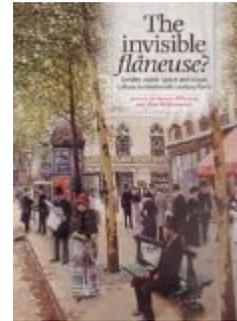


Aruna D'Souza, Tom McDonough, eds. *The Invisible Flâneuse?: Gender, Public Space and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008. 224 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7190-7942-9.

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Revisiting the “Flâneur” as a Viable Theoretical Construct of Urbanity

Twenty years after the publication of Janet Wolff’s seminal article, “The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity,” an international group of eleven scholars and artists have produced a collection of essays that contributes fresh new insights on the construction of Parisian modernity.[1] Comprised of twelve chapters, this anthology seeks to offer “a new model for understanding women’s experience of public space” that can be applied “both within and outside the discipline” of art history (pp. 1-2). To this end, they question the degree to which an ideology of separate spheres influenced and found expression in representations of women in the French capital. How did women gain visual access to what had traditionally been coded as privileged sites of white, bourgeois masculinity? What cultural practices or urban spaces threatened or disrupted presumably fixed gender roles? Through an examination of underutilized historical sources, the individual contributors challenge earlier interpretations that associated modernity with the masculine, public world of the bourgeois stroller or flâneur. Rather, they convincingly demonstrate that urban spectatorship was a shared experience of both men and women in the fin-de-siècle.

The first chapter provides an overview of the state of scholarship beginning with Wolff’s arguments about women’s visibility in the modern city. Influencing research in sociology, urban studies, and history, Wolff’s textual criticism revealed how gender biases embedded within early accounts of modernity colored con-

temporary understandings of what life was like in mid-nineteenth-century Paris. Central to her analysis was the flâneur, a historically specific Parisian type that emerged alongside and witnessed the psychological and social transformations accompanying modernization. The flâneur represented an active, presumably objective, observer of the urban scene as evidenced by the physiognomy’s gender (male), class (bourgeois), and social attributes (mobility and aloofness being primary). Wolff argued that in their identification with the flâneur, French intellectuals reaffirmed and perpetuated a patriarchal vision of Parisian life within their works, thereby eliminating recognition of a feminine counterpart to the flâneur in the public sphere.

In response to Wolff’s claim that a “strict division” of public and private life made the existence of a respectable, public bourgeoisie literally and figuratively “impossible,” several different schools of thought have emerged subsequently to debate the meaning and importance of the flâneur for studies of nineteenth-century French visual culture.[2] Taking their cue from Griselda Pollock, who extended Wolff’s critique to the field of art history, some scholars suggest that the flâneur’s command of “the gaze,” a visual field designated for men only, denied women agency as viewing subjects.[3] Borrowed from film critic Laura Mulvey’s work on the cinema, the analytical construct of “the gaze” represents a position of power that, as Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson states, “begins in the activity of following women”(p. 72).

Rather than theorize the flâneur as “an instantiation of patriarchal power, positioning women as the objects of an erotic and covetous look” (p. 10), others working within an alternate feminist theoretical framework point to women’s occupation of urban spaces in a consumer-oriented society as evidence of female “flânerie.” The value of this essay collection lies in its ability to bring these various approaches together within an interdisciplinary framework that complicates, yet expands, contemporary understandings of the dynamic interplay between material, cultural, and sexual forces within the modern city.

A general consensus on the existence of female spectatorship emerges within the collection, although there is some disagreement on the question of causality. Playing on the notion of a dialectics of seeing and being seen, chapter 4 explores how the veil as a feminine accessory of the Second Empire mediated women’s experiences of urban renewal. Functioning as an object of fashion and a protective cover, the veil reinforced on a symbolic and material level the spatial and physical construction of gender and class lines associated with Napoleon III’s reconstruction of Paris. Paradoxically, as the veil standardized the bourgeoisie’s appearance and defined the parameters of her vision, it expanded her range of sight and movement within the city. Female flânerie became possible, Marni Kessler suggests, when veiled women could safely navigate through, and thus apprehend, the city without risking their respectability or their health.

Conversely, chapter 8 demonstrates how Parisian commerce served as a catalyst for the construction of a modern femininity oftentimes associated with the New Woman. Commercial posters encouraged female viewers to identify with idealized images of women as confident, self-aware participants in city life. In her study of fin-de-siècle advertisements, Ruth Iskin focuses on the sexually charged boulevards and stores where women acted as both the subject and object of consumption. Depictions of bourgeois shoppers and working-class laundresses manipulating “the gaze” of boulevardiers, as well as appropriating it for themselves, illustrate the important role consumer culture played in creating a set of conditions that encouraged men and women to deploy “gendered strategies” in their negotiations of the city’s social spaces (p. 121).

The notion that flânerie constituted an urban practice, that was not exclusive to any one sex or class, is reaffirmed by chapter 7’s investigation of illustrated magazines. While an increase in physical mobility and eco-

omic agency certainly contributed to women’s wider engagement with their environs, Tom Gretton argues that the rise of the modern press broke down real and imagined barriers within French culture by encouraging readers to adopt an intertextual position of neutrality. The metropolitan spectator, as Gretton demonstrates, was not so much a person as a subject position that could anonymously inhabit the streets as well as the pages of a journal. Building on historian Vanessa Schwartz’s claim that “The flâneur is not so much a person as flânerie is a positionality of power—one through which the spectator assumes the position of being able to be part of the spectacle and yet command it at the same time,” Gretton broadens our interpretation of flânerie and simultaneously offers a plausible explanation for why the flâneur as a distinct physiognomic type lost its cultural relevancy by the twentieth century.[4]

A second consideration addressed in this collection concerns why some spaces were more sexually charged than others when it came to depicting women’s public presence. This question is taken up by Greg Thomas and Aruna D’Souza, who examine the flâneur-artist’s documentary, yet casual, gaze of Paris’s numerous parks and department stores. Thomas’s comparative analysis of Impressionist paintings by Édouard Manet, Berthe Morisot, and Mary Cassatt in chapter 3 reveals that male and female painters represented parks from opposing vantage points, choosing to interpret the display of bourgeois leisure as either a public or private experience. Although the images’ subjects and visual frames of reference expressed a gendered perspective of these sites, they illustrated a desire on the part of female Impressionist painters to socially engage in more public arenas. Paradoxically, D’Souza investigates why male artists avoided *les grands magasins* as a subject of their larger project, “the painting of modern life,” in chapter 9. She suggests that uneasiness about the effects of capitalism on bourgeois masculinity led the flâneur-artist to impose boundaries, both spatial and visual, between himself and the feminine world of shopping. Unlike middle-class women whose access to the city expanded with modernization, bourgeois males maintained a distance from the seductive forces of consumption, documenting the growth of modern consumerism as an outsider looking in.

While Paris’s transformation into a fashion, shopping, and pleasure capital contributed to female flânerie, chapter 5 demonstrates that territorial expansion of the French empire concomitantly challenged the flâneur’s gaze upon which his masculine authority rested. Building on Ferguson’s claim that the flâneur became a “fig-

ure of exile” (p. 67) in the post-1848 era, Ting Chang explores how French art connoisseurs and critics dealt with feelings of loss, displacement, and disorientation. The flâneur’s internal struggle between wanting to be immersed and wanting to escape everyday life found expression in travel logs, etchings, and in the collection of objets d’art. In her reconstruction of Théodore Duret, Emile Guimet, and Henri Cernuschi’s experiences in Asia, Chang argues that Parisian flâneurs abroad deployed writing and art collecting as strategies to counter a perceived crisis of masculinity. Chang extends Gretton’s reconceptualization of the flâneur by calling into question the very stability of the flâneur as a representational figure and fixed identity by the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

The sweeping coverage of this text is one of its greatest strengths. Scholars of the nineteenth century, especially those who specialize in art, gender, and cultural history, will appreciate its application of the flâneur/flâneuse paradigm to a larger set of issues related to urbanization, imperialism, and mass consumer culture. Collectively, the articles enrich already established narratives of metropolitan sexual encounters, class tensions, and interactions between the metropole and the colonies. Its emphasis on visibility as a central element in the development of a modern consciousness offers an alternative model for thinking about the causes and effects of spatial transformations on the individual over time. The deep textual and visual analyses (e.g., magazines, posters, and fashion plates) undertaken in these studies successfully illustrate that urban living corresponded with an intense awareness of self. However, the assertion that a critical engagement with one’s surroundings became a feature of the urban experience leaves traditional assumptions about class intact. The historical subjects encountered here, as active consumers or gentile bystanders of Haussmannization, seem to typify the metropolitan type who, described by the nineteenth-century sociologist Georg Simmel, “reacts with his head instead of his heart.”[5] This is borne out by the source material that, while seemingly “popular,” was mostly produced for and consumed by members of the bourgeoisie who possessed the capital and leisure time to shop, travel, and read. An exploration into how the working classes experienced and negotiated social interactions within urban spaces would complement and extend the work begun here. Tom McDonough’s article on class tensions within an increasingly anonymous urban center is an excellent case in point. In addition to investigating how the bourgeoisie interpreted and responded to the De-

cember 1844 crime wave, chapter 10 could broaden the reader’s perspective of this historical moment by including counter-narratives produced by the very class of people blamed for such activities. A more inclusive and nuanced reading of these night-time attacks would present a dynamic portrait of Paris on the brink of revolution.

As an edited volume of papers given at the 2001 Conference of the College Art Association, the anthology lacks an organizational framework that would otherwise illuminate the relationship between the selected articles. The inclusion of two creative writing pieces by contemporary artists Simon Leung and Helen Scalway seems methodologically out of place given the predominance of art historical research. However, an editorial attempt to bridge the past with the present succeeds in the afterword where it did not in chapters 6 and 11. Here, Linda Nochlin responds to Janet Wolff’s call in chapter 2 to destabilize understandings of “the city” and “public” so that one takes into account “the dark silences” that “haunt” readings of modernity (p. 28). Citing memorials designed by contemporary female artists and architects, Nochlin argues that the collective experience of women’s marginalization within the city has produced a distinctly feminine and visible mark on the urban landscape. Rather than resolving the conundrum of female flânerie, Nochlin leaves the debate open. Whether one chooses to see women’s public engagement as inherently different from their male sexual counterpart’s or to see women’s exclusion as symptomatic of a larger narrative blind spot in documenting life in the city is still left to interpretation.

Notes

[1]. Janet Wolff, “The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 2, no. 3 (1985): 37-46.

[2]. Wolff, *Feminine Sentences* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 47.

[3]. Griselda Pollock, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), 50-90.

[4]. Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 10.

[5]. Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” repr. in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. and ed. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950), 410.

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