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The *flâneur* in his territory(ies): from modern to contemporary milieus

Pedro Costa, José Luis Saldanha, Ricardo Lopes and Nuno Rodrigues

You want to know why I hate you?
Well I'll try and explain
You remember that day in Paris
When we wandered through the rain [...]

And in the road before us
Stood a weary greyish man
Who held a child upon his back
A small boy by the hand
The three of them were dressed in rags
And thinner than the air
And all six eyes stared fixedly on you

The father's eyes said "beautiful!
How beautiful you are!"
The boy's eyes said
"How beautiful!
She shimmers like a star!"
The child's eyes uttered nothing
But a mute and utter joy
And filled my heart with shame for us
At the way we are

I turned to look at you
To read my thoughts upon your face
And gazed so deep into your eyes
So beautiful and strange
Until you spoke
And showed me understanding is a dream
"I hate these people staring
Make them go away from me!"

"How beautiful you are", The Cure

The way *The Cure* reinterprets Baudelaire's "*petit poème en prose*" "The Eyes of the Poor", included in his "Le Spleen de Paris", allows us to introduce the subject we propose for this text: to question the territory(ies) and the territoriality of the *flâneur* concept in contemporary times. Being the romantic and romanticized idea of *flâneur* a construction of modernity, which is often represented by an idle figure, ready for a stroll through the city (almost always, through the centre of the city...), and highly marked out by class, gender, and often by an overt and even ostentatious attitude or pose, what sense will it make to a *flanêrie* which seems gradually democratized and potentially available to (almost) everybody, in cities increasingly fluid, diversified and

spatially complex as those of today? In which territories could and would the contemporary *flâneurs* want to wander? Which is the space to practice the idleness (*otium*) in a life that is doubly submerged by the lack of time and by the sphere of business (*nec otium*)? To what extent would or could *flânerie* continue to be a result of a clear intentionality? To what extent would contemporary *flâneurs* want to dissipate in the crowd and to pass more and more unnoticed in their drifts through the city? And to what extent would the outcomes of this *flânerie* in present-day territories be easily shared and assimilated by others, in a world marked by mediation and legitimation processes which are increasingly complex and fluid, and where, at its limit, each one of us is left wandering in a bubble more and more particular and specific to each one, determined by the multiplicity of these conditioning mechanisms, and so that therefore our *flânerie* in the city may be no more than an opportunity for the expression of our “individuation” (Remy and Voyé, 1992) and for the individual awareness of the city that is around each one of us?

The grounds of the *flâneur's* (un)concerned observation

We state the obvious: the *flâneur* is a brainchild of the Industrial Revolution and the city it issues - not of those that through the last century-and-a-half applied the expression to a certain way of strolling through urban places. The verb “*flâner*” precedes the nineteenth century, but its cultural, literary and philosophical usage since Baudelaire applies to the modern town “*flâneur*”, and quite especially, in the context of the universal reference in the arts and literature of that age: Paris. The 1959 *Petit Larousse* Encyclopedic Dictionary tells us that the verb draws from old Scandinavian, expounding it thus: “*Errer sans bût, en s’arrêtant souvent pour regarder : flâner sur les boulevards.// Perdre son temps*”.

Burgh and *boulevard* also have no Latin root, but it is in France that the «bourgeoisie» and the tree-lined avenue would find their epitome. «Burgh» draws from Old English, meaning «fortified settlement» or «fort». «Boulevard», however, draws from the Middle Dutch (dialectal group also called *Diets*, or *Dietsch*, in use until the end of the Middle Ages) word *bolwerc*, corresponding to the polygonal bastions (named «baluartes» in Portuguese) in the ramparts encompassing cities. With the closing of

the eighteenth century and through the nineteenth century, the growth of these industrialized towns and the numbers of their inhabitants (and the advancement of war tactics) would render these walled defences useless, while also straggling the expanse of the cities. It is precisely in the locations which had been occupied by the (now demolished) battlements – and *non aedificandi* grounds surrounding them – that the new avenues would be lain out, along with the adjoining quarters. A remarkable case is Vienna's *Ring*, but we also find these in smaller scale situations as in the elegant blocks built where the outer bulwarked battlement of Castelo Sforza, in Milan, had been. In the *Boulevard* entry in the Webster Comprehensive Dictionary, we find the definition: "*Originally, a rampart; hence, a street lain out on the site of former ramparts*".

It is not chance that the multiple group of technological innovations which started in the Enlightenment deserved the classification of «revolution», their impact reaching far beyond industrial aspects. Society would be changed irreversibly, with the gradual, – and at a different pace, according to each country – replacement of the clergy-nobility-people triad by a capitalist bourgeoisie/working-class two-pronged structure. This industrial bourgeoisie would engage in social gatherings in the public space – to see and be seen – with less compunction, under shapes of coexistence stranger to the oligarchical regime preceding it.

The modern town will then become the stage for new manifestations and expressions, individual or collective, and it is in the bourgeois class that the best conditions for individual freedom were to be found – as in the *flâneur*. To begin with, strolling and observing the urban life demands requirements beyond the people's grasp: **time** and **leisure**. Therefore, modern towns and their public space will meet the arrival of new places for engagement which previously did not exist: public gardens, opera houses, museums, railway stations – and *boulevards*. And since, according to the *Larousse*, "*boulevardier*" ("*A Paris, personne qui fréquentait les Grands Boulevards//Qui a le caractère particulier aux théâtres, aux cafés, aux journaux, etc.*") is a synonym for *flâneur*, the site of action of this actor of the modern city becomes immediately clear.

In Portugal, the timid industrialization would also be a late one, but still these stages of modern life are to be found, especially in the capital: the *Passeio Público* (the *Public Walk* – soon to be followed by the *Estrela Garden*), the *Chiado* and the São Carlos Theatre, the *Janelas Verdes* Museum, the *Rossio* railway station – and also in the *Liberdade* Avenue, which project earned the censure of Ramalho Ortigão in 1889, in *As Farpas* (Tome VII – *The Capital* – our translation):

“The boulevard project for the walk from Rossio to Campo Grande is of a saddening pretentious conception. [...] It serves no other purpose than to spread the bad habits of the café and the trottoir, the love of ostentation, leisure, boulevardism, cocottism, or the cheap luxury of the toilette.”

Other French words of interest

Flânerie and *voyeurism* do not quite match, as the latter works undercover, since it is a necessary condition that the *voyeur* not be seen (under pain of not seeing what he wishes to see...) – while the *flâneur* acts incognito, but not deliberately in hiding. What we may truly assume is the condition of (un)concern in this leisurely observation – the Portuguese word for leisure, *ócio*, drawing from the Latin word *otium* (contrary to *negotium*, or *negócio*, meaning *business* in Portuguese) – of the city and its crowd. He savours the setting in an uncommitted fashion, without engaging in it, preferring an overhanging, outside, point of view, in the way of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s 1914-1916 preparatory book-notes for his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus: The ordinary point of view sees objects, as it were, from in between them, the view sub specie aeternitatis from outside* – which would imply that “any object could become a work of art when contemplated from the absolute point of view” (Wijdeveld, 2000, p.167).

In these times, Paris’s cultural and artistic primacy in the western world that it had come into in the eighteenth century increased, but it was also the centre for studies in planning, designing and building techniques, at the *École royale des ponts et chaussées* created in 1747 by Daniel-Charles Trudaine. That was the school attended by Lisbon-born engineer Frederico Ressano Garcia (1847-1911), who was to mark the Portuguese capital indelibly with the Restauradores Square - Liberdade Avenue - Marquês de Pombal Circle - Fontes Pereira de Melo Avenue - Saldanha Circle - República Avenue axis plan.

Infrastructure, also the object of research in civil engineering (which detaches from military engineering), is gracefully presented in «A Cidade e as Serras» (the City and the Mountain-Chains), by Eça de Queiroz - probably the writer's most important work published posthumously (a year after his death), under a revision completed by Ramalho Ortigão. We must point out that the «mountain-chains» figure in the plural form, but *city*, there could be none other than the French capital where Eça was to die, on 16 August 1900 (Eça, pgs. 354-355 – our translation):

“By a truly natural conclusion, the idea of civilization, for Jacinto, would not separate from the image of the city, an enormous city, with all its vast organs powerfully working. Nor did this supercivilized friend of mine acknowledge that away from stores served by three thousand clerks; away from markets where the orchards and estates of thirty provinces are poured; away from the banks where universal gold glitters; and from factories avidly smoking, avidly inventing; from crammed libraries, cracking, with the paperwork of centuries; from deep miles of streets, crossed, underneath and overhead, by telegraph lines, telephone lines, gas pipes, stool lines; and from the boisterous line of omnibus, trams, carts, bikes, jalopies, luxury spans (...) the 19th. Century man might taste, fully, the delight of living!

(...) And in the 202, when he considered around him, in the dense masses of the Paris dwellings, two million beings puffing in the work of civilization (to maintain in nature the domination of all Jacintos!) he felt a quiet, a repose, a warmth, comparable only to the pilgrim, who, while crossing the desert, rises on his dromedary, and sees the long cue of the marching caravan, full of lights and weapons...”

Dandies and Fops...

Most «continental» cities in the nineteenth century would follow the grid plan of the classical world, according to Hippodamus (of which the *haussmanian* Paris is paradigmatic), in which at a glance we may sweep with the view hundreds or thousands of metres. However, the British and the Germans resisted this regular (and sometimes gridded) approach of strong visual impact and wide breadth, preferring less geometrically affirmed solutions, so that in London and Berlin (as in *Unter den Linden*, or “beneath the linden” Avenue, all the way to the Tiergarten) the avenues run through parks and gardens, while in the denser urban fabric we find the *crescent*, *circle* and *oval*, rooted on curvilinear forms that provide for a dynamic ongoing revelation of urban space. We remark anyway that the Germans call the sensationalist “yellow press”: *boulevardpresse*...

In the United States, the grid is embraced, either because the country grew onto vast territories previously occupied by the French and Spanish (who had been laying out right-angled patterns in the Renaissance model ever since Felipe II's *Ordenanzas*); or because of the strong bonds with the French from the outset of the independence of the USA. The country's capital itself was designed by Frenchman Pierre ("Peter") Charles L'Enfant, who had migrated to America to serve as a military engineer during the War of Independence under his kinsman Major General Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette. Therefore, we are to find *boulevards* from Washington D.C., through *Paris, Texas*, all the way to Los Angeles - *until the Sun comes up over Santa Monica Boulevard...*

The *flâneur* diffuses across the United States (especially on the East Coast) and perambulates through the streets of London, where he combines with more exuberant expressions of those that *want to see*, while still *wanting to be seen*: the *dandies* and *fops*, of which the charismatic writer Oscar Wilde set a fine example, and of whom Jorge Luís Borges wrote: *En el año final del siglo XIX murieron en París dos hombres de genio, Eça de Queirós y Oscar Wilde. Que yo sepa, nunca se conocieron, pero se hubieran entendido admirablemente.* This derivation of the saunterer of the modern city shares several props with the *flâneur*, such as the requisite hat and *rattan* walking-cane. In *The Hunting of the Snark*, by Lewis Carroll, one of the crew is a *broker* (*notary* in the 2003 Portuguese edition by Assírio & Alvim), who is depicted with a bowler hat and a light cane in hand, in the second and sixth original figures (by Henry Holliday) that accompany the text, which Martin Gardner (1962, pgs. 40- 41) comments thus:

"The broker is holding his walking cane so that the handle touches his lips. I am indebted to Leigh Mercer, of London, for informing me of the fact that this practice, known as cane sucking, was a common affectation of Victorian fops. London dandies, with canes at their lips, are depicted in many cartoons of the time" (e.g., see Punch, Volume 66, 1874, page 141).

Given the affinity between both countries, we could not help including an excerpt of Sting's "Englishman in New York":

"See me walking down Fifth Avenue
A walking cane here at my side
I take it everywhere I walk
I'm an Englishman in New York".

The *dérive(s)* of contemporary *flâneur*

Among the crowd and facing a multiplicity of “centres and boulevards”, either physical or virtual, the contemporary *flâneur* wanders. Through the cores of the “consolidated city”, covered with many layers of history and other stories, which are increasingly accessible to ordinary people, at all latitudes of the globe; but also through the informal or self-constructed city that shapes most of the contemporary “urban” world’s peripheries; or through the city without a centre that extends itself without end to the horizon... A more democratized *flâneur*’s figure that, at its limit, could be any individual who in the search, even subtle, for his individuality, wishes to see and to be seen. Those from the boulevards, with their idle and modern poses of seeing, may not have disappeared, but the spaces where they move have changed and diversified. The social and economic stratification and commodification of traditional public space and of society in general led to the emergence of other spheres of action and exhibition, available for different publics and *flâneurs*. From the main shopping centres to the streets of the world cities’ peripheries, from the “icon-museum” to the slum, passing by the digital social networks, such as *Twitter* or *Facebook*, the spaces and the opportunities for an idle (but interested...) observer are multiplied on a large scale as well as the rapidity with which they proceed.

The signs and symbols also have changed and diversified. Each individual experience, more or less “urban”, more or less “transgressive” or “liminal”, of *flânerie* indelibly marks the way the territory is perceived by the *flâneur*, and how that symbolic knowledge is embodied in the collective image and identity of the city. Each *flâneur*, with his own and individual way of decoding the city, contributes to the legitimization and to the putting on the map of new streets, new neighbourhoods, new experiences, new people. He is a *gatekeeper*, one that contributes with his own cosmopolitanism and openness to the symbolic and affective production of the city. And gradually, the margins (geographical, social, cultural, ethnic, gender) may become central in the city and may make the city, in its multiplicity, central for their everyday experiences. In a world where it is not only in Paris that fashion is dictated, and where the walking stick and the bowler hat feature no more (or not just...) the pose for *la dérive*, other symbols emerge, more or less codified, more or less accessible to all and each one of us, crossing the different layers that make contemporary society and *flâneurs*: indistinguishable individuals in the crowd.

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