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Review of Anke Gleber, *The Art of Taking a Walk: Flanerie, Literature, and Film in Weimar Culture.*

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Anke Gleber, *The Art of Taking a Walk: Flanerie, Literature, and Film in Weimar Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999. 283 pp. ISBN 069100238X.

Reviewed by Imke Meyer, Bryn Mawr College

In her study, *The Art of Taking a Walk*, Anke Gleber seeks to “delineate a history of perception and representation in modernity by analyzing one of its significant modes of observation, that of ‘flanerie’” (vii). The book “argues that the *flâneur*, as a product of modernity, experiences city streets as interiors” (vii). This thesis is indebted to Walter Benjamin’s observations on the figure of the *flâneur*. Gleber intends to facilitate “a broader understanding of the specific cultural context within which [the figure of the *flâneur*] emerged,” and she wants to contribute to a redefinition of “our conception of the intersections among modernity, vision, and public spaces” (vii).

The monograph is divided into four parts that focus on the nexus of “Literature, Culture, Theory,” on Franz Hessel’s writings, on “Flanerie and Film,” and on “Female Flanerie,” respectively. Each of these four parts is subdivided into two or three chapters, which in turn consist of shorter subchapters. Gleber describes this structure as the result of her attempt “to develop an ambulatory form of presentation that seeks to adjust its own trajectories in accordance with the phenomena it seeks to investigate” (viii).

In the first part of her study, Gleber seeks to outline a “Theory of Literary Flanerie.” Towards this end, she examines a number of fictional as well as non-fictional texts by nineteenth-century German writers such as Heinrich von Kleist, Heinrich Heine, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Ludwig Börne, and Wilhelm Raabe. The texts under investigation here all focus on city environments and the visual features these environments exhibit. In these texts, Gleber wants to trace the development of a flaneuristic attitude and, specifically, of a flaneuristic gaze. In addition, Gleber describes the growth of cities and the development of modern cityscapes in the wake of industrialization. In this context, Gleber is especially interested in artificial lighting and in new modes of transportation, since lighting as well as transportation obviously have an influence on one’s perception of a given environment. At the end of this section, Gleber focuses on the early twentieth century. She discusses writings on the modern metropolis and flanerie by authors such as Georg Simmel, Siegfried Kracauer, and Walter Benjamin.

While this first part of the study provides some interesting historical background and a useful introduction to the topic of the book, it also raises a few questions. Most notably, the study often speaks of “the fundamentally visual disposition of modernity in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (37). However, it could be argued that such a “fundamentally visual disposition” can also be identified in, for instance, the 18th century or in antiquity. The potential counter-argument evoked by the “visual dispositions” of a prior era might have shed additional light on the texts by Kleist, Heine, E.T.A. Hoffmann, and Raabe that are discussed in the study. One of the purposes of the book is to analyze changing modes of perception by way of focusing on the figure of the *flâneur*. As Gleber convincingly shows, modes of perception surely change in modernity; however, this insight does not necessarily support the far broader claim that a “fundamentally visual disposition” in and of itself is what sets modernity apart from other eras.

The second part of the study focuses on Franz Hessel, a German-Jewish writer and translator who resided in Berlin and Paris and who, in the 1920s, collaborated with Benjamin on a Proust translation. Gleber provides a brief biographical sketch of Hessel, places him in his intellectual environs in Berlin, and describes, in this context, the development of his friendship and intellectual exchange with Benjamin. Gleber seeks to point out certain intellectual affinities between Hessel and Benjamin, and she identifies overlaps between Hessel's and Benjamin's reflections on the *flâneur*. Gleber does this by analyzing a number of Hessel's fictional and non-fictional texts.

The fourth chapter is especially well written; it provides a critical and balanced discussion of Hessel's writings and intellectual stances. The following chapter, which is devoted to Hessel's novels, could have benefited from a more detailed analysis of the narratological aspects of the texts under investigation. Such an analysis might have facilitated additional observations about the discursive and stylistic flanerierie in Hessel's texts. The last chapter of this part of the study introduces the reader to some of Hessel's lesser-known essayistic writings.

The third part of the book, "Flanerierie and Film," takes as its point of departure the argument that the *flâneur's* gaze can be compared to the movement of a film camera, especially the camera in silent cinema. Gleber thus "seeks to expand Hessel's characteristic aesthetics into a comprehensive phenomenology of the flaneurist gaze, an aesthetics of the everyday that can serve to open up new approaches to a theory of film" (ix). Gleber refers to the Weimar *Kino-Debatte*, discusses Kracauer's *Theory of Film*, and takes a closer look at a number of parallels that can be drawn between the flaneurist gaze and the movie camera's eye: both the *flâneur* and Weimar cinema display an interest in the visual spectacles of the modern cityscape. In moving slowly through the streets and their traffic, resisting the hectic pace of the metropolis, both the *flâneur's* and the movie camera's eye transform the exteriors of public spheres into spaces of interiority. Thus Gleber compares the camera--itself a new technical invention--to the *flâneur* in that each potentially facilitates a critical view of modern technology and the numerous social problems that arrive in its wake.

While it is clear that both the *flâneur's* gaze and the camera's eye can open up critical perspectives, it is equally true that both the figure of the *flâneur* and the medium of film can and often do align themselves with dominant bourgeois paradigms and ideologies that seek to uphold the status quo or evoke a politically problematic nostalgia for bygone eras. The study provides some critical remarks with regard to such issues, although an explicit contrast of Benjamin's optimistic socio-cultural views on film to those of Adorno and Horkheimer could have sharpened the analyses.

The fourth and last part of the study engages in a "search for traces of a 'female flanerierie' within Weimar culture and female writing" (x). In this context, Gleber discusses Walter Ruttmann's famous silent film *Berlin, the Symphony of the City*, two of Weimar writer Irmgard Keun's novels, and psychoanalyst Charlotte Wolff's memoirs. Gleber argues that female flanerierie, while not completely absent, is certainly a rare phenomenon and a phenomenon that, to the extent that it does exist, has been rendered largely invisible in the critical discourse on the figure of the *flâneur*. In unearthing traces of female flanerierie, Gleber seeks to make visible "female

subjectivity in the public realm and to make possible a liberated gaze that in turn would allow women to become the subjects of their own perception" (x).

Gleber's detailed interpretation of certain sequences of Ruttmann's *Berlin* runs counter to a lot of the existing secondary literature on the film and opens up interesting critical perspectives. While Laura Mulvey's seminal essay on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" is referred to numerous times throughout the study, it might have been worthwhile to engage some of the essay's critical insights on spectatorship to an even greater extent in the context of the discussion of Ruttmann's film. The discussion of Keun's novels, like the engagement with Hessel's novels, could have been made even more convincing if, in order to emphasize further some of the texts' formal "flaneuristic" characteristics, closer attention had been paid to the novels' narratological features. Since these last chapters attempt to find female flânerie in Weimar culture, they also might have wanted to touch upon German-Jewish poet, dramatist, and prose writer Else Lasker-Schüler. While Lasker-Schüler's texts do not necessarily or explicitly reflect on the phenomenon of flânerie, it could be argued that Lasker-Schüler herself was something of a flâneuse, in light of the fact that, during various periods in the early part of the twentieth century, she lived in Berlin without actually having a permanent residence or home there. The last part of the study presents a large amount of material, however, and one cannot demand that these chapters be all-inclusive.

A reader of *The Art of Taking a Walk* might conclude that this detailed study's language is at times somewhat convoluted. This is unfortunate, as it makes many passages difficult to grasp. Also, while the "ambulatory form of presentation" Gleber chooses is a legitimate approach to a topic such as flânerie, the study could nevertheless have benefited from more stringent editing. The book contains a number of rather repetitious passages, many of the observations provided in the endnotes appear more than once, and some quotations appear several times. The study might also have differentiated its own critical stances even more clearly from those found in its sources. Still, Gleber certainly achieves what she sets out to do--she presents a wealth of material on the history of flânerie, and she takes her readers on an interesting walk "through the cities and spaces of modernity" (vii).