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Rethinking the Flâneur: Flânerie and the Senses

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‘Oh! errer dans Paris! adorable et délicieuse existence! Flâner est une science, c’est la gastronomie de l’œil’, wrote Honoré de Balzac, generously mixing metaphors in his sensuous description of flânerie in *Physiologie du mariage*. As the embodiment of modernity, the figure of the flâneur is closely associated with our conception of nineteenth-century urban experience and of Paris, the city where he originated. Various defined as a fashionable male idler, a leisurely stroller, an expert reader of urban signs, an artist or writer, and a sociologist *avant la lettre*, the flâneur remains as multifarious and elusive as the city with which he is associated. This special number of *Dix-Neuf* seeks to rethink the flâneur and flânerie’s relationship to sensory perception, taking into account the ‘sensual turn’ in the humanities and social sciences.¹ It brings the sensitivity of sensory studies to bear on the study of the flâneur, who epitomizes the ascendancy of vision in modernist studies. Shifting focus, we can wonder whether the lure of the visual has blinded us to other significant aspects of urban experience. Acknowledging that vision may not dominate the flâneur’s ways of perceiving to the exclusion of all other senses, this collection of essays explores new paths taken by the flâneur through the sounds, smells, tastes, and textures of Paris in the nineteenth century.²

The ‘sensual turn’ in literary studies, and more broadly the arts, humanities, and social sciences has been moving scholars (since the pioneering work of French historian Alain Corbin in the 1980s, as well as Canadian anthropologists David Howes and Constance Classen and British geographer Paul Rodaway in the 1990s) to make sense of their disciplines by developing ‘a habit, a way of thinking about [culture], and a way of becoming attuned to the wealth of sensory evidence embedded in any number of texts, evidence that is overwhelmingly apparent once and, ironically, *looked for*’ (Smith, 2007: 5).³ The ‘sensual turn’ follows the return of the body and material culture after the decline of post-structuralism and its attendant repression of the body and the materiality of text (Howes, 2003; 2006). The sensual turn also complements the rise of visual and cultural studies which positioned the flâneur’s modernist gaze as painter of modern life at the centre of many of its inquiries. The sensory approach fleshes out ‘homogenizing’ concepts such as the ‘body’ by providing a full-bodied understanding of corporeal existence as ‘bundles of interconnected experiences’ that relate dynamically to the world (Howes, 2006: 115; Syrotinski and MacLachlan 2001: 7).

Modernist scholars' emphasis on vision has enriched our understanding of the nineteenth-century flâneur by extending our gaze onto material culture, making connections with art history, and probing the scopic drive in psychoanalytical studies. A fully sensual approach does not aim to denigrate vision, but rather seeks to grasp how sight interrelates with the other four senses. Vision may well dominate nineteenth-century culture — many have certainly argued the point and the present volume largely supports this position — but a better, fuller perception of the development of modernity can be gained if we expand our sensory field.

In fact, the predominance of visual studies scholarship, however compelling individual studies may be, tends to produce an image of the nineteenth-century City of Light as a tasteless and odourless, smooth reflective surface, rather than the city rich in clamour, street din, music and voices, aromas, perfumes, stench and bouquets, tastes, flavours, sweet and savoury pleasures, comforts, irritants, textures, and shocks. The early decades of the nineteenth century brought important shifts in technologies of observation, print culture, and urban planning, all of which promoted a visualist aesthetic. These changes impacted the whole sensorium, affecting thresholds of perception, tolerance for levels of noise and stench, circulation of smells, street congestion, crowd control, and water and food quality. Older modes of perception persisted with newer ones even while the relations among the senses evolved. The non-visual senses remained vital under modernity (Smith, 2007). A multisensorial approach explores the connections and associations between the senses and their ties to cognition and memory, proximity and distance, self and other, intuition and reason, realism and fantasy, attraction and revulsion, male and female.

Traditionally, in a system inherited from Aristotle, the senses have been conceived of hierarchically (Levin, 1993). Sight predominates over hearing as a source of cognition, beauty, and truth, and smell, taste, and touch figure among the lower and instinctual senses. An impoverished vocabulary for accounting for smell and taste correlates with their reputations as the least aesthetic and truthful, the most primitive and unreliable (though flâneur writers such as Charles Baudelaire and Émile Zola must have relished the challenge of scouting out sensuous words to meet their needs). In an influential formulation, Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong associated modernity with the eye in a paradigm that maps the shift from oral/aural to print/visual culture onto the early modern to modern divide. Mark M. Smith, however, has challenged the primacy afforded sight in the theory of the great divide because historians increasingly agree that the 'non-visual senses proved central to the elaboration of modernity' (Smith, 2007: 2). Smith argues that there is no clear break in sensory regimes in the transition from pre-modern to modern society. Likewise, there is no 'universal hierarchy of the senses', but only evolving relations particular to a context, time, and place (Syrotinski and Maclachlan, 2001: 10). At the beginning of the 'modern' age, for example, French enlightenment thinkers valorized the full range of sensory perception and developed an empiricism based on the sensorial and the sentimental (Riskin, 2002). From Diderot to Merleau-Ponty and Guy Debord, there has been a long-standing tradition in modern France of thinking through the senses and questioning ocularcentrism (Jay, 1993; Syrotinski and Maclachlan, 2001: 7–8). Pauline de Tholozany's work, for instance, demonstrates how productive Bergson's theory of perception and memory can be for rethinking the role of the senses in flânerie.

Many nineteenth-century thinkers also mapped the senses onto social distinctions that linked the lower classes — and women — with the baser senses. We might be wary, then, of a discourse on the primacy of vision and the hierarchy of the senses that can reproduce rather than expose class or gender prejudice. As Corbin cautioned, we must ‘avoid becoming hostage to the rhetorical sensory hierarchy sponsored by a given class’ (quoted in Smith, 2007: 15). Implicit in the trope of the flâneur’s visual mastery and emotional detachment is a discourse of control, both over urban space and the city inhabitants with whom the stroller is likely to come in contact. The flâneur’s disembodied eye reflects an elite mentality and gender bias, an impassiveness that is often challenged by the seduction of mass consumption and the (vital) mixing of high and low-brow Parisian society, as we can see in Catherine Nesci’s reading of the shift from detachment to embeddedness in *Gambara*.

The contributions in this special number therefore work from the assumption that sensory perception is not an immediate apprehension of phenomena by the senses. While physical and psychological research into sensory perception could usefully inform some of the analyses, the contributors clearly show the senses to be mediated by culture. Senses are constructed historically and culturally. Ways of sensing generate social and moral meanings about gender, class, health, power, space, time, and beauty that are fleshed out in literature and art.

These culturally constructed signifying systems are explored in this collection. For example, Pauline de Tholozany and Hazel Hahn clarify the complexities of sight by contrasting mechanical and purposeful seeing and by concentrating on the importance of unfocused or distracted vision which immerses rather than distances the flâneur in his surroundings. My article assesses the status of hearing thought to be more passive, but more relational than seeing, and more frequently associated with feelings of pleasure and pain than with detachment. Catherine Nesci, Cheryl Krueger, and Priscilla Ferguson engage our ‘lower’ senses of taste and smell to explore their connections to social and sexual difference as well as desire, memory, and knowledge. Tactility incorporates all the senses. Touch connects inner and outer through the interoceptive and vestibular senses. Sight in particular is mediated by touch, as Tholozany’s discussion of absorption and Heidi Brevik-Zender’s rendering of fashion’s multisensory appeal remind us. Given the duality of touch, the toucher is touched. Conversely, the collection evinces how representations of the senses are tied to their material and cultural development, growth or atrophy, and circulation, as can be seen in my claims about increased intolerance for street music, Krueger’s discussion of the perfume industry and the relationship between miasma and disease, and Ferguson’s comments on the growth of botanical gardens, restaurants, as well as the market at Les Halles.

As ‘sensory relations are social relations’ (Howes, 2003: 55), it is surprising that urban and architectural studies were not moved by the sensual turn earlier. The trope of the city as spectacle and spectacle of the city has had a stranglehold on the field. As a result, as one critic put it, ‘the media apparatus freezes the modern flâneur’s varying perspective, the urban tumult and vibrations, the complex patterns of natural and social rhythms, not to mention the ever-changing weather into silent snapshots and flawless clichés of consumption under ideal conditions’ (Diaconu et al., 2011: 7). As the 2007 issue of *Senses and Society* made palpable, ‘sensory reductionism’ is undergoing serious critique by academics as well as policy makers. In *Sensations*

urbaines, an innovative exhibition held at the Center for Canadian Architecture in 2005–06, the curator Mirko Zardini calls for urban planners to renew their interest in a more sensuous exploration of the city in order to take into account the ways spaces acquire character through their specific appeal to all five senses. Proceedings from the conference David Howes organized in concert with the exhibition can be consulted online <<http://www.david-howes.com/senses/sensing-the-city-index.htm>>. In a similar vein, in *Senses and the City: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Urban Senses*, Mădălina Diaconu writes of the need to sensitize scholarship to the haptic and olfactory dimensions of urban experience to capture the ‘flair of the city’ (2011: 8), a determining factor in inhabitants’ well-being and sense of place. These architectural and urban planning studies are indebted to the foundational work of Juhani Pallasmaa who argues in a now classic work, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (1996), that the suppression of the non-visual senses in design has promoted a built environment that causes feelings of detachment and alienation. Literary and cultural studies have also touched on the topic of the multi-sensual appeal of the urban experience. Alexander Cowan and Jill Steward’s edited collection, *The City and the Senses: Urban Culture Since 1500* (2007), takes the long view on the question of how the West experienced cities in terms of the senses. Rather than span urban experience across a broad range of centuries and Western metropolises, this special number of *Dix-Neuf* focuses narrowly in order to make sense of the flâneur as he emerged and evolved in his native city of Paris in the nineteenth century. Resensualizing the flâneur, however, implies a larger desire to reconceive the modern city as a sensual place and reconstitute the senses of modernity to which the flâneur’s perambulations give us privileged access.

The flâneur was originally a distinctly Parisian type, though he quickly spawns British and German counterparts (Lauster, 2007). The genealogy of the flâneur has already been well drawn, notably by Priscilla Ferguson in *Paris as Revolution*. He emerges during the First Empire, out of eighteenth-century urban descriptions by Alain René Le Sage, Louis-Sébastien Mercier, and Restif de la Bretonne, as well as out of the journalism of Richard Steele and Joseph Addison’s *The Spectator*, and achieves iconic stature during the July Monarchy. In the 1830s and 1840s, the flâneur proliferates with the growth of European *feuilleton* culture and was ubiquitous in the physiologies, especially Louis Huart’s *Physiologie du flâneur*, and literary guidebooks such as *Paris, ou Le livre des cent-et-un* and *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes*. These sources — what Walter Benjamin called ‘panoramic literature’ and recently the subject of expansive treatment by Stierle (2001), Lauster (2007), and Rose (2007) — are abundantly cited by the contributors to this special number to flesh out the type of the flâneur. If the flâneur can elude our grasp it is because false flâneurs such as idlers, gapers, and tourists also crowd the streets, as Hahn and Tholozany discuss. Tholozany also questions the flâneur’s famed detachment by catching him at his most clumsy. While clothes and outward appearance determine the flâneur’s identity, as Brevik-Zender explains, he is also characterized by extra-ordinary sensory abilities. Whereas the average city dweller pays no attention to commonplace urban sensations, the flâneur capitalizes on his extreme familiarity with the ins and outs of the city and reports on everyday sensory encounters of all kinds. The flâneur in popular guidebooks is indeed a ‘roving empiricist’, as Richard Burton suggested (1988: 60).

Following Mary Gluck (2003), it is useful to distinguish the ‘popular’ from the ‘avant-garde’ flâneur: whereas the popular flâneur emerged in panoramic literature and the commercial press, the avant-garde flâneur is more closely associated with innovative artists, especially Charles Baudelaire. He identified the flâneur with the artist and the imagination, against a scientific conception of modernity (Gluck, 2003: 74). In contrast, Honoré de Balzac had conceived of flânerie as a synthesis of empiricism, creativity, and science in a well-known passage of *Physiologie du mariage* discussed by Nesci; as Boutin and Ferguson show, this two-step process dominated by intellectualization would remain a dominant model for decades.

In ‘Le Peintre de la vie moderne’, Baudelaire compares the flâneur to Poe’s ‘man of the crowd’. As he who chooses to dwell at the centre of the movement of the crowd but who resists being sucked into it, he remains disengaged, masterful, princely, invisible, superior, and omniscient; but, as Krueger demonstrates in her rereading of this well-known passage, the man of the crowd not only observes the spectacle but he smells its effluvia. Olfaction and flânerie ‘function similarly as experiences of perception’ and penetration in Baudelaire’s prose poems as well.

To Walter Benjamin, we owe the resurgence of the flâneur as an icon of modernity in contemporary critical theory in the 1980s. He treats the flâneur most fully in the essay ‘The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire’, first published in German in 1938 and in the never-completed book *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. The posthumous publication of *The Arcades Project* in German in 1982 and in English in 1999 gave new impetus to the study of flânerie. Benjamin sought to define the modern stroller as the avant-garde flâneur and based his understanding of the type on the artist-flâneur as he appeared in Baudelaire’s poetry and prose. As Martina Lauster (2007) has pointed out, Benjamin largely ignores the import of panoramic literature in shaping the type, consequently undermining how these typologies thematized the very process of observation. His materialist interpretation of the flâneur emphasized the significance of the new architectural visual aesthetic in Paris, notably the arcades or *passages*, built in the first decades of the nineteenth century (but perhaps more marginal than Benjamin would have it) and the boulevards, started under Préfet Rambuteau and pursued aggressively by Baron Haussmann, whose comprehensive design turned the street into an interior.⁴

The new phenomenon of the boulevards and the urban masses made the flâneur into a ‘man of the crowd’ whom Benjamin counterintuitively interpreted as a person disconnected from the crowd. He cast the flâneur as an oppositional figure whose pace and leisurely attitude protest the industriousness of the marketplace, a loitering and dilatory posture further theorized by Ross Chambers (1999). The clear impact of the Benjaminian approach, as I argue further in my article, can be felt in the reduced sensuality of flânerie in the critical field today. Benjamin’s other work, however, leaves open the possibility of other readings immersed in the sensuality of the everyday: for instance, in his 1929 essay ‘The Return of the Flâneur’, Benjamin reflects that the flâneur ‘would be happy to trade all his knowledge of artists’ quarters, birth-places, and princely palaces for the scent of a single weathered threshold or the touch of a single tile — that which any old dog carries away’ (1999a: 263).

The discourse on the flâneur inevitably assumes his male gender. As Wolff (1985), Wilson (1992), Gleber (1999), Parsons (2000), D’Souza and McDonough (2006), and

Nesci (2007) have noted, women did walk in the city and wrote of their trespasses as flâneuses, some (such as Delphine de Girardin) as early as the 1830s. Women were denied the right to look at passers-by, see, feel, and move about the city, so that they were either hypervisible (as fallen women) or invisible (as flâneuses or reporters). As Ferguson summarizes in her preface to Nesci's book *Le Flâneur et les flâneuses* (2007), scrutinizing the flâneur helps us 'question the conditions of inclusion and exclusion of public urban life' (9). In order to report on society, the flâneuse had to practice masquerade, as Nesci (2007) illustrates, or elude the surveillance of spouse and narrator, as in the case of Madeleine Pelletier discussed by Brevik-Zender. As Parsons (2000) argues, the 'social influx of women as empirical observers into the city street [challenges] aesthetic, urban perception as a specifically masculine phenomenon' (6). Although such a statement exposes the relationships of domination encoded in the visual, it does not go far enough to point out the power dynamics inherent in regimes of sensory perception generally. Sensory practices encode gender, and changing gender roles upset the hierarchies and relations among the senses in the nineteenth century. Women, particularly lower-class or exotic women, were distinctly associated with the foul and the fragrant as evoked by a whiff of Baudelaire's poetry or of Zola's *Le Ventre de Paris*. The sexualization of flânerie motivates a desire to ingest the city that authors describe in terms of possessing, touching, controlling, and devouring the female body — subtly in Balzac's *Ferragus* and *Gambara*, and more violently in Maupassant's *Bel-Ami*. When women such as Colette's Renée do practice sensual flânerie, suggests Nesci, they can dislocate gendered, social, and sensory divisions.

Flânerie produces an innovative kind of writing, and has a mythic existence as a catalyst for artistic reflection⁵ and as a practice that produces texts (Frisby, 1994: 83). We can therefore speak of the reciprocity between the flâneur and city space, for the flâneur (re)produces and reinvents the city as text through his peripatetic practice, as Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre have theorized. Since the flâneur came to prominence in the commercial press of the July Monarchy, it stands to reason that journalism, the *feuilleton*, the verbal sketch, and visual caricature would instantiate flâneur-writing. Many of the contributors discuss different forms verbal sketches and journalistic writing take in the literature of flânerie. Indeed, the flâneur's receptivity to transitory sensory impressions and personal reflection lend themselves to subjective and fragmentary writing that is not driven by plot. The contemplative art of flânerie can lead to poetry (or prose poetry), but its attention to detail can also lead to documentary prose. Flâneur writing has, of course, been linked to the Realist novel. As Brevik-Zender and Ferguson illustrate, the protagonists of *Bel-Ami* and *Le Ventre de Paris* walk the streets and chance encounters determine the course of their fictional lives.

Yet, from the July Monarchy to the Second Empire, the flâneur undergoes a transformation. Whereas in Balzac the flâneur can sometimes appear indecisive, lazy, and unproductive, he is more often intelligent, inspired, and creative.⁶ As the type evolves, however, the sense of perceptual mastery that often characterizes Balzacian flânerie is eroded, and the flâneurs in the fiction of Flaubert, Zola, and Maupassant struggle to possess the city and end up possessed by it (Ferguson, 1994: 95). In contrast to Baudelaire or Fournel, for whom flânerie channels creativity, the fictional flâneurs

Bel-Ami and Claude Lantier are failed artists. Whereas the flâneur dwelt in the interstitial space between mastery and absorption in Lacroix, as Tholozany suggests, he is fully possessed by the city in all its sensuality in Maupassant. Though he is not a flâneur proper, Florent is eaten up by the city. Zola the writer-flâneur, however, as Ferguson argues, ‘uses flânerie rather than being used by it’. In the case of Maupassant’s flâneur, Duroy is no longer aloof from the marketplace, but rather wrapped up in bourgeois capitalism and consumerism: he has come ‘ostensibly to look around, but in truth to find a buyer’ to borrow Benjamin’s expression (2006: 66). Not the dispassionate flâneur of the 1830s and 1840s, Zola’s and Maupassant’s flâneurs are sensualists who cannot resist temptations.

Zola’s character, the painter Claude Lantier (with his ties to Manet and Cézanne) encapsulates flânerie’s association with impressionism. Baudelaire identified the sketch artist Constantin Guys as the quintessential flâneur in ‘Le Peintre de la vie moderne’. The cosmopolitan Guys travelled the globe as a newspaper illustrator and Baudelaire admired in him the ‘homme du monde’ with an insatiable passion for discovery: ‘he wants to know, understand, appreciate everything that happens on the surface of our globe’. Guys exemplifies, explains Hahn, the new travelling flâneur who transforms raw sensations offered by foreign countries into subjective and creative expression. This ‘projection of flânerie onto world travel’ elicited ‘imaginary flânerie’, argues Hahn, as readers of illustrated magazines undertook mental voyages — sometimes with dubious ties to conquest and colonization as in the journalistic flâneries of Duroy in Algeria.

At the risk of a detour, it is certainly worth making sense of the flâneur in our contemporary globalized world: although originally a nineteenth-century Parisian type, the postmodern flâneur has become a tool for conceptualizing urban mobility and encounters, and a symbol of self-conscious awareness of urban experience. For most people, urban sensations are so commonplace that they go unrecorded; it is travellers and foreign visitors — tourists, in a word — who comment on how the city they are visiting feels different: different smells, flavours, sounds, temperatures, comforts. Régine Robin in *Mégapolis: Les derniers pas du flâneur* (2009) excels at conveying the subjective and kaleidoscopic sensations, interspersed with fictional and cinematic itineraries, of the global flâneuse who travels to New York, Los Angeles, Tokyo, London, and Buenos Aires — anywhere but her home towns of Paris and Montreal. As Edmund White writes in *The Flâneur: A Stroll through the Paradoxes of Paris* (2001), the flâneur is not in search of a history lesson or edification, nor is he interested in checking off the major sights on a list of standard wonders (47). The ‘flâneur is in search of experience, not knowledge. Most experience ends up interpreted as — and replaced by — knowledge, but for the flâneur the experience remains somehow pure, useless, raw’ (47). White practices the art that he defines as a search for raw experience, as he takes the reader on a discontinuous journey through the known and the secret haunts of famous Parisians past and present. White’s palimpsestic and multicultural Paris that includes Blacks, Jews, gays, contemporary royalists, and nineteenth-century Hachichins, presents a striking contrast with another contemporary depiction of flânerie, Woody Allen’s film *Midnight in Paris* (2011), which depicts a monocultural, nostalgic, and romanticized dreamscape of 1920s (and 2010s) Paris.

In this special number of *Dix-Neuf*, each of the contributors' essays considers the Parisian flâneur in the nineteenth century, using a range of approaches in various genres and in different decades of the nineteenth century. Each contributor tackles a particular sensory system, but together the contributions suggest how the flâneur renders the city a sensuous place, how urban sensations anchor the flâneur onto the streets where he is bathed in the multitude of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches. Flânerie was a multisensory practice in the nineteenth-century city, as it remains today, though the modalities of intersensorial experience have changed. Sensory and social transformations go hand in hand. By making sense of the flâneur/flâneuse, we get a better feeling for social class, race and gender conventions, industrialization and urbanization, global travel and colonialism, private and public space, concepts of time and space. The flâneur/flâneuse's peripatetic encounters with the city across the decades may go in different directions, but the contributions to the special number anticipate his/her footsteps and attempt to pave a way forward for a more sensual theory of modernity.

Notes

- ¹ David Howes defines the 'sensual turn' and coins the term in his influential book *Sensual Relations* (2003: 29, 235–36), and again in the inaugural issue of *Sense and Society* (Howes, 2006: 114–15). In that issue, the editors refer to the 'emergent field of sensory studies'.
- ² Keith Tester acknowledged that 'flânerie might be about more than just looking' (18) in the introduction to his influential edited volume *The Flâneur* (1994).
- ³ The sensual turn may be shaping social sciences in France as well, as Le Breton (2000), Thomas (2007), and Nuvolati (2009) suggest.
- ⁴ For more on the sensual wealth of the Grands Boulevards, see Hahn, 2006 and 2009.
- ⁵ 'Flânerie was therefore always as much mythic as it was actual', wrote Rob Shields (in Tester, 1994: 62).
- ⁶ I thank Pauline de Tholozany for drawing my attention to this ambiguity in Balzacian type.

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