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ISP “The Stance of the Flâneuse”

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WOMEN IN CITIES & THE ART OF THE FLÂNEUSE

INTRODUCTION:

Women in the city have always questioned, and continue to question, their right to mobility and the public sphere. To wander and have freedom within urban space allows women to wonder, create questions, incubate passions, and act upon them, affecting the world around them. A fascinating product of this human inevitability is the ability to capture this metaphorical conversation on film. Throughout this essay I hope to explore what it means to be a woman in urban space as well as examine the figure of the female *flâneuse* and the translation of that experience into art, primarily onto photographs and films.

HISTORICAL PREFACE:

There is no question that women have always existed in the city. The question is: *in what way have they had access to the city?* Pre-railways, or before the nineteenth century, free mobility for women was rather difficult. Travel in general was usually reserved for either elite upper class leisure or out of necessity, like the exchange of goods or seeking refuge. Social status had a lot to do whether or a woman would find herself on

the streets of a city. Take for example, in Paris, where the masculine term *flâneur* was born out of the pleasure of strolling among the arcades (shopping stalls)—women didn't have this freedom. You were either a *fille publique* (a streetwalker or prostitute) or a *femme honnête* (a respectable married woman who didn't wander) (Tiller 35). Since the birth of cities in the Western world, a woman's life was traditionally spent in the private sphere—at home with the kids.

Even as modern society was changing rapidly due to the industrial revolution, there weren't even public toilets for women until the late nineteenth century, and up until 1886, any woman wanderer could be locked up thanks to the Contagious Diseases Act (Gulliver). Nevertheless, there were a healthy number of working class women during Baudelaire's time in Paris (1821-1867). For example, women ran most of the stalls in the markets, and even at home they would sit on their street stoops, intervening in social control of their neighborhoods, which later Jane Jacobs would call the "eyes on the street" (Elkin 14). Even so, there are several aspects of this increasingly modernized society that allowed women more freedom in the city; the emergence of department stores, legal access to cafés, and bicycles all led to society's acceptance of women in the city (Gulliver & Tiller).

NEW WOMEN & PHOTOGRAPHY:

At the turn of the twentieth century the first "wave" of feminism birthed the suffragist movement—thousands of women marched on the streets in order to have a voice. During both World Wars, women found increasingly more independence while working the jobs the men had left behind, and the *nouvelle femme*, or "new woman"

phenomenon grew. Women were challenging the idea of separate spheres, and with that, demanded choice, education, careers, and access to the city.

Take, for example, influential photographer Dorothea Lange. In her youth, between 1905-1910, despite a limp from polio, she took on her New York persona, “walker in the city” and grew away from traditional home life (Gordon 23). At this time, “metropolitan modernity was beginning to blur the cultural lines between classes and ethnicities, by growing a commercial public culture” and curious teenage Lange was able to see it all (Gordon 27). In 1918, despite their parents’ warnings, Lange and her best friend decided to travel the US, based on the knowledge that rich girls in Europe at the time were taking premarriage *cultural tours* to compliment their formal education (Gordon 39).

In the early twentieth century, photography was still a relatively new and evolving art form, but for Lange, it was her passion even before she had even held a camera (Taylor). Generally (and this still echoes into present day), society gives men permission to pursue passions obsessively, but not women. For a young woman to leave home suddenly was rare and brave during this time—*especially* to pursue art. She was truly a courageous flâneuse, and we see this reflected in her stance:

When you enter into the visual world, detaching yourself from all the holds on you... it is a mental disengagement so that you live, for maybe two or three hours, as completely as possible a visual experience, where you feel that you have lost yourself, your identity. You are only an observer. (Taylor)

Best known for humanizing The Great Depression, her photograph *Migrant Mother* is one of the most iconic images in American history. She saw life as it really was and captured it on film. She got her start at the beginning of the “Golden Age of Photojournalism”—allowing folks at home to experience what was happening in the world without physically traveling there.

On the flipside, born during The Great Depression, there was another woman who spent most of her life taking photos in Chicago—the mysterious street photographer Vivian Maier. During her entire lifetime, she never showed her work to anyone. It was only after someone (Chicago collector John Maloof) randomly found a collection of her negatives in 2007 that the world was introduced to Maier. She was “someone who exists entirely in terms of what she saw” and her outsider life as a nanny permitted her to live the life of an observer (Maier 8-9).

When asked what she did in life, Maier responds in one of her home videos, “I’m sort of a spy” (Maloof). Very private and secretive, much of her life remains a lingering mystery, but in her photographs you feel that playfulness, like following a childlike discovery of the city. You do get a sense of a wandering detective when looking at her work—unknown moments caught in time. Maier lives on as a definitive example of *art for art’s sake*. Seeing the bizarreness of life, she captured urban moments of conflict, grief, sadness, joy, and absurdity, as well as forgotten people and objects. She was like a photojournalist without a network.

DANGEROUS WOMEN & THE CINEMA:

An even stronger form of “armchair tourism” was the growing popularity of motion pictures. The motion picture industry and the women’s movement, along with access to the city, go hand-in-hand. Women ran Hollywood just as the industry started to bloom. Known as the golden age of employment for women, from the 30s to the 50s, nearly forty percent of the film industry was run by women (Smyth 20). The majority of moviegoers were women in the beginning of the twentieth century, and as feministic film theorist Laura Mulvey proclaims, cinema-going was “the most important way in which women participated in the urban mass culture of the first half of this century” (Mulvey 10).

In the classic Jean-Luc Godard film *Vivre Sa Vie* (1962), main character Nana references going to the movie several times, which connects to her desire to be a literal woman of the streets in order to observe the public sphere. Cinema was a form of access to public space that women had never had before, or as visual arts researcher Giuliana Bruno puts it, “going to the cinema triggered a liberation of the woman’s gaze, enabling her to renegotiate, on a new terrain of intersubjectivity, the configuration of private/public (Russell 563).

With this new sense of independence and women’s new ability to gaze, and consequently think for themselves, there was an upset in society’s traditionally male-dominant narrative. In response to this, many of the most famous silent film era actresses were seen as dangerous and threatening. Referring to a dangerously sexual woman, the term “vamp” became popular thanks to the silent film era’s vampires like Musidora and Theda Bara (Tiller 32). During the 1940s, film noir surfaced and “the Hollywood *femme fatale* served as a physical embodiment of the anxiety men had in Post-War America over

the growing number of women entering the work force and leaving the confines of their current domesticated lives” (Tiller 29). They are usually overtly using their sexuality, still performing the *feminine masquerade* while also fitting into the role of the previously mentioned *fille publique*. As explained by Bruno:

The cinematic situation made it possible for the female to experience a form of *flânerie*, as film, triggered by a desire for loitering, offered the joy of watching while traveling. The ‘spectatrix’ could thus enter the world of the *flâneur* and derive its pleasure through filmic motions. We may see film spectatorship as providing access to the erotics of darkness and (urban) wandering denied to the female subject. (D’Souza and McDonough 21)

In this sense, our mobility as women can in some way be supplemented by watching films, no longer constrained to our physical bodies moving through life. This was a huge asset to the feminist movement of the twentieth century!

In 1977, at the height of the “second wave” of feminism, movie star Bette Davis acknowledged that women didn’t have much of a voice in contemporary Hollywood (Smyth 23). She reminisced, “Women owned Hollywood for twenty years, and we must not be bitter” (qtd. in Smyth 23). So what happened? Why is it taking so long for our perspective on female filmmakers to change? With this in mind, I’ll attempt to run parallels between a few *flâneuse*-like characters in different eras of cinema.

One of my favorite movies, *Roman Holiday* (1953), features a princess who runs away from her royal life for a day in order to roam around Rome. In many ways this story

is a metaphor for the modern woman's struggles to live and learn within urban space. At a time when women were questioning their traditional place in the private sphere, everyone could relate to Princess Ann's longing to get out on the streets. Looking back at her flânerial journey is much different in my current postmodernist stance than it would be for its original 1950s audience. As Mulvey points out:

Ways of seeing do not exist in a vacuum. The 'gaze', as many critics and theorists have argued convincingly, is a key element in the construction of modern subjectivity, filtering ways of understanding and ordering the surrounding world. While social and sexual factors outside the cinema affect its structures and conventions, the cinema has, reciprocally, played its part in streamlining, reinforcing and recycling them. (1)

Princess Ann's journey would seem to a 1950s audience as bold and daring, whereas we look at her journey now as a kind of sexist mishap, saved by the leading man. But if one looks closer, she becomes a metaphor for all that is good and stimulating about a city (*gemeinschaft*), and he becomes everything that is bad or constraining in urban life (*gesellschaft*). By exploring these elements, we can start to examine why we even long for the city (and public life) in the first place.

It's hard to find any modern analysis of the term *flâneuse* without the mention of director Agnes Varda's character Cléo in *Cléo from 5 to 7* (1962). In the first half of the film she fits into this vain feminine masquerade by expressing herself through shopping, giggling and crying seemingly at random. As men stare at her as she passes, Cléo is clearly an *object* to be looked at. In the second half of the film she starts to question her

role in the city, and becomes *one-who-looks*, an observer herself, living her life for herself and not others. A lot can happen in two hours!

While there are big metaphors to take away from *Roman Holiday* and *Cléo*, these undoubtedly are outdated versions of feminism. It's a restricting distraction to believe that this *be-seen* to the *seer* is the biggest revelation a woman can have in her life. In a way, it puts centuries of repressed blame on one woman's internal struggle for a life lived with more agency. A more relatable flâneuse for myself as a postmodern woman is born out of the film *Amélie* (2001) almost a half century later. This story revolves around an introverted and somewhat naïve Parisian woman who has to create a scavenger hunt in order to engage with a man she likes.

While there are lewd characters and emotional *femmes* trying to direct Amélie's path as she questions her loneliness and place in life, we follow her journey as a person who is naturally curious about the world around her. She finds solace in wandering the streets of Paris, observing others, and she only becomes a person with agency after witnessing what her actions can do for a lonely stranger. It's her journey from *flâneuse* to *flâneuse-in-action* that really interests me. Born out of the freedom women felt in modernity, she takes an outdated standpoint, questions her role as an observer, and *makes something* out of it.

THE MODERN FLÂNEUSE:

The argument for the existence of the female *flâneuse* didn't really emerge until the mid-twentieth century, or during the second "wave" of feminism. One of the most powerful arguments for why a flâneur is typically male, is his ability to be unseen.

Women still struggle on the streets today to be *unseen*—as we are often subject to being looked at as objects, catcalled, and harassed. Believe it or not, even dining alone is still viewed as a revolutionary act for a woman—so much so that even the New York Times feels like they have to publish an article about it (this year!) called “On Eating Alone in Paris” (Rosenbloom). As Catherine Russell mentions in her essay “Parallax Historiography: The Flâneuse as Cyberfeminist”, “the flâneuse is a figure who may well be fictional, who may even be a parodic figure, but is above all a projection of feminism onto a history of oppression” (Russell 564).

Arguably one of the most prominent modern-day authors to write about the flâneuse figure is Lauren Elkin. In her book, *Flâneuse: Women Walk in the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice, and London* (2017), she creates comparisons between her life as a city wanderer to flâneuse women writers and artists. She has a call-to-action for women to walk in cities, saying, “a culture that does not walk is bad for women. It makes a kind of authoritarian sense; a woman who doesn’t wonder – what it all adds up to, what her needs are, if they’re being met – won’t wander off from the family”.

Even though Elkin’s book is a recent publication, and offers valuable insight into how flânerie relates to women as artists, I would argue that her message is a somewhat passive, even old-fashioned way to think about flânerie. My hope is that there is a new, more engaged and motivated version of the flâneuse that comes out of this rebirth. Just like the artists I’m referencing, who may start out as this ostensibly passive image of a ladylike observer, they eventually become fierce seers and iconic truth-tellers, creating a revolution of gender and artist. In the twentieth century, the combination of new

technology and feminism was a perfect storm for the flâneuse writer and artist. Now we must move on.

It's impossible to talk about women in urban space without thinking of the fiery writer and activist, Jane Jacobs (1916-2006). She spent most of her life as a flâneuse in New York city. In regards to her earlier years in the city, "I didn't know where I was most of the time," she'd say, "but it fascinated me. It was wonderful. Every place I came out I was amazed" (Kanigel 65). Jacobs wrote seven books, but one of them in particular, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), has stood the test of time and is still considered one of the most influential books on how people see cities and what we expect of them (Kanigel 4).

Jacobs has helped multiple generations see the city through new eyes, which can be connected to a flâneurial term for *rasa*, the "first gaze", or seeing the city like a child, uncompromised by prejudices or judgments (Gleber 85). There was a defining moment in young Jacobs' life, when her father turned her attention to an oak tree in their yard, asking her "What is its purpose?" (Kanigel 10). From an early age she was taught to be become a detective of the world around her and ask the questions that no one else was asking. This is one of the first steps to becoming a flâneuse, but I believe that the transformation is incomplete without actually *acting* on ones observations.

Much of my own experience in walking in cities has undoubtedly been during my nomadic travels. It's personally shocking how many times I got asked why I was traveling alone—"But what about your family? Where is your husband?" With tourism at an all-time high and the addition of Internet access, our exposure to different cities all

over the world is extraordinary. While it's a nice thought that one can tour the world's cities from one's armchair (in the form of news or art—or even new VR technology), it's not getting the fully lived experience of using all five senses, not to mention one's actual influence or ripple-effect of existing (getting those people to ask those questions!). However, without ever stopping to ask ourselves *why* we see what we see, we risk wasting an opportunity for positive growth, and instead put ourselves at risk of detrimental societal (and earthly) decay. As world-traveler and author Nicos Hadjicostis describes in his philosophy of travel, “ownership” needs to be re-thought, we own our body as much as we own the earth (12)—and in that sense, everyone has the right to any part of it.

If it's one thing we can learn from Jacobs' observations, it's that living things never stay the same—they are in a constant state of growth and change. She asks us to think, “what life would be like if all we had to do was to maintain things as they already are, living passively off the creativity of the past. In such a utopia, life would be intolerably boring. Sheer maintenance and well-worn routines are drags, especially if there is no relief from them” (qtd. in Kanigel 11). It's one thing to take a photo or write a social media post out of ritual, but quite another to create something with new eyes, question, and grow.

Urban wandering, or travel as Hadjicostis writes, “more than any other activity cultivates *the art of asking questions*” (85). First and foremost, a flâneuse needs to love the city. I propose a more modern way to look at it: that yes, one must first observe and ask questions, but then you act—whether that be with art or policies. It doesn't matter through which medium, but you cannot be a true flâneuse unless you produce and express

what your observations mean to you. Perhaps this is the modern *flanqueur*, a gender-neutral artist of the future.

It isn't enough to travel, to wander a city, to take a ritualistic photo, or spend time in public alone. In my eyes, women's access to the city is no longer a personal fight, but is now our time to show what that access can create. Whereas the women who ran Hollywood in the early twentieth century are all too commonly a forgotten past, it's only now in the twenty-first century that female filmmakers are getting recognition. Since the beginning of the academy awards in 1929, it took eighty years for a woman director to win an Oscar. Modern directors like Sofia Coppola and Haifaa al-Mansour feature female *flâneuse* characters in their films and the world (I hope) is starting to take notice. But really, it's up to us to as artists to get our work out there.

In the case of Vivian Maier, “She didn't defend herself as an artist. She just did the work,” one of the curators of her work points out, “but I don't feel her as secondary, when I look at the pictures, I always feel something primary” (Maloof). Maier was lonely, misunderstood, and on the brink of being completely forgotten. While beneficial for the first stage of artistry, you can't be a *flâneuse* every moment of your life. Too much of that detached reality cuts you off from your humanness. It's a delicate balance between the public and private spheres, and between art and reality. To go back to the ripple-effect of your existence, we don't live in a vacuum. As I mentioned before, the final stage of *flânerie* should be to act on those observations by whatever means necessary—writing, filmmaking, photography, politics, activism, poetry, scientific research, business, or whatever your pen of choice may be. As Carl Jung offered this advice to fellow psychologists a century ago:

The researcher ought to hang up exact science and put away the scholar's gown, to say farewell to his study, and wander with human heart through the world, through the horror of prisons, madhouses, and hospitals, through drab suburban pubs, in brothels, and gambling dens, through the salons of elegant society, the stock exchanges, the socialist meetings, the churches, the revivals and ecstasies of the sects, to experience love, hate, and passion in every form in one's body. (qtd. in Hadjicostis 42)

Change that "he" to a "she" and replace the word "researcher" with "flâneuse" and you've got a powerful message for women—encounter all you can encounter and don't let anything get in your way.

CONCLUSION:

Jane Jacobs at one point interviewed the nation's first poet laureate, Joseph Auslander, in which she wrote, "It is those out of tune with the world who are called the dreamers... our hope is in the poets. It is the poets who see beauty in the machine age, and it is the poets who grant rescue from the machines" (Kanigel 44). As cities continue to be the apex of human creation, all of us women can be poets born of these streets, and I believe we have a responsibility to take what generations did before us and take it further.

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