

# The Cyberflâneur in the Age of Digital Technology

Roseanne Ganley

University of Essex

---

## **Abstract**

This essay discusses our relationship with the flâneur in a socio-historical context, considering new realms of possibility in the age of digital technology, with the help of critics such as Lauren Elkin, Rebecca Solnit, and Evgeny Morozov. It will, furthermore, pose questions about its future credibility, asking if it has the potential, to move with the times, and be redefined as the cyberflâneur from an ungendered perspective. In the age of hyper-surveillance, we are being watched all over the world. We are participating in the sharing and storing of information, creating a cyberspace that exists beyond reality.

**Keywords:** Digital Technology, Cyberflâneur, Cyberspace, Surveillance

## **Essay**

In a post-modern world dominated by technology our attention has turned to the aesthetic experiences our digital screens can offer us. Our zombie-like presence in the realm of the digital era has, however, affected our ability to engage with the natural world, the city streets and other passers-by. Digital technology has influenced the emergence of the cyberflâneur, which is “the flâneur in cyberspace, a fast-forward flâneur, a net flâneur or a virtual flâneur” (Cutting Edge Women’s Research Group, 2000, 93). The flâneur is already nostalgic of its role of understanding place and indulging itself in the cultural and sociological history of its existence. But, with the ever-increasing exposure of information online, we can now, instead, avoid the outside world. In *The Encyclopaedia of Trouble and Spaciousness*, urban wanderer Rebecca Solnit acknowledges the phenomenon that to understand a place and how it exists geographically is to engage with the “braided narratives” (Solnit, 2014, 1) of our time. Have we destroyed our own aesthetic experiences of the spaces we inhabit? Or has digital technology provided us with new ways of seeing? By

discussing some contemporary perspectives of the flâneur, to imagining its rebirth in a post-humanist setting, we can grasp a better understanding of its origins and importance in a literary context where digital technologies are blurring the distinctions between natural and urban spaces.

The term flâneur originated from the French verb flâner, meaning to stroll or loiter. The flâneur as a socio-cultural figure of modernity was first brought into being by Charles Baudelaire, and was described as “an anxious wanderer, lost and terrified, at constant risk of encountering the grotesque and Gothic dwellers at the heart of the maze [of London.]” (Ridenhour, 2013, 80). Inspired by Edgar Allan Poe’s story *The Man of the Crowd* (1840), Baudelaire concluded the invention of a “new urban type, an isolated and estranged figure who is both a man of the crowd and a detached observer of it and, as such, the avatar of the modern city” (Coverley, 2013, 80). To redefine the flâneur in the present day, according to Deborah Parsons, is firstly to “acknowledge its related but distinct uses as a conceptual term and as a socio-historical phenomenon, it is to clarify a term which is currently at once too vague and too exclusive” (Parsons, 2003, 9). Issues still arise as to the assumption of the flâneur (Wrigley, 2014, 327). Women wanderers however were more often known to be prostitutes, widows or murder victims and were given the impression that they were never allowed to stroll alone in the city.

In the age of robotics, self-service machines and multi-functional phones, it has become apparent that digital technologies are blurring the distinctions between natural and urban spaces. As our landscape faces the disastrous consequences of an Anthropocentric world that is ever increasingly dominated by humans, to be a flâneur in the present day is, as Lash refers to it, to “stroll, or better stagger, among the ruins of dead landscapes, cityscapes, ‘culture-scapes’” (Lash, 1998, 311). In his article ‘Being after time: Towards a politics of melancholy’ Lash goes on to define our own human subjectivities existing only as “points or nodes in a network” (313) in the post-narrative age of information. We have discarded our own bodily connections to the outside world and are now in the age of “hyper surveillance, in which the past, digitised and stored, is available all of the time” (313). Our vision is perpetrated through the eye of the digital screen or lens. Digital technology has invaded our privacy and deferred the meaning of being and the self. Consequently, all that is left is a body that “roams the abstract spheres of cyberspace today” (Hartmann, 2004, 112) disengaged and cut off from its surroundings. It can be argued however, that the cyberflâneur can adopt new ways

of redefining itself with the “possibility to create content for/within the medium [of digital technology]” (Hartmann, 2004, 121). The cyberflâneur in its new state of existence can have a relationship with the crowd and is the modern-day voyeur of cyberspaces who “knows the net rather well, since he constantly speeds through” (127). If we are to imagine the future of the flâneur then we must transgress the boundaries and redefine the term from an ungendered perspective. A constructive way of achieving this is by referring to the flâneur as a cyborg entity and a non-body that is resistant to the politics of gender and allows us to “write counter-histories of the future in which hybrids and syncretism are not outside the norms.” (Shields, 2006, 219). This averts, also, any assumptions to be made that the flâneur is not able to adapt with the times or have a new reason for its existence. It is, instead, a multi-layered complex figure, that is not easily labelled and can adapt with the times.

The post-modernist vision of the female flâneur is one whose “gaze is more tolerant than authoritative, and more connective than detached” (Reus and Usandizaga, 2008, p.189). Urban spaces are no longer being “conceived as a male space, in which women are either repressed or disobedient marginal presences” (Parsons, 2003, p.2). By redefining it as the cyberflâneur, we can reimagine its purpose as an “open and migrational one, available to female as well as male walkers of the city street” (9). Inventor of the term flâneuse, Lauren Elkin also attempts to redefine the role of the woman in *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London*. Elkin explores how females “were once the objects of the gaze” (Elkin, 2016, 1). This all changes however, when “as street haunters we become observing entities, de-sexed, ungendered” (Elkin, 2016, 86). This is not too dissimilar to Virginia Woolf’s essay ‘Street Haunting’ which discusses the circumstances at which it is acceptable for a Woman to wander the streets alone in the early twentieth century. Woolf reveals that when we go outside in the evening “we are no longer quite ourselves” and that “we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreeable after the solitude of one’s own room” (Woolf, 11). The flâneur is thus a stroller through the city, an artist, a cultural figure of modernity.

The cyberflâneur, geared towards social reality, seeks to transgress gender boundaries by “naming herself in a female category and thereby referring to a whole array of behavioural possibilities that have arisen from the flâneuse’s history” (Cutting Edge Women’s Research Group, 2000, 102). This

justification of the female flâneur has presented women with the ability to identify with subjects and objects through the initiation of the gaze, showing a willingness to join in with the crowd. The purpose for the existence of the cyberflâneur according to Cutting Edge Women's Research Group is to "engage with city strollers who take in a lot of information and find their specific ways of dealing with it" (102). This is in comparison to the virtual city which is "partly a dreamscape and as such it offers itself to the cyberflâneur" (102). This can be seen in relation to the relationship formed between humans and digital technology or the cyborg of the city, which is best known as the informatics of domination by Donna Haraway (1991) with its purpose to "iteratively enact the human subject as the monocular centre of any and all space" (Shaw, 2015, 238). The borders between other living entities however, "between living and non-living, sentient and nonsentient, human and animal and object and subject becomes increasingly unstable" (238). The cyberflâneur has consequently, been reduced to "a rootless, displaced subject" as discussed by Bull in his essay 'The end of the flânerie' (Bull, 2013, 152). This poses a threat to the future credibility of the cyberflâneur and its role in contemporary literature. The continual presence of mobile devices allowing the spectator to surf the web restricts our experiences of real spaces and questions our role as unidentified subjects existing in a virtual world. The emergence of technology has caused us to be distracted and to prevent our heightened sensual awareness of the spaces we inhabit. In the age of the post-urban "cities are hyper-realised as experiences in themselves" (Shaw, 2015, 232). The post-urban being a space that presents itself in terms of information regulation rather than "the living and working bodies of its inhabitants" (232), the city streets are now monitored with security cameras and projection screens affecting the flâneur's involvement with digital and physical spaces.

The flâneur in the present day therefore has more of a virtual presence than an actual one. In his article for The New York Times, Morozov discusses that the very stance of popular technology, including the suggestion that the existence of the frictionless sharing of news on Facebook is "killing cyberflânerie: the whole point of the Flâneur's wanderings is that he does not know what he cares about" (Morozov, 2012, 6).. Increasing access to social media and other external sites of information means that we often experience the lives of others through a camera lens, or screen and thus, reality for us becomes second nature. Morozov, further to this, argues how Google servers are destroying the possibility of cyberflânerie and all that defines it; "solitude and individuality, anonymity and opacity, mystery and ambivalence, curiosity and risk-taking – is under assault" (4). The act of being

watched or surveyed in the City can activate fear in the individual, having a detrimental effect on their own visual perceptions and sensory experiences. The flâneur then acts as the fieldworker for the capitalist state by “posting images of exotic destinations on social media sites.” (Shaw, 2015, 236) as a kind of knowledge-making with the rest of the world. Rather than just basing the flâneur on a cultural figure that roams the streets, it is also one that fuses itself with the world of the virtual in the mechanical age of reproduction. This suggests that the future of the flâneur will be better accommodated online, in a virtual world rather than existing beyond the screen. This also poses the question of what the significance will be “if we replace the windscreen with the television or computer screen, so that the viewer is not in a vehicle moving through a landscape but sits in front of the screen which is used to transport images and information to the recipient?” as discussed in Featherstone’s book on virtual public life. (Featherstone, 1998, 911). Technology will have an overarching effect on how we mentally record impressions or store information leading to “the retreat from sensation characteristic” (916) associated with “a more general decline of public space” (917). The post-modern era therefore poses unknown questions about the future credibility of the flâneur.

To conclude, technology has been at the forefront of our being for the last decade or so. It has colonised and inhabited us, walking us into a new way of existence. If critics such as Michael Bull and Maren Hartmann are already discussing what happens after the end of technology, then, it is important to be well equipped in redefining the cyberflâneur as an androgynous, ungendered entity, that exists beyond an online network and that may not necessarily be human but crosses all boundaries and exceeds all limitations. As Hartmann says, the cyberflâneur is “a transitional figure, which serves to reveal that moment when a new technology passes from its initial restricted application to widespread social uptake and social normalisation” (Hartmann, 2004, 276). The flâneur has already undergone a dramatic transformation since the beginning of the twentieth century, but still has its place in society, and has potential to move forward with the times. It represents the first of the next generation of users of the internet that “roams the abstract spheres of cyberspace” (103) and is, in my opinion, a central figure for the present day.

## References

- Bull, M. (2013) 'The End of Flânerie: iPods, Aesthetics, and Urban Experience', in Ekman, U. (ed.) *Throughout: Art and culture emerging with ubiquitous computing*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, pp. 351-364.
- Elkin, L. (2016) *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London*. London: Penguin Books.
- Coverley, M. (2013) *Psychogeography*. Harpenden: Pocket Essentials.
- Featherstone, M. (1998) 'The Flâneur, the City and Virtual Public Life', *Urban Studies*, 35(5), pp. 909-925.
- Hartmann, M. (2004) *Technologies and Utopias: The Cyberflâneur and the Experience of 'Being Online'*, Erfurt: Verlag Reinhard Fischer München.
- Lash, S. (1998) 'Being after time: Towards a politics of melancholy', *Journal for Cultural Research*, 2(2-3), pp. 305-319. doi:10.1080/14797589809359301.
- Morozov, E. (2012) *The Death of the Cyberflâneur*. Available at: <http://dc37.dawsoncollege.qc.ca/finearts/Faculty/AManniste/Text/Cyberflaneur.pdf> (Accessed 20 April 2018).
- Parsons, D. L. (2003) *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Solnit, R. (2014) 'Introduction: Icebergs and Laundry', in *The Encyclopaedia of Trouble and Spaciousness*, San Antonio: Trinity University Press.
- Shaw, D. B. (2015) 'Street for Cyborgs: The Electronic Flâneur and the Posthuman City', *Space and Culture*, 18(3), pp. 230-242.
- Shields, R. (2006) Flânerie for Cyborgs. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23(7-8), 209-220. doi:10.1177/0263276406069233.
- Reus, T. G. and Usandizaga, A. (2008) *Inside out: women negotiating, subverting, appropriating public and private space*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

## The Cyberflâneur in the Age of Digital Technology

Ridenhour, J. (2013) *Darkest London: The Gothic Cityscape in Victorian Literature*. Lanham: The Scarecrow Press.

Cutting Edge Women's Research Group (2000) *Digital Desire: Language, Identity and New Technologies*. London: L. B. Tauris.

Wrigley, R. (2014) *The Flâneur Abroad: Historical and International Perspectives*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.