

Urban Walking – a Subversive Staged Experience?

The Post-heroic Flâneur under Observation

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Abstract

On the one hand, for decades there has been a growing interest in urban walking as an authentic physical, creative or subversive spatial experience. On the other hand, cities as well as different walking practices are more and more staged, are part of mediatized, as well as market-oriented city scenarios or artistic image productions. Thus urban strolling appears increasingly to be a theatre- or film-like experience. The text discusses the ambivalence and complexity of today's walking practices and re-evaluates their meaning ranging from resistance to consumerism, referring to the historical concept of the *flâneur* as well as to the current phenomenon of a post-heroic urban stroller. Examples from film, fine arts and literature from recent decades, illustrating paradoxical walking concepts, are used for analysis; a special focus is placed on Bertrand Bonello's film *Nocturama*, Albrecht Selge's novel *Wach* and Valérie Jouve's photo series *Les Passants* and *Les Personnages*.

Keywords *flâneur*, resistance, consumerism, stage-like, post-heroic

Focusing on Las Vegas in her last chapter of *Wanderlust* (2001) – at first sight a pedestrian-unfriendly city of entertainment that nevertheless became a place to walk – Rebecca Solnit outlines a vision where the subversive act of walking will survive “outside the mainstream [culture] and sometimes reenter it” (Solnit 2001, 288). Its future depends, as the last sentence of her book states, on whether the connecting paths of this human culture and history are still traveled (cf. Solnit 2001, 291). In retrospect her hope seems to be justified when we look at the notable increasing interest in walking since her 2001 publication, ranging from physical-sporting activities through socio-political expressions to creative spatial and aesthetic experiences, especially in the arts context. Already in 1999 Thorsten Sadowsky spoke of an “inflationary *flânerie*” (Sadowsky 1999, 62). On the other hand – intertwined with the society of spectacle – different walking practices are more and more staged or curated: They are part of mediatized, also market-oriented city scenarios and everyday experiences as well as of artistic productions, from games such as Pokémon GO to audio-video-walking-guides. Thus urban walking has increasingly become a theatre- or film-like experience (cf. Nigg 2017, 277). That is why I would refine Solnit’s conclusion, but also Michel de Certeau’s prior insistence on the fundamental resistant and poetic quality of walking, including the re-evaluation of the consumer as producer in his *L’invention du quotidien I. Arts de faire* (1990/1980): The paths are not only to be traveled; to maintain the utopian, subversive power of urban walking we should focus also on *how* the paths or urban scenarios are produced and reflected as a conscious interference or intervention in the movement itself (cf. Nigg 2018). Walking should be considered as a fundamentally ambivalent, paradoxical practice that includes the possibility of re-narrating or re-spelling the city space as resistant *overwriting* and thus creating new constellations (Certeau identifies walking and narrating equally as *arts de faire*), as well as consumerist *rewriting* and entertainment. Here a parallel can be drawn with the new narrative and interactive theatre concepts or formats including walks among other things, especially with the experimental performance practices of the noughties beyond drama and post drama (cf. Tecklenburg 2014, 21). Today the notion of theatre encompasses a broad spectrum of practices, from classical stage-play to interactive performance, that also interfere with each other. The theatre scientist,

director and performer Tina Tecklenburg maintains in *Performing Stories. Erzählen in Theater und Performance* (2014) that narration can no longer be understood as a counter-concept to theatre or (art) performance, nor is theatre necessarily to be interpreted as a counter-concept of performance.

Hereafter I will discuss the paradoxical coincidence between a supposedly free, critical, even subversive strolling and a consumerist walking practice in the city. It is my thesis that in our increasingly mediatized, economized, even post-heroic times both practices, that is playful consumerism and resistant appropriation, coincide more forcefully. This also challenges both theoretical and practical concepts of walking, so at the end I will have to re-evaluate them. To travel this path I look back to the theory of the classical city dweller, the *flâneur* between an aimless stroller and an unseen commodity, but I also look ahead to some recent examples from film, literature and fine arts predominantly after 2001, where the protagonists move at the interface between resistant and consumerist walking practices.

Mediatized City Walkers

On the one hand, the increasing interference of consumerist and subversive strolling can be traced back to the stronger influence of more and more portable mass media in our everyday life where experience and knowledge (production), Michel de Certeau's walking and seeing practices are increasingly intertwined. On the other hand, the concept of the *flâneur* must already be regarded as ambivalent. In this text I will not elaborate on the influence of different forms of media or of transdisciplinary performative concepts, but I would like to discuss some examples with reference to the city pedestrian. New media and technologies not only support the scientific study of body movements, but since the 19th century also their 'improvement' – whether for military, sportive or aesthetic purposes (cf. Mayer 2013). The French sociologist Marcel Mauss observed as far back as the nineteen-thirties that the gait of the nurses in a New York hospital – and back in France also that of Parisian women – reminded him of movie actresses, as he states in *Les techniques du corps* (Mauss 1936/1934). They represent in this example a fashionable walking role model for the everyday North American and French woman, a sign of globalization and media influence; walk-

ing is thus cultural mimicry. Today the models come from television shows or YouTube tutorials. Conversely, the everyday walkers and their permanent self-recordings or external tracings equally become a stage-like model for advertisements and visual arts. An interesting example is the vast I-phone billboard, shot some years ago in a public space in Zurich (see fig.), that is also a mimicry of Caspar David Friedrich's *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (1818) who is nowadays never alone or unseen. But artists also bring the anonymous everyday passer-by as a typological model back to the public screen. The Swiss photographer Beat Streuli shows his pictures of pedestrians from globalized cities all over the world not only in exhibition contexts, he also mounts them on glass fronts of buildings or on billboards: Larger-than-life they confront the actual city walkers with their personalized big brothers and sisters (see <https://www.beatstreuli.com/installation/>). The British artist Julian Opie definitely crosses the borders between everyday life, visual art and advertising: He reduces walking figures, one of his main motifs, from the real world to matchstick figures. By drawing, taking photographs and using digital technology he transforms his observations of street passers-by to easy recognizable symbols and applies them as single or group figures on different media from painting through sculpture to LED-panels, also giving them life in computer films. Opie's goal is to mesh real-life models with a universal sign (cf. Kliege 2004, 149). That his walking figures have no feet and an abstract head without eyes is an interesting detail: The anonymous strangers do not interact with the viewer or the other walkers; these animated *flâneurs* can 'in reality' not even look or take a step. Is this a subtle reference to the imaginary, (im)material movement of the world of media and commerce? This interpretation seems obvious when we look at his recent larger-than-life walking figures exhibited in public spaces, especially on department store buildings in Manchester or Zurich, for example (Opie 2003 and 2014). These matchstick figures redouble the street motion. Exposed in a shop window, with their huge sizes and reduced, anonymous outlines, they reflect the endless stream of products and walker-shoppers without personality or a moment's rest. Or are they strolling post-shoppers? In their repetitive choreography the figures mimic a catwalk parade or suggest the street-life as a stage for a fashion show. The 'advertisement' is no

longer an interruption in the flux of the consumer-walkers, but accompanies them, even distracting them from looking into the shop-window. Passing close by Opie's work pedestrians will probably not even notice their shadow. Only from a certain distance they will be able to enjoy the art spectacle – a strange inversion of window-shopping.

Flâneur-Consumer-Conspirator

The possibilities of permanent (self-) monitoring and (self-) staging of daily movement through new technologies, especially at the interface of commerce and art, also lead back to the discussion of the traditional concept of the *flâneur*. In an extension of Walter Benjamin's strolling as a medium of observation of the commodity world we could conclude that walking tends nowadays in times of "inflationary *flânerie*" to be itself economized. Not only were department stores for the woman of the nineteenth century *the* spaces for 'free' strolling, they also constructed the female shopper in a way (cf. Lindemann 2015, 101ff., 139ff.). Since then the economic optimization of shopping mall walkways, with the aim that clients should not have to make decisions about where to go, is a constant management obligation (see Farocki 2001). But we can already find clues to the ostensible inconsistency of an observant stroll and a consumption-driven walk in Benjamin's notion of the *flâneur*, walking through the arcades as precursors of the shopping malls and department stores. Benjamin called the last ones in reference to E. A. Poe's *The Man of the Crowd* the "decay form" of the arcades, which is nowadays itself in decay:

"Wenn die Passage die klassische Form des Interieurs ist, als das die Strasse sich dem Flaneur darstellt, so ist dessen Verfallsform das Warenhaus. Das Warenhaus ist der letzte Strich des Flaneurs." (Benjamin 1991 / 1939, 557)

According to Benjamin, the ambiguity of the arcades – ranging from invented industrial luxury to the underworld to Nirvana (cf. Benjamin 1991 / 1982, 1050) – serves as a compensation for the tracelessness of the bourgeois' private life in the big city, whereas the use of consumer articles leaves traces and objects 'store' every touch. Walking is also a remedy for boredom as a consequence of the satu-

rated reaction of the Basilisk glimpse (cf. Benjamin 1991/1939, 539ff.). Benjamin's *flâneur* is in fact not a buyer, but is himself an anonymous, unseen commodity surrounded and yet abandoned by the crowd: The moment of abandonment is part of the *flâneur's* intoxication; the moment of consciousness or (self-) reflection on the situation would tear the veil, represented by the crowd, from the city image and open an unobstructed view on the urban reality (cf. Benjamin 1991/1939, 557–562). Here lies in my opinion also – apart from the aimlessness of strolling – an important clue for a resistant walking perspective: It includes stumbling over one's own movement, a moment of shock or of lifting one's eyes (cf. Benjamin 1991/1939, 647) that gives time and space for reflection and making a choice. This cannot happen for example to Opie's looped walkers without feet; also the passageways of arcades and shopping malls try to prevent stumbling moments through their architecture.

Post-heroic *Flâneur*

But the *flâneur* does not only cross shopping passageways. His glance is also an observant look, a looking for, especially in an uneasy metropolitan atmosphere or in times of terror; therefore *flânerie* shares traits with those of the detective or even the conspirator (cf. Benjamin 1991/1939, 543). This paradoxical conflation or strange proximity of free resistant or subversive and consumerist walking, of conspiracy and *flânerie* is exemplified in a critical postmodern way in Bertrand Bonello's film *Nocturama* (2016). At this point I will not discuss its qualities or the political impact of this film, which flopped when it was first released because of the coincidence with the terror attacks in Paris and Nice 2015, but I focus on the *flâneur-consumer-conspirator*. At the beginning of the film we follow seven young adults of different social and cultural backgrounds, walking through Parisian streets and the tunnels of underground stations. What at first sight appear to be accidental crossings and different changing clusters of passers-by is gradually shown to be a precise choreography of planned bombings of different monuments in the city (Statue of Jeanne d'Arc at the *Place des Pyramides*, the Ministry of the Interior, the *Total Tower* office blocks in la Défense and the square of the stock exchange). The concrete purpose of their action or revolt remains vague: The protagonists' short, almost superficial and arbitrary conversations mention current social problems such

as unemployment and globalization, historical events such as the French revolution, the Iraq-Iran-war, a false memory or monument culture, but also intellectual annoyance. After the attacks, their movements finally all come together in a department store in the historic building of *La Samaritaine* that was staged for the film while it was vacant – in its “state of decay” so to speak, before the current renovation into a spatially more open design. The protagonists want to spend the night there waiting for the situation in the city to calm down. But the police figure out where they are, storm the department store and shoot all the protagonists. Bonello contrasts the long passages through the real city – reminiscent of the long walkways and steady cam shots by film-makers such as Alan Clarke or Gus van Sant – with the artificial, closed world of the department store, which is also reflected in two different cinematic languages: A factual, documentary-like one, on the one hand and an almost dream- or stage-like one on the other (cf. Bonello 2017). The young adults become more and more nervous and start to wander through the staged temple of luxury and consume in an excessive way, so that their revolt seems to have little to do with a substantial critique of capitalism or consumerism. They even appear as doubles of shop mannequins or song interpreters of Shirley Bassey’s *My way*. Alternating with listening to pop music in the electronics department, they also ‘consume’ the results of their bombings on television, commenting the pictures with “what a thing to see that in real life” (*Nocturama* 1:06:46). The only ‘free’ strolling passages in the film are executed by David when he leaves the department store to smoke, roaming around the quarter confronted by the real images of the attacked city. He is also the only figure who from time to time shows slight doubt about the acts committed.

The title *Nocturama* means a special animal enclosure that filters the natural daylight and creates an artificial night mood inside for observing nocturnal creatures during the day. Does the title refer only to the second part of the film in the department store? Or can the *nocturama* be interpreted as a situation of social enclosure, as a metaphor for the position of the viewer and the director, reflected in the steady cam perspective as well as in the surveillance cameras inside the store that accompany every step of the protagonists? It is an effect that is also suggested by suddenly changing angles of vision on the same situation and split screen scenes of parallel events.

In a way, the film could be interpreted as a post-Benjaminian, also post-Certeauian concept of a simultaneous *flâneur*-consumer-conspirator. It shows a diffuse escapism, an ambivalent walking practice between remote controlled and out-of-control – for the sake of doing something, ending up in consumerism. “It was bound to happen, right?” says a young woman with her bicycle that David meets during his night stroll, putting the whole situation in a nutshell (*Nocturama*, 1:22:58–1:23:06).

The literary scholar Jan Söffner discusses in a recently published article the crisis of realism in a post-factual and post-heroic era that can be helpful for contextualizing this ambivalent status of walking. Söffner’s thesis is that the crisis of realism has to do with a confusing relationship between *res* and *pragmata*, between consumerism and the criticism of capitalism, between the things someone does and the things that someone refers to, so that the ‘pure’ action or act are left over:

“Verbirgt sich hinter der gegenwärtigen ‘Krise’ des Realismus vielleicht eine besonders unerträglich gewordene Unberechenbarkeit zwischen *res* und *pragmata*, zwischen den Dingen, die man tut, und den Dingen, auf die man sich bezieht? Wird das Verhältnis zwischen den beiden gerade neu ausgelotet? Vielleicht ist dieser Gedanke es wert, diskutiert zu werden. Er besagt, dass die gegenwärtige Krise nur vordergründig eine Krise der Fakten ist. Vielmehr ist das Verhältnis zwischen den Dingen, die man tut, und den Dingen, auf die man sich bezieht, unklar und verwirrend geworden. [...] Dies ist natürlich eine gewagte These. Aber was besagt eigentlich der Begriff einer ‘postfaktischen’ Politik? Doch wohl vor allem, dass politisches Handeln sich von den Dingen emanzipiert, auf die es sich bezieht.” (Söffner 2018)

Whether or not this thesis will be confirmed is part of the current discussion. In any case, it makes us think critically about the complexity and possible consequences of the concept of free city walking and aimless strolling in the current socio-political context and the growing acceptance of simulated real places, as Solnit puts it.

Also in the novel *Wach* (English: *Awake*) (2011) the German author Albrecht Selge, who previously worked as a developer of acoustic travel guides for Berlin and other European cities, contrasts urban strolls with the space of a shopping mall. But whereas the walkers in *Nocturama* end up in a department store, the protagonist August leaves his home and his managerial job in a Las Vegas-like shopping center in the Mediterranean style called *castle* or *pleasure palace* for longer and longer walking tours in Berlin. He suffers from insomnia and compulsive walking, especially at night. He likes to roam around and get lost looking for traces of history, for unknown, transient or left over places, looking for experiences in the (supposed) real world beyond the convenience of the artificial and staged shopping paradise (cf. Selge 2011, 81ff.). That the female figures in the novel, especially the ex-girlfriend, have a problem with August's unsystematic walks (cf. Selge 2011, 92ff., 102), highlights indeed the classical understanding, even the old-fashioned cliché of the male *flâneur*. But at the same time August's walking experience contradicts the traditional concept: Paradoxically he himself can no longer imagine this historic figure in the contemporary commercial streets of the city (cf. Selge 2011, 89). Crossing totally different districts from residential and governmental quarters to multicultural, humble or peripheral areas beyond the usual tourist paths, it turns out they all have a certain uniformity, artificiality, also pseudo vitality and triviality in common. In fact, not only do August's stories appear as if they were only theories; even his observations and experiences do not lead to deeper insights. Strolling seems to work as occupational therapy, 'superficially' like the uniformity or facades of the city. Does the *post-flâneur* here finally reach an ideal state of free walking or is his "entertainment in which nothing is spent or consumed" (Solnit 2001, 285) almost too empty? When at the end of the novel August loses his shoes, walks home barefoot and is finally hit by a car, he only interrupts his passage for a short time; back in life everything seems to proceed as if nothing has happened.

Staged Resistance

The French photographer and anthropologist Valérie Jouve shows with her urban photographic and cinematic interventions, how the permanent feeling of physical discomfort in an urban environment or non-site can be made more productive – here also interpreted as

a possible visualization of Söffner's thesis of the unpredictable relationship between *res* and *pragmata*. Jouve has used mediality and explicit staging for a critical and utopian appropriation of the built environment since the nineteen nineties. In her work she uses, as one of her main subjects, the figure of the passer-by. In contrast to *Nocturama* or parts of *Wach* she situates her pictures deliberately in mostly anonymous city contexts or peripheral non-sites, explicitly distant from consumer places. She would rather question the relation between meaning and the experience of space through the self-staged body of her protagonists beyond visual documentation or presentations of reality (cf. Inkster 2002, 105ff.). Jouve calls this approach in one of her exhibition titles *Corps en résistance*, Michel Poivert "théâtre politique" (Poivert 1998, 6) – a term that combines to a certain extent urban stage-play and public intervention or interaction. In the photographs *Les Personnages*, which are mostly shown from the front, the generic title is complemented with the name (abbreviation) of the protagonist Jouve worked with. *Sans titre (Les Personnages avec E. K.)* (1997–1998) for example causes a strange friction between the protagonist and her environment: a young woman with strongly dyed white hair and a frilly, gaudy pink dress is shown against the background of a fenced industrial *terrain vague*. She has a powerful actress-like expression oscillating between anger, fear and confusion. Is it caused by the exterior wasteland or her internal state? The passers-by in the series *Les Passants* are, in contrast to *Les Personnages*, less personalized as the title indicates. The figures without names are shown merely in motion and from the side view or the back, so that their expression is not really discernible. Thus the viewer focuses more on the way the passers-by are walking and how they are dressed, but also how they inscribe their bodies in the architectural environment, for example in front of graffiti painted walls or office facades. During the posing for the photographs the active consciousness-raising of the collective body, threatened by its disappearance, is important to Jouve. But the viewer's physical motion and experience of alterity is also crucial for her installations in exhibition or public spaces (cf. Jouve 2011, 3). In spite of the staged physical appropriation of the (non-) sites by the protagonists, the interpretation of their poses in the photographs remains open. The viewers cannot figure out what the concrete cause for the protagonists' performance is so as to understand



Fig. I-Phone-advertisement in Zurich, 2016.
(photo: M. Nigg)

their personal relationship to the built or socio-political environment. The figures and their surroundings appear to be disconnected, also because the middle ground is metaphorically missing.

This seems to be a common feature of the protagonists in Bonello's *Nocturama*, Selge's *Wach* and Jouve's photographs. In order to overcome the discomfort of disconnection – and with a sidelong glance at a possible reconnection between what people do and what they refer to – walking, especially as a practice of referencing and constellation remains indeed a valuable, necessary and utopian activity. But if resistant and consumer-oriented walking tend to coincide and the subversive power of walking is to be maintained, it is not enough, in my opinion, only to play with the urban making-of or, as Andrew F. White states for the post-tourist in Las Vegas, to perform the ambivalence or knowingness (cf. White 322, 324). My conclusion is that the resistant potential of walking, though itself mediatized and economized, can only be further productive and

powerful when the movement is not reduced to its pure act, but staged as a consciousness-raising subversive *intervention*, where the concepts of consumerism and resistance are to be brought explicitly into friction. A such augmented walking experience could be described as a paradoxical reversal of Benjamin's aimless flâneur and Certeau's tactical consumer-walker into a purposeful or strategic drifter, so as to trace new paths and to detect what the media-tized and economized walking practices do in fact refer to.

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