opens up her fictional space by allowing her persona to travel around the world, either virtually or physically. In this way, other countries—in fact, cities, megalopolises—are incorporated into the global image of world-city that the author tries to create in her works. *L'écriture transmigrante* is a term that applies to works which describe the character's voyage out of the space of his or her naturalization to other places around the world.

<sup>10</sup> The concept of "transcendental homelessness," dear to Georg Lukács, is helpful in many ways for understanding the feeling of uprootedness depicted by Robin in her works. Lukács understood the term to apply rather to an openness to ideas—more exactly, it applies to his theory of the novel as the genre that illustrates the emancipation from the heroic epic—than to an actual physical positioning in space. Nevertheless, the idea behind the concept was rooted in the actual experience of exile through which the critic had to go and which led him to feel at home in any place in the world, much as Robin's narrator in *Mégapolis* attempts to approach her travels. Losing the Heimat, which is mythically rooted in the Ancient Greek epic—seems to be for the young Marxist, as it was for Walter Benjamin, a sign of progress, despite the nostalgia involved, as it makes possible the placement of the individual in a continuous process of becoming (Lukács 72-73).

all social aggregates. With the “grand narratives” destabilized, the individual, who always seeks to make sense of the things around him or her, faces no other alternative than to “swim [...] in the fragmentation and chaotic currents of change as if that is all there is” but in a way that affirmatively embraces “fragmentation and ephemerality” (Harvey, *The Condition* 44). And as Robin emphasizes many times throughout her latest work, *Mégapolis*, she is indeed “equipped” for this type of affirmative interaction with the big cities of the world, as she prefers “la surface à la profondeur et l’artifice au prétendu naturel” (44). A most salient description of her condition as intellectual, migrant and *flâneuse* is given, in this sense, by Peter McLaren when he argues that the postmodern *flâneur*—or *flâneuse*, as he makes sure to indicate the gender difference—is, in fact, the ethnographer, not the shopper, the tourist or other individuals engaged in mass consumption. According to him, ethnographers are “the urban spectators who dwell in prohibitive spaces both inside and outside of academia, losing themselves in their incognito observations, who indulge in the thrill of public spaces, whose identity, personal and professional, depends upon acts of *flânerie*, who are the mirror image of postmodern culture, and who are emptied of all modern practices of the self in order to make way for the creation of new postmodern subjectivities” (145). In this sense, the postmodern *flâneur* and *flâneuse* seem to start their strolling with a more stable sense of who they are, compared with their predecessors.

Although the interest in deciphering the mystery of the postmodern migrant condition permeates Robin’s fiction at all times, I would argue that there seems to be a subtle tempering of the question marks over *le soi* in her more recent work, such as *Cybermigrances* and *Mégapolis* and a greater acceptance of a divided, fluid identity that

could never be fixed. Hence the interest in the itinerary and the spaces traversed in themselves rather than in how they change the person who traverses them. In other words, Robin's later works appear to spring from an understanding of the migrant's identity as no longer disoriented, but simply divided, forking into a plurality of selves that correspond to the palimpsestic construction of the space they inhabit. In this way, in *Mégapolis*, the author seems no longer preoccupied with longing for an enclosed and well defined space that she might call home; instead, she displays a readiness to embrace the (urban) space as a mélange of various real, virtual and fictional spheres which suit her to different degrees. The (im)migrant survives the uprootedness and turns toward a more mainstream practice, that of *flânerie*. It is not accidental, then, that in *Mégapolis* Robin moves away in her urban descriptions from the two cities that previously defined her movements: Paris and Montréal. The geographical perspective opens up to other five megalopolises of the twenty-first century: New York, Los Angeles, London, Tokyo and Buenos Aires as the meaning of *flânerie* takes on that of twenty-first century cosmopolitanism, by which I am referring to the sophistication made possible by the technological discoveries of the last decades and toward which Robin and her personae manifest a great attraction.

Robin is indubitably a lover of urban spaces—the city is the central image in all her works—and her fictions build on each other in such a way that they manage to create, from cut-out images of urban life, a sort of city-world made up of fragments of Berlin, Paris, Montreal, Tokyo, London, Buenos Aires and other big cities. In this way, Robin proves that “the fragmented posturban landscape no longer consists principally of physical objects in relative proximity to each other, but is composed more and more of

invisible networks [...]. At a global scale, these networks increasingly link cities to each other rather than to their immediate hinterlands and national contexts" (De Ghent 15-6).

The space thus created, and continuously expanded through additions of city images from literature and film, seems tailored for discussions of postmodernity or supermodernity.

To restate, via David Harvey and other theorists, that the city represents the stage on which postmodernism performs at its best is a commonplace. Nevertheless, it is never a futile endeavor to try to clarify, before moving on to the analysis of a specific text, the concept in light of which the work should be understood. In our case, the concept of postmodern space and place is one that lies at the core of our understanding of Robin's cosmopolitan *flânerie*, making it necessary to review some theoretical positions with which Robin's text engages overtly.

Although Michel de Certeau names the city "the machinery and the hero of modernity," he also alludes to its inexhaustible ability to receive additions, to be "constantly enriched by new attributes," which is one of the ways in which postmodernism distinguishes itself from modernism (95). In this light, the city becomes the site that accommodates both types of influences. De Certeau argues in favor of a city that is freed from fixed, rational conceptualization and as a result changes at every turn, in the same manner a text is not only a passive construction, but engages with its reader. One can engage with the city in two ways: the God-like approach, which belongs mainly to the urban observer who situates himself or herself on a higher platform that would allow him or her to get a panoramic perspective over the whole city. Marc Augé, in *Non-Places*, contends that this perspective renders, often erroneously, an ideal image of the world, the image of a whole in which each element seems to fit in as the right piece of a



bigger puzzle. However, Augé argues, “the mirage disintegrates if we look at it too closely,” by which he means that a more horizontal approach to the city would give visibility to the real mechanisms of the urban experience (xiii). This latter approach, which represents the other way of interacting with the city, stresses the importance of moving around and becoming a part of its many constituent networks.

The urban observer has to choose between “cinematic long shots” on the one hand, which render an aesthetic image of the city-world, one in which the “ruptures” in the barriers, and the cracks in the system’s “pavement” are less visible, and close-ups on the other hand, which make more visible the “networks [on which] spaces of circulation, consumption and communication” rely (Augé xi). Thus, under the “surface aesthetic effects,” the postmodern experience of city strolling reveals the often unexpected and harmful activity of “immediacies, intensities, sensory overload, disorientation, the mêlée or liquefaction of signs and images, the mixing of codes, the unchained or floating signifiers of postmodern ‘depthless’ consumer culture” (Featherstone 93, 23).

Born out of the individual’s dreams and desires for appropriating time and space in more pleasurable ways, consumer culture is one of the main factors, if not the most important, of space transformation, or rather place transformation, if we are to consider de Certeau’s distinction between the two concepts.<sup>11</sup> Part of a capitalist *modus operandi*, it grows out of the erratic movement of goods, capital and people within a space that has to accommodate each variation of the interaction between the three. The result is,

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<sup>11</sup> Michel de Certeau makes an interesting distinction between space and place in his work *The Practice of Everyday Life*, a distinction which seems to be based on the animate/inanimate binary. He argues that the status of “place” is given to environments that are defined through their constituent objects, a type of “being-there of something dead” while space is defined through “the actions of [its] historical subjects” or more illustratively, through connections between man, object and various other historical or practical components (118).

according to the big names of postmodernist criticism--Baudrillard, Lyotard and Jameson, to name just a few--the replacement of reality (spaces) with-- and here the list of terms is rather long-- hyperreality, geometrical spaces, commodity spaces, non-places, heterotopias, etc. More simply put, the nineteenth-century Parisian arcades (reality) were replaced toward the end of the twentieth century with virtual spaces of consumption (hyperreality). In these places the *flâneurs*, as Susan Buck-Morss points out grimly, "like tigers or pre-industrial tribes, are cordoned off on reservations, preserved within the artificially created environments of pedestrian streets, parks, and underground passageways" ("The *Flâneur*" 102).

There is, however, another category of public places which have mostly sprung out of the desire for greater efficiency of our fast-paced society. Augé names them "non-places" and they are milieus that are the opposite of "anthropological places," or what de Certeau would call "spaces," in so far as they "cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity" (*Non-Places* 63). In Augé's view, these places are not to be understood negatively, but neutrally, as non-places are those places of transition, like airports, hotel rooms, subways, fast-food restaurants, through which people pass without integrating them into their personal development. Most of them lack the type of connection with the past that personalizes other cultural spaces and are defined by their functionality rather than their cultural value. They define supermodernity, or supermodernity provides them with their status; in any case, they further form a new dimension of the living space we inhabit, with no pretenses of

authenticity or value other than that needed in the consumerist chain of production-consumption.<sup>12</sup>

As Anthony Purdy points out, there are points of intersection between Augé's non-places and Foucault's heterotopias in the sense that they both entail "a suspension of History [...allowing] a beneficent forgetting" (20).<sup>13</sup> Moreover, several types of non-places (and heterotopias) are built according to the *bricolage* technique in the sense that they can bring under the same roof cultural simulacra or kitsch elements which provide the illusion of perpetuating cultural memory when in fact they are working toward breaking its organic unity even more (Purdy 21). Once more, the claims of authenticity, unity, linear development are dropped in face of the new places (of consumption), which, under the pressure of the acceleration of history, put into question all foundational elements of existence. And, as suggested by Augé and Peter McLaren, there is nobody better equipped to analyze these changes than the anthropologist/ethnographer or any other person with similar interests, be they academics or amateurs. It is in this guise that the *flâneur* or *flâneuse* continues to exist in present times.

A world where people are born in the clinic and die in hospital, where transit points and temporary abodes are proliferating under luxurious or inhuman

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<sup>12</sup> Paradoxically, but not surprisingly in a postmodern world, these non-places are part of the trend of the aestheticization of everyday life and they prove, as Mike Featherstone points out, that "art can be anywhere or anything" as the viewer's perception of art and beauty changes in order to integrate the flux of images and stimuli into which he or she is thrown daily (65).

<sup>13</sup> As described in "Of other spaces," heterotopias are, for Foucault, real spaces, at first taking a marginal position within society, then gradually advancing into the conventional social space, up to the present moment when they can co-exist under the "anything goes" slogan of postmodernity. They have the function of contesting the real spaces (or their foundational characteristics of authenticity, functionality, progress and security) and of offering themselves up as places of compensation. Some examples would be churches, cemeteries, brothels, libraries, mental rehabilitation facilities, and, more recently, shopping malls, cinemas, theme parks and hotels, which create alternatives for those moments in which reality does not hold as a whole anymore.

conditions (hotel chains and squats, holiday clubs and refugee camps, shanty-towns threatened with demolition or doomed to festering longevity); where a dense network of means of transport which are also inhabited spaces is developing; where the habitué of supermarkets, slot machines and credit cards communicates wordlessly, through gestures, with an abstract, unmediated commerce; a world thus surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral, offers the anthropologist (and others) a new object, whose unprecedented dimensions might usefully be measured before we start wondering to what sort of gaze it might be amenable. (Augé 63-4)

Régine Robin's fiction is particularly important because it engages with the very theoretical issues I tried to introduce above. In her writings, and particularly in *Mégapolis*, she seems to give an answer to the implied question about what gaze would be the most appropriate for exploring the postmodern spaces and places, as she endows her narrators or characters with all-encompassing observing abilities, informed by an evident intellectual training in sociology, history, art and politics. Within a society that Theodor Adorno condemned as being formed by individuals who are seeking (intellectually) effortless entertainment, it takes a certain training to see beyond the surface of things and to provide coherence to the discontinuous flux of images, sensations, and sounds that form the megalopolis. And even when these preliminary conditions for a pertinent observation of the city have been met, the narrator in *Mégapolis* still finds herself somewhat unprepared before the difficult task awaiting her:

Comment représenter les villes? Comment faire ressentir la ville, ses traces sensibles, comment rendre compte de ces milliers de passages de

microbiographies et microfictions, de cette simultan  t  , de ce kal  doscope    la fois chaotique et ordonn   ? Sans doute par le choc d'images heurt  es, par l'accumulation cacophonique de d  tails et d'impressions visuelles: enseignes, affiches, plaques d'immatriculation de voitures pare-chocs contre pare-chocs ; accumulation de bruits et d'odeurs. Aimer les villes, les arpenter, les humer, les filmer, les photographier, les repr  senter, les d  crire, chercher ce qui se d  ploie dans ce palimpseste, dans ce labyrinthe. (16)

The narrator, a woman, sees herself confronted with a completely different problem than a woman a century ago might have faced: it is not the gender and social limitations that she has to overcome; it is not the lack of means of transportation or observation; it is the elusiveness of the space itself that makes representation difficult. The text—if we are to continue to use de Certeau's and other critics' metaphorical representation of the city—is too complicated, laden with signs which await deciphering; it cannot be kept within clear lines and, therefore, does not open itself up to an easy “reading.” This initial urban image created by the narrator has a poetic quality to it, which illustrates the idea that the city is much more than buildings and infrastructure that can be rationally structured; the city is also atmosphere, resulting from the m  lange of projections of desire with which one approaches it. As it is such a complex entity, palimpsestic or labyrinthine as the narrator says, its discovery calls for an array of methods and attitudes—filming, photographing, perusing, strolling, breathing—but above all, one has to love the city in order to know it. The city is no longer a fortress that needs to be “broken into” from the margins, but a palimpsest that can be visualized from the center.

And within this space, the question that appears central to her book and to all the journeys undertaken by Robin's narrator to five of the world's biggest cities—New York, Los Angeles, London, Buenos Aires, Tokyo—is, “Peut-on encore flâner dans les mégapoles?” The answer seems at once easy and difficult. Easy, because reality, or better said, hyperreality, as Jean Baudrillard understands the enclaves of simulacra that imitate several aspects of reality in order to encourage the consumer's forgetful chase of pleasures, seems to provide even more opportunities for idle perambulations than before<sup>14</sup>. Vacations, Internet surfing—or *cybermigrances*, as Robin calls them—Disneyland trips, shopping malls, all seem to invite *flânerie*, idleness and, as many critics argue, amnesia.

Sharing from the grim perspective on postmodernity that Baudrillard, and before him, Adorno, constructed, Zygmunt Bauman and Stefan Morawski, professors of sociology and theory, respectively, argue that it is common nowadays to talk about flâneuring the space of mass consumption, where the *flâneurs* are as fascinated as they are brain-washed by the flow of simulacra, but that it is not a meaningful practice. However, they also admit that there exists a class of intellectuals who can make the distinction between the empty sites of consumption and the illusion of freedom they create and the sites that preserve meaning. Although they are portrayed as detached spectators and critics of postmodern urban spaces, these *flâneurs* can't help but live inside the space of consumption because there is no outside of it anymore, except,

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<sup>14</sup> In *Simulacra and Simulation*, his 1981 seminal study on the breach between reality and postmodern society, Baudrillard advances the idea that we, in fact, live in “imaginaries of representation,” which have lost their origins (2). These realms are neither rational, because they have lost their epistemological referent, nor unique or distinctive, as they can be replicated ad infinitum until they actually replicate nothing. Their main feature is that of being operational and of hiding the emptiness of an existence that has lost contact with the real or truth.

perhaps, with the help of memory, in those *lieux de mémoire* which put the present on hold. To quote Andreas Huyssen, “there is no pure space outside of commodity culture, however much we may desire such a space” so we need to accept and approach realistically the changes that impact our society without falling into the trap of unproductive melancholy (19). The *flâneur*'s role is to wander, and wandering means allowing oneself to ride along with the tide, even if it is only to point out its drawbacks; in short, at least outwardly, the *flâneur* needs to participate in the scenery.

On the other hand, if we remain faithful to a more traditional image of the practice of *flânerie*, that is, one that involves the actual streets of the city, then the answer to Robin's question of whether one can still find opportunities and spaces for *flânerie* is more complicated. Not accidentally, the subtitle of Robin's book, “les derniers pas du flâneur,” stresses the end of this practice. It is clear that there has indeed been a shift in the way urban space is configured and that it has become increasingly difficult to talk about *flânerie* in the sense understood by Baudelaire. The reasons can be, as alluded to elsewhere in this study, tied first of all to the decline of streets and boulevards in favor of highways and parking lots, which has led to the disappearance of the city as we traditionally know it. For Robin, this calls for a “transformation complète du regard” (*Mégapolis* 27). Furthermore, due to the technical innovations of the second half of the last century, traditional *flânerie* seems to have lost its meaningfulness. The World Wide Web offers everything that the city could offer, plus more. With the streets being replaced by virtual networks carrying information almost everywhere in the world, the very concept of *flânerie* had to go through changes of terminology--autovoyeurism, *cybermigrance*—without, however, being completely replaced. This shows that, despite

our fascination with novelty and progress, we cannot completely detach ourselves from iconic (past) practices and images.

A resolute supporter of postmodernist principles, Robin allows all these elements to coexist in her depiction of the megalopolis, forbidding herself to fall victim to nostalgic dreams of authenticity. Maybe it is along these lines that her lack of interest in a gender differentiation of the term *flâneur-flâneuse* should be understood. Despite the fact that postmodern urban sites are said to be comprised of heterogeneous elements, Robin seems to allude to the idea that experiencing them can and will become a more standard, genderless or “post-everything” practice<sup>15</sup>. If this is true and the lack of differentiation is not accidental in Robin’s work, then it marks a significant move away from the way in which, for centuries, “sexual difference [was] the central definer of public identity” (Swanson 88). In the city described by Robin, man and woman can gaze at each other without interdictions, as the mystery of existence is no longer inside the person—oneself or the other—but becomes lost in the intricate network of synesthetic signs, where images are born from sounds and sounds are born from objects. Sarah Herbold argues that “exposing oneself to the gaze of this other makes one into the other” (37). Although the critic does not go into any details about the space created as the result of the unification of the two gazes, an interesting article by Elizabeth Grosz provides some theoretical help through the notion of Plato’s *chora*:

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<sup>15</sup> Sarah Herbold argues that, like any theory, postmodernism “necessarily essentializes in its formulation of general propositions, no matter how localizing and heterogeneous it tries to make them” (3-4). Analyzing Zizek’s theory of woman-as-man in postmodernity, Herbold suggests that behind this essentialization an apparent simplification of terms and images still looms in men’s projections of “desired images of [themselves]” (36).



Chora then is the space in which place is made possible, the chasm for the passage of spaceless Forms into a spatialized reality, a dimensionless tunnel opening itself to spatialization, obliterating itself to make others possible and actual. It is the space that engenders without possessing, that nurtures without requirements of its own, that receives without giving, and that gives without receiving, a space that evades all characterization including the disconcerting logic of identity, of hierarchy of being, the regulation of order. (51)

Once again, if we could understand the space that Robin refers to in her work as an inclusive and nurturing one, as *chora*, a space in which people and objects are not possessed—because possessing them would mean nothing, as things have lost their aura—then this might justify why a *flâneur/flâneuse* approach to urban life is necessary. The *flâneuse* seems to deconstruct space, while the *flâneur* is more inclined toward negating it. Giving as example Dubai, a city “created,” an “anti-city,” but one of the leading candidates for the title of capital of the twenty-first century, Robin points out that for her, a “real” city is one which makes possible the co-existence of true and false, of artificial and authentic sites, of real and imaginary or cinematic spatial constructs. It is the city that rises up to meet the expectations of its inhabitants, the city where one asks oneself if one lives within reality, on the cinema screen or between two theater acts (*Mégapolis* 60). On the other hand, in all these spaces, the *flâneur* often sees the emptiness, the absence, the non-place, which explains the reserved, often critical stance he adopts when interacting with them.

Judging from the narrator’s first theoretical reflections on postmodern urban space, we can deduct that the gaze that will disclose for us the mysterious elements

forming this space is a cinematic one, or at least kaleidoscopic. During her journeys, the narrator takes many mental or real shots of the places she sees, which she later arranges in frameworks of meaning which seem to run according to cinematic principles. Despite their fragmentary quality—the images speak for different parts of the world—these mental pictures engage each other in creating what seems to be a coherent poetics of place—the megalopolis, or what might be called the world-city. I say this because, in the same way that a megalopolis, according to the American Heritage Dictionary, gathers, through a variety of networks, visible or invisible, multiple cities around the same urban nucleus—most often the agglomeration is geographical, as illustrated by the cases of Boston-Washington or Tokyo-Hiroshima, but it could also refer to a unity of vision and practice—so in the same way, the entire world can be envisaged as a global city (De Ghent 30-31). What the narrator-*flâneuse* does is put the pictures together in such a way that the reader can draw meaning from them and that can testify to a poetics of urban space, a poetics of excess and of paradox:

La poétique des mégapoles que je cherche à traquer n'est en rien une saturation du regard. J'aime les néons, les décors kitsch, le carton-pâte et cette collision entre le passé et le présent, l'authentique et le pastiche, le postmoderne et l'ancien. Le trop-plein ne m'empêche pas de voir, de penser, de comparer et je m'épanouis dans ces excès et rencontres des contraires. (19)

What Robin's *flâneuse* describes as an urban poetics follows the same principles as what Featherstone calls "the aestheticization of everyday life." For her, even the most banal aspects of existence, such as car tags, street lamps, cardboard, have the potential of opening a different reading of the world, one that, as Featherstone points out after Susan

Buck-Morss, comes as a result of divorcing these objects from their contexts and of ignoring the objects' functionality. Of course, once again, the training of the gaze also plays an important role in surprising the artistic potential of the view, as the *flâneuse* is often not just the prostitute or shopper, as the stereotype goes, but the artist and the intellectual. Once everyday existence stops shocking the urban dweller, as was typically the case for modern *flânerie*, the eye yields to the sign. As Chris Jenks astutely remarks, "No longer the stimulus-bombarded and shell-shocked inhabitant of Simmel's 'philosophy of money,' the *flâneur* must shake off the 'blasé attitude' and proceed to a critical appreciation of the falsehood, fabrication, replication at the heart of postmodernity's volatile network of meaning—so often symbolized as 'the city'." As Featherstone implies, today's *flâneur* requires engagement with the crowd. (153)

Despite her love of the city and abandonment to the phantasmagoria of signs, sound and lights that the city represents, despite the fact that she challenges the *flâneur*'s attitude toward the same sites with her own active and enthusiastic approach, Robin's *flâneuse* knows how to keep her critical resources sharp, combining the two impulses—to consume and to analyze critically—in a mix which Andreas Huyssen would have labeled "productive"<sup>16</sup>. The *flâneuse* does not surrender herself irrationally and ecstatically to the

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<sup>16</sup> Despite the fact that his theory applies to time changes and not to space, I believe that Huyssen's solution for "secur[ing] some continuity within time and provid[ing] some extension of lived space within which we can breathe and move" is relevant to our debate regarding the attitude one should have toward space in postmodernity (24). Huyssen argues that once confronted with an ubiquitous reality (or hyperreality) of globalization and cyber-capitalism, deemed by many to throw us into an acute state of amnesia, our society needs to adopt a much more productive stance than that of mourning the disappearance of the *milieux de mémoire*. In this sense, he advances the notion of "productive remembering" understood as a counter process to musealization and as a means of accommodating the interference of digital technologies in the way in which we have been dealing with the past and with memories. In a similar manner, those who

multilayered spaces of modernity, as the shopper might do, but nor does she keep herself away from the cauldron of energies that is the postmodern city: “si je suis à la recherche des images symboles de notre postmodernité, j’essaie autant que possible de ne pas succomber aux fantasmagories suscitées par le nouvel âge de la marchandise qui nous enferme et qui est l’étoffe même de nos rêves contemporains » (*Mégapolis* 68).

If we compare the *flâneuse* in *Mégapolis* to, for example, Eric Pecker, Don DeLillo’s young *flâneur* in *Cosmopolis* (2004) we see that the same difference in attitude has been perpetuated for more than a century within the triangle *flâneur-city-flâneuse*: the *flâneur* maintains his detached and bored gaze when out in public space, while the *flâneuse* opens up her every pore in order to maximize the experience. Despite having access to ultramodern facilities—fancy vehicles, computerized technology, apartments in skyscrapers, private planes—which allow him a privileged view not only of his immediate surroundings, New York City, but also of other cities in the world, Eric lacks enthusiasm, involvement. His blasé attitude and his habit of driving around at night in a white limousine send us back to the nineteenth-century *flâneur*, who experienced a certain feeling of security being outside in the city where he tried to evade his own thoughts and feeling of boredom. Like those past times, which marked the entrance of capitalism on the urban scene, the times in which Eric lives are under the influence of post-capitalism and globalization, which De Lillo portrays in negative images.

The effect of these two interrelated phenomena is fragmentation of space and human connections—Eric and his wife live separate lives in separate places and only bump into each other briefly—but also a terrible anxiety when in open spaces. The fear of

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debate the problem of the authenticity of the postmodern space could compromise over the use of a productive criticism in relation to the unstoppable transformations marking the space we inhabit.

crowds and of other uncontrollable, non-computerized elements that are part of his surroundings make Eric stay inside closed, secured spaces and limit his *flânerie* to car rides, surveillance cameras and *cybermigrations*. He makes no attempt to gain control over space through the variety of technological aids he has at his disposal, but instead he succumbs to, on the one hand, the emptiness of the interior spaces he retreats to and, on the other hand, the fear and sense of chaos that the outside inspires. The climactic point marking Eric's loss of control over both spaces is represented by the moment when he is trapped in his car, surrounded by violent groups of protesters demonstrating against the very thing he represents: corporatist control over the world.

It is true that the atmosphere created by DeLillo in this novel is parodic in its exaggeration of the drawbacks of globalization, but there are certain resemblances between it and the depictions of space in Robin's works, *Mégapolis* and *Cybermigrations*. Both Eric and Robin's narrator are "habitués of global non-place" (Purdy 25). They both inhabit a space that distinguishes itself through an apparent erasure of frontiers—Robin's narrator travels with great easiness from one part of the world to the other, while Eric uses cyberspace in order to be virtually in various parts of his country at the same time—which of course accentuates the breach with the "real." The two characters seem to be perpetually "in transit"—in cars, in metros, in airplanes, connected to their computers—to the extent that the modern space of *l'entre deux* turns into a postmodern *entre plusieurs*, which gives them the feeling of being everywhere and nowhere at the same time, of thinking of another place and other affairs the minute they are in one place doing a certain thing. Robin's character admits that this is the malaise of a world following the ideals of globalization: that of a perpetual longing for another view, another place and

never being satisfied with the place we inhabit at present. And it is from this incessant shift of images, that the surreal, cinematic city space takes shape. The main difference between the ways Eric and the narrator in *Mégapolis* inhabit it, is that while the former seems to be headed toward his death, defeated by his own meaningless existence, the latter knows how to live inside and outside the city at the same time.

Peter McLaren argues that in order for the *flâneur* or *flâneuse* to cope with and “live within the blurred and vertiginous strategies of representation and the shifting discourses of capitalism’s marketing strategies and mechanisms” he or she needs to creatively merge with this flux. Merging, but not fusing, necessitates a certain degree of wakeful consciousness and a critical approach to the space one inhabits. The way the *flâneuse*, in the guise of Robin’s narrator, achieves this and, as a result, manages to control “ses crises de désespoir” when faced with the instability of space, is through an attempt to recreate space after first impressions have been registered. This process of recreation involves gathering the vast number of mental and real pictures and other references for the urban space and reorganizing them in coherent, more stable and easier to access structures or, to borrow a term used by Chris Jenks after the Situationists, “psycho-geographies.”

A psycho-geography [...] derives from the subsequent ‘mapping’ of an unrouted route, which, like primitive cartography, reveals not so much randomness or chance as spatial intentionality. It uncovers compulsive currents within the city along with unprescribed boundaries of exclusion and unconstructed gateways of opportunity. The city begins, without fantasy or exaggeration, to take on the characteristics of a map of the mind. (154)

Due to the elusiveness of the concept of "whole space," relying on cartography in order to represent the indefinable city space seems a rather futile, if not preposterous, endeavor. Nevertheless, as Jameson contends in his article "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," mapping is necessary in order to infuse the rather chaotic postmodern space with some logic that would help one gain some control over the environments through which one is passing. Jameson also admits that a new approach to mapping is necessary, and I believe that Régine Robin responds to this need with great craft.

Dedicated to each of the five cities she visits, each chapter opens with a traditional map displaying those parts of the city most frequented by the narrator-*flâneuse*. At the same time, possibly out of the same need to instill a certain degree of order and logic to the space that is about to be opened to the readers, the narrator prefers to precede her actual observations with fictional incursions into that particular city, via literature or film. She chooses to create these semi-fictional introductions through a fictional character from a book or through a film she considers representative of her own experiences or by summoning up various literary references which, together, create a more detailed, more complete image of the city in question. I read in this act an attempt to create a more coherent map of the city, a multi-layered or polypalimpsestic map that is more fitted to the postmodern space. The "real" places reveal themselves little by little from the layers of fictional, documented and autobiographical references, in a way that shows their complexity, their richness. The map that Robin's *flâneuse* creates is one that reveals the space traversed in its multidimensional coordinates and reminds us at the same time of what Deborah Parsons posited about the similarities between the city and

the text: the *flâneur* or *flâneuse* approaches the city in a manner similar to the writer's approach to the text, that is "add[ing] other maps to the city atlas; those of social interaction but also of myth, memory, fantasy and desire" (1). When the map precedes the territory, as in the case of Robin's work, then, argues Baudrillard, we deal with hyperreality.

Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds rot across the extent of the map. (1)

Robin's work is thus peppered with many names of writers and their creations, some fictional, others critical, who help her on the one hand to establish a certain history of *flânerie*, as all of them talk about the city from their own experience, and on the other hand to reveal certain dimensions of the city which cannot be measured, detected, or decoded by technological inventions. Through processes of "montage, collage, mots trouvés—la ville se constitue au moyen d'une accumulation de traces" which are placed under close observation by Robin (Simon 100).

There is an action of 'entering the city' and not just 'being in the city' that is of great importance for the understanding of Robin's global city. One of her first encounters with the cities she visits is, in fact, with the infrastructure, particularly with the highways and metro lines. Her view of these transit spaces or non-places is very different from



accounts at the end of the twentieth century by critics such as Buck-Morss. For Buck-Morss, “automobiles are the dominant and predatory species [...which] penetrate the city’s aura so routinely that it disintegrates faster than it coalesces” (“The *Flâneur*” 102). The fact of being in a car, or, for that matter, in any other means of transportation, is an obstacle to the freedom of the *flâneur* who cannot change his mind in mid-stream and take another turn. The highway not only takes one away from the urban hub, it also subjugates one to the rules of the traffic. In the same way, argues the critic, “the metro system extinguishes the view [...] and places diminish to dots and colors on a map or block letters on the station walls” (102). For Robin, it is this very transportation infrastructure that constitutes the city’s “poétique mystérieuse” (*Mégapolis* 125). It dresses the city up in new layers and provides new venues for enchantment, thereby making up for the so-called demystification of space. Nevertheless, as Robin’s narrator points out when analyzing Camilo Jose Vergara’s descriptions of his “subway memories,” the banal images that are captured during these journeys are still enough to cause one to reflect. This contemplation does not have to be a “rhapsodic view of modern existence [possible] only with the aid of illusion” (103) as Buck-Morss contends, but it will still represent a way of familiarizing oneself with the environment one inhabits.

The (surface) metro, one of Robin’s favorite transit systems in New York next to cab-rides, is far from requiring that one plunge into the void of oblivion, the insignificant, the repetitive. It is in fact a *lieu de mémoire*, as for a knowledgeable passenger the station’s names are often rooted in historical references. Purdy remarks on the existence of a clear concordance between Robin’s depictions of subway rides—the reference is to the writer’s experiences of the Paris metro but the same would apply to other metros too—and

Augé's, as detailed in *Un ethnologue dans le métro* (2002). In both cases, "the metro map is portrayed as a kind of Proustian *madeleine*, triggering involuntary memories unique to each individual" (25). As Augé posits in his work, behind the repetitive, the regular, the banal, there are the encounters with the other and with a knowledge of ourselves that is not revealed during other daily activities. "For our story is itself plural; the itineraries of daily work are not the only ones we held in memory, and the name of this or that station that, for a long time, was for us merely one name among others, [...] could suddenly acquire a meaning, a symbol of love or of misfortune. [...] To every station are tied knots of memories that cannot be untangled" (*In the Metro* 9). In a way, this undermines Augé's theory regarding the lack of affect in non-places. The metro is just such a transit space, but nevertheless can fill up at times with emotion drawn from passengers' memories. This further destabilizes the typical view of postmodern spaces as void of history and emotion. It is rather the individual's participation or passivity when faced with these spaces that determines the nature of any place or space. At the same time, it is the name that preserves the aura of things, despite any obvious physical decay.

If in New York the *flâneuse* is the metro- or cab-rider, in Los Angeles, the next component part of Robin's global city, she must become the car-driver and consumer of pop culture in order to partake in a "real," or better said, hyperreal, experience. The *flâneuse* does not shy away from being a consumer of clichés, of signs exhausted by overuse, that speak to the moral decay of Hollywood, its recent efforts at restoration, its prostitutes and drug dealers next to the T-shirts and plastic statues of Marilyn Monroe. Nevertheless, when confronting several of these places and symbols with their names—Beverly Hills, Sunset Boulevard, Santa Monica, Marilyn Monroe—the narrator revives

their aura, as behind the real thing there opens suddenly an entire network of cultural references. The city of mirages is Robin's name for Los Angeles, designating a confusing mix of visual elements such that the narrator is not sure anymore where the décor ends and where reality begins, where film gives way to everyday life. Even the real streets seem to be an intrusive addition—in fact, several of them have been built only to preserve the image of a “real” city—to the bricolage of elements making up Los Angeles.

What makes the *flâneuse*'s peregrinations more complete is that she not only travels about the city herself, but retraces the experiences of other *flâneurs* and *flâneuses*, fictional or real. This is the case of Harry Bosch, Michael Connelly's LAPD inspector. By driving on his trail, the narrator rediscovers (sees with different eyes, those of the *flâneur*-detective this time) several of the city's sites. In the same way, under the influence of movies such as *Collateral* (2004), *L.A. Confidential* (1997), *Blade Runner*, *Falling Down* and the list goes on, the narrator is able to discover that the city has inexhaustible potential. The *flâneuse* needs to be, in turn, a detective, a consumer of culture, a tourist, a reader, a film lover, a driver, and not least, a stroller in order to disentangle the past and present, real and virtual networks of meaning that form this megalopolis. Her accomplishment is that “dans les villes-patchworks, je m'épanouis, je m'insinue dans les interstices, je crée mon espace,” which distinguishes her as more than an observer of space (*Mégapolis* 224). The postmodern *flâneuse* is a cosmopolitan creator of maps.

If New York and Los Angeles are, to a certain degree, familiar cities to the narrator, two other cities she pins on her map, Tokyo and Buenos Aires throw her outside clichéd urban representations and make her face the unknown. Of course, this time too, the ritual of knowing a place through its literature and film productions precedes the actual

journey. Moreover, the many photographic representations of Tokyo (and of the other cities) which the narrator seeks before venturing into its streets, cafés and cinema halls contribute to her desire to know this city. As Susan Sontag points out in her seminal work on photography, “photographs furnish instant history, instant sociology, instant participation” (*On Photography* 75). In addition, the attraction exercised by photographs comes not only from a Benjaminian interest in their auratic value, but from the things the camera captures that the eye will never see. “Everyday life apotheosized, and the kind of beauty that only the camera reveals—a corner of material reality that the eye doesn’t see at all or can’t normally isolate; or the overview, as from a plane—these are the main targets of the photographer’s conquest” (90).

What she discovers in Tokyo, even before seeing it, from cinematographic representations and photo albums, is that this city seems to be the embodiment of non-place. “C’est le virtuel qui m’attire ici, la civilisation de demain, le meilleur et le pire, l’effacement des frontières entre le réel et le virtuel, l’hybride sous toutes ses formes, les corps-cyborgs, l’individu-machine, la prothèse généralisée” (*Mégapolis* 224). Although she becomes excited at the idea of discovering this infinite space, the hub of electronic inventions, after spending several days in Tokyo the narrator feels like the characters in *Lost in Translation*, Sofia Coppola’s movie: the perfection and the silence of places, the emptiness of the luminous ubiquitous signs, the machines that have replaced human labor become a sad sight. “Un vide identitaire appelé « transparence » enserre l’individu. N’être rien, ne vivre que de la consommation ne laisse comme parade que l’absentéisme, le refus de rejoindre une entreprise, le devenir clochard, l’automutilation ou l’exhibition d’une excentricité vestimentaire, seules façons de singulariser son existence » (*Mégapolis* 234).

In such an environment, the *flâneuse* derives a certain pleasure from being different from the mainstream, from behaving in ways that would shock the otherwise perfectly working Japanese social system. While taking the metro, she snaps pictures at the walls while she constantly juxtaposes the real images around her with the mental ones, those formed as a result of her virtual *flâneuring*. It is in these spaces, which she cannot comprehend, that her *flânerie* becomes increasingly virtual. As she finds Tokyo and Buenos Aires increasingly sad, breathing a certain malaise, she retreats from the streets in books and films, preferring the guidance of fictional characters to real ones, until she herself is not sure of her own corporeality.

Buenos Aires represents a special space during the narrator's travels due to its "espaces symboliques plus ou moins liés topographiquement aux événements, mais où la mémoire des disparus et sa représentation artistique et éthique prendraient toute leur mesure" (*Mégapolis* 302). The *flâneuse* understands that this is a city to which homage should be paid by walking on its streets and acknowledging its historical sites of suffering, marked by the political repression and the killings of the '70s and '80s. In Buenos Aires, paradoxically, history continues to linger in the present, through absence, as "les espaces publics ont été vidés et réduits à silence" (306). But it is precisely this silence and absence, argues Robin, that opposes the amnesia spreading through late capitalist, mass consumerist societies.

Not accidentally, the *flâneuse* tries to end her global peregrinations in London, the most representative symbol of chaos, not the type of chaos resulting from the juxtaposition of real and hyperreal places, but rather the kind of chaos created by a disorganized social system. London is the worst and the best of cities—the worst because it is a city without a

clear personality and the best because it is the city of endless opportunities. For Robin's *flâneuse*, who cannot resist the temptation of being first of all a tourist and a consumer of (luxury) goods and places, London is the ideal place. This is why, when taking as guide Iain Sinclair and his book *London Orbital*, she declares herself disappointed by the desolate atmosphere he creates. In her opinion, Sinclair, the perfect example of the *flâneur* who never changes his dissatisfied approach to the city, "réagit en aristocrate un peu snob, en amoureux d'une ville réduite à ses dimensions du XIXe siècle, même si, habitant à l'est de Londres, à Hackney, il prétend aimer et arpenter des zones désolées, loin des images de cartes postales" (*Mégapolis* 345). And her response to this perspective on London, one which is similar to that of other *flâneur*-writers in relation to other big cities, represents the *flâneuse*'s poetics:

Je suis allée à Dartford en train et, de là, au Bluewater en bus. J'ai traîné dans le centre, de café en restaurant, de Marks&Spencer en House of Fraser. J'y suis allée au cinéma voir *The Kingdom* avec Jaimie Foxx. J'ai monté et descendu cent fois les escalators. Je dois figurer mille fois sur les cameras de surveillance. Je suis entrée dans les librairies, les maroquineries, les boutiques de dessous féminins. Je me suis arrêtée dans des Starbucks pour lire le *Guardian*, prendre des notes dans mes petits carnets vénitiens, contempler la foule, méditer sur le devenir suburbain des villes : mais cela ne m'a pas attristée. (345-46)

Without downplaying the negative social aspects revealed through the practice of *flânerie*—poverty, immigration, drug abuse, violence—the *flâneuse* is not taken by surprise by and does not flinch from them. For her, it's the knowledge that comes with these journeys, the experience of a deterritorialization that is no longer seen as positive or

negative, but that is accepted as the reality of a new spatio-temporal order. As Miriam Henderson, Dorothy Richardson's persona aspired to see herself as a Londoner, neither a woman nor a man, but a citizen of a country and a rightful inhabitant of a space, Robin's narrator closes her peregrinations through real, fictional and virtual places and spaces of the world by seeing herself as a rightful inhabitant of the world-as-city.

The last pages of *Mégapolis* bring together various images from all the cities that the narrator-writer has traversed into one, that of the global city. It is far from being a homogeneous image, as the identity of the subject who brings all the elements together is not a unified, fix one. On the contrary, as shown in the episodes with Michael Snow's woman, who seems to be following her around the world and who finally is revealed to be her double, her identity is very much disjointed. Only this time, despite the pervasive feeling of melancholy at still not being able to find a home space—she wonders, indeed, why not Montréal, but she knows that something is lacking there too—the narrator is satisfied with being everywhere at the same time. This is how, in my opinion, we should interpret one of the final scenes in which she looks around for the mysterious woman following her and discovers herself in everybody else; the other becomes self, the unknown space becomes a familiar site. In the global city, due to the unimaginable advances in science which create “vertiges de la simultanéité,” the postmodern *flâneuse* can be in many places at once.

## Conclusion

Talking about *flânerie* in our times, after the controversies surrounding this practice since space started to be measured according to the principles of capitalism, might come across as a nostalgic attempt to revive the mythical dimensions in our existence and point to the values lost along the path we call history. This would scarcely be surprising, as Benjamin's underlying reason for retracing the map of nineteenth-century Paris was rooted in the uncertainty he felt about the times in which he was living and the need for a real (re)enchantment to replace the empty spectacle that was modern existence. It was as if Benjamin had anticipated de Certeau's affirmation that "Tout récit est un récit de voyage—une pratique de l'espace" (170-71) through the statement that "L'existence est un récit." Our (urban) existence is a story that needs to be kept alive; keeping it alive, keeping it enchanted, means *flâneuring* through it at leisure even if economic conditions dictate a fast and purposeful run through everything. Without leisure, it would not be a story and, above all, it would not be an enchanted story. And who are those who provide us, at any time, with sources of enchantment and where are they to be found? The answer might be that given by James Donald, who posits that whenever the urban space was subject to rational measures of control by modernists (or, we can add, to parodic approaches from the postmodernists, since Donald does not separate modernity from postmodernity), *flâneurs*, artists and the rest of us have systematically re-enchanted their creations: as comic parade, as sexual display, as hellish dream-world, or simply as home. This is one of the key lessons from Benjamin. He perceived enchantment not only in the spectacular or the mysterious aspects of Paris. Myth even whispered its



presence to him in the most rationalized urban plans that, 'with their uniform streets and endless rows of buildings, have realized the dreamed-of architecture of the ancients: the labyrinth'. (51)

Looking at the two instances of *flânerie* referred to in my thesis—one occurring in the modern and the other one in the postmodern space—I realize that, if their role is indeed to testify to the enchantment of (modern and postmodern) existence, then this has been achieved, even if it did not mean infusing the present with visions of an authentic and treasured past. Rather, what both Miriam Henderson and Robin's *flâneuse* succeeded in doing was to create new aesthetics of urban space which were infused with hope and enthusiasm for a type of existence which was otherwise highly criticized for its hybridity and alienation.

To the cynical and blasé attitude that, I have argued, characterizes male metropolitan types, Miriam and Régine Robin's narrator respond with, to use Georg Simmel's expression for the paradoxical attitude of city dwellers, "a 'secret restlessness', a 'helpless urgency that lies below the threshold of consciousness', which propels [...them] toward ever-new stimulations" (qtd. in Frisby 11). Despite the fact that they step onto the urban stage during different periods, Miriam and Robin's *flâneuse* have in common the complex stance Simmel talks about (the mix of detachment from and participation in urban life) as they are both (critical) social observers and avid consumers of urban stimuli. However, neither of them falls into the category of what Anne Friedberg calls "les flâneurs du mal(1)" as they are inside mass culture but are not unconscious consumers of goods.

“Over stimulation,” argues Graeme Gilloch, “leads, on the one hand, paradoxically to boredom, to the misery of the always-the-same; on the other, it brings with it the frenetic, neurasthenic personality searching for the something-new” (172). Indeed, it is the newness—not to be confused with the authentic in the case of Robin’s *flâneuse*—that both women look for in the urban landscape as, historically speaking, they themselves are a new apparition on the scene of the metropolis. And the newness is found and perpetuated often at the expense of cultural memory, which has become one of the indirect critiques brought to bear against female *flânerie*. Not being a direct participant in the history of urban development, the *flâneuse* cannot feel, from the beginning, the same anxiety at the prospect of urban change as her male counterpart. Urban change and a distancing from traditional ways of envisaging public space have brought her freedom and visibility. Thus, there is in both Miriam and Robin’s narrator a strong desire to look ahead rather than back—as the past, not the present, is often painful—which translates into an apparent amnesia and designates the *flâneuse* as a consumer of commodity culture. What my thesis has tried to show is that, despite their approval of a break with the past, both the modern and the postmodern *flâneuse* continue to “remember productively” while they walk on the streets, respectively, of the metropolis or megalopolis. They do not negate urban space, but try to develop, through their walking, a new urban aesthetics, for, as Kinga Araya argues, for the *flâneuse* walking is a question of survival. Often the trajectory of walking is private space-public space-global space because not even the local can define the *flâneuse*’s identity.

Despite the fact that personal safety on city streets continues to be felt as the main drawback for the adventurous *flâneuse*, the anxiety that is considered to be characteristic

of the *flâneur* is replaced by a desire to experience the things that have been long forbidden. The city is seen as an expansion of the *flâneuse*'s identity and changes from a decor to an animated presence that is continuously longed for. Critics have frequently understood the investing of space with personal characteristics as an expression of women's desire to replace feelings of homelessness, attributable to the insecurity of her social status, with feelings of belonging, first at the local then at the global level. This idea is illustrated, in the two works I have studied, by the two *flâneuses*' attempts to map out two different concepts of the city: the city-as-world and the world-as-city.

For Miriam, London is the center of the world. Any other city she travels to, even while briefly abroad in Germany or Switzerland, does not present the same interest for her. Miriam's dreams of *flânerie* are thus very much contained within local borders. As I pointed out before, her nationalism leaves her convinced that the British are the best among the world's peoples—some exceptions are granted to Germans—which makes her accept other cultural influences only to the extent that they improve her country's, and London's, own image. During her walks she observes the results of Britain's imperialist economy, but at the beginning of the novel her gaze is still that of the colonizer, despite her aspirations toward being a cosmopolitan intellectual. As Celena Kusch points out, "Miriam's designs for intellectual distinction remain so deeply grounded in the economy of imperial Britain that her path to cosmopolis is incoherent at best and paradoxical at worst" (43). In these circumstances, her understanding of cosmopolitanism comes on intellectual and aesthetic terms rather than social ones, which, Kusch argues, is a characteristic of modern cosmopolitans. Thus, her imaginary *flânerie* across the globe acknowledges only the places and people who are involved in intellectual practices:

All over the globe, dotted here and there, were people who read and thought, making a network of unanimous culture. It was a tiring reflection, but it brought a comfortable assurance that somewhere beyond the hurrying confusion of everyday life something was being done quietly in a removed real world that led to the other world. (v.ii 342)

This illustrates the imperialist's habit of seeing other cultures only as aids in furthering British culture, which, Kusch argues, is characteristic of cosmopolitan modernism.

Another way in which Miriam regards cosmopolitanism is reflected in her constant reading of the journal *Cosmopolis* and her attending literary circles in which being different is accepted and even encouraged. The fact that she also feels different and "other" within her own culture contributes to an instinctual understanding of what being "Other" in a political understanding of the term must be like. Nevertheless, the fact that the result of her abstract cosmopolitanism is a "comfortable assurance" that the world is contributing to the betterment of London speaks volumes about Miriam's initial imperialist understanding of the concept. In London, the world is reduced to goods and news from various places which Miriam enjoys consuming and observing because, once removed from their contexts, they can be appropriated. The same idea applies, at times, to the people she meets, immigrants or foreign travelers, who reinforce her own sense of superiority as a British citizen. This is the case of the Spanish-Jewish Mendizabal or the Russian-Jewish Michael Shatov and his Russian friends, who are observed during walks and dinners by Miriam and who convince her that London and Britain are the best places to be. So it is that "the constant cross cultural confrontations within the text work as importations that reveal that the cosmopolitan awareness of other cultures remains on

solid imperial ground” (Kusch 51) and, I would add, on an understanding of race and class that reflects the observer’s upper-class background. Kusch adds that Miriam shows affinities with the intellectual cosmopolitans, but tries to separate herself from those who have become cosmopolitan for economic reasons (that is, they had to go abroad in order to find more sustainable jobs or to marry). This is the case of Nurse Dear, the Wheeler girl who marries an Indian, and other characters who jeopardize their class status by mixing with other nationalities. But what is more important for the modern *flâneuse* is that she can take part in this incredible flux of cultural influences and knowledge without leaving London. Hence, it is not an exaggeration to affirm that, for Miriam the world is, in fact, the city—London—where the *flâneuse* has access to most of the things she needs to know and see and also has the freedom to enjoy them.

In the case of Robin’s *Mégapolis*, where we see the *flâneuse* taking her urban journeys outside the boundaries of a single city and outside the physical boundaries of this world (she is also a *flâneuse* of the virtual, cinematographic and textual realms), it is logical to ask how much her perspective concerning cosmopolitanism and the local versus global debate has changed compared to Miriam’s. Timothy Brennan posits that cosmopolitanism should be broadly understood as “thirst for another knowledge, unprejudiced striving, world travel, supple open-mindedness, broad international norms of civic equality, [and] a politics of treaty and understanding rather than conquest” (qtd. in Kusch 43). This is in agreement with what Bruce Robbins in *Feeling Global* (1999) calls “a sort of popular, non-Western or non-elite cosmopolitanism” or, as South African critic Benita Parry terms it, a “postcolonial cosmopolitanism” which is

extended both geographically and socially [. . . and] includes an Indian slave sent by a Jewish merchant to transact business around the Persian Gulf in the Middle Ages, African servants of British travelers in the 1800s, African American travelers in modernist Europe and European, Caribbean and Asian au pairs in the contemporary United States as well as the more obvious Third World intellectuals operating out of the metropolitan centers. (Robbins 100-101)

In asserting this, Robbins goes back to the origins of the term cosmopolitanism which, other than meaning 'feeling that you belong where you are not, feeling at home in the world,' also shows its historical affiliations not with higher classes, but with the lower ones. Ross Posnock completes this understanding with the observation that cosmopolitanism is no longer linked to identity, that of belonging everywhere in the world and not being confined to any one country. He argues that it becomes a practice or an "act of true judgment," which is a term that Bruce Robbins uses. Rather than being the privileged position of the person who can afford to travel anywhere and know the world, cosmopolitanism can be better situated in the process of opening up toward and becoming knowledgeable about other cultures without necessarily trying to include them in fixed classifications.

As discussed in chapter 3, Robin's narrator, an (im)migrant, is confronted with the problem of uprootedness and of living "in-between" or "among-many" spaces. I say "among-many" because even within the same culture there are cultural microcosms which further fragment the culture in which one is brought up or into which one is adopted. This usually has two results, as illustrated in *l'écriture migrante*, borderland

littérature or literature of exile: it either leads the characters to accept their condition and to consider themselves dwellers of the world, or it further estranges them from all possible spaces of belonging and deepens to extreme feelings of alienation. Although not entirely cured of a certain nostalgia for the lost home space, Robin's *flâneur* decides not to "shield herself from encountering the full diversity of society" (Jones 49) and to consciously embrace it by taking advantage of the freedom of movement that a woman can enjoy around the turn of the twenty-first century.

She embarks upon her adventure as a middle-class, professional woman with both a personal and an academic (that of the sociologist, the ethnographer) interest in the megalopolises she visits. Her postmodern gaze lacks the urgency of qualifying the things she observes as "high class" or "low class," "domestic" or "foreign," "authentic" or "kitsch," as in Miriam's case, and instead allows them to enter and exit at will the various screens she uses for organizing her images into mental spaces. Moreover, her gaze lacks the panoramic quality that is characteristic of Miriam's (and the modernist's) gaze, having more in common with the accidental quickness of the snap-shot. In this way, she can pay equal attention to all aspects making up the spaces she visits and I tend to argue that it is in this way that Posnock's argument that cosmopolitanism has become a practice can be understood. The gaze of the postmodern *flâneuse* breaks down possible (visual) hierarchies and opens up toward every constituent element of local and foreign spaces in a non-discriminating way.

However, when it comes to "feeling at home in the world," the relationship between global space and the postmodern *flâneuse* becomes complicated. Despite her attempt toward an undifferentiated embrace of foreign places—in a way, it is inscribed in

the condition of the migrant that all spaces are alien spaces—we see Robin's narrator unconsciously detaching herself from certain spaces, such as Tokyo and Buenos Aires. They both inspire her with a certain loneliness on the one hand—as Buenos Aires is too full of recent painful history and Tokyo too cybernized—and a certain distancing from Western values which seems to have become part of her “comfort zone.” Whenever she feels the burden of the “foreign-ness” of these places grow too heavy, she seeks familiar, comforting places like Starbucks or standard, Western-looking cinema halls in which she can retreat. This makes one wonder how easily we can distance ourselves from familiar cultural patterns and how objective one can be in observing a foreign space. In this sense, Araya argues that “the two positions, the global and the local, are still not reconciled because we are constantly reminded of our wanted or unwanted ‘locality’, depending on the global situations. We do participate in a complex socio-political and cultural economy that divides East from West, the provincial city from the metropolis, and the first- from the third-world countries” (n.p.). However, she admits that there is always a certain shock when she finds herself in public, and all the more in foreign spaces. “For me,” Araya concludes, “putting one foot in front of the other was never about becoming a global *flâneur* or a *flâneuse*, it was about survival” (n.p.).

The two instances of *flânerie* that I have brought into discussion here, are representative, all in all, of two attitudes toward urban existence as experienced by women. As they walk or drive, from a bus, train, metro or from being in front of a screen or book, the two *flâneuses* succeed in creating, in my opinion, an intriguing perspective on urban life and, as a result, on modernity and postmodernity respectively. The practice of *flânerie* might have changed since the times and conditions ascribed to it by



Baudelaire and Benjamin, but it can still function as a way of negotiating with the instability that is characteristic of contemporary times. The alternative, which is to reject the randomness and diversity of existence by retreating into "the security of a cocoon of private spaces" (Jones 49) seems to be a less compelling strategy for understanding ourselves and the time and space in which we live.

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