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The *flâneur* goes shopping:
An inquiry into the *flâneuse* as consumer

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Dedications

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Abstract

Recent feminist theorists have suggested that the *flâneur* – a key trope of modernity – had a sister figure who, if not equally on par in importance, figured significantly within the changing modern landscape. The '*flâneuse*' also gazed upon the spectacle of urban life, only she did so from the vantage point of the consumer dream-land that was the department store. But how useful is this trope of the *flâneuse* and what are its, or more specifically, her limitations, particularly within her popular construct as the consumer-observer? This paper explores the concept of the *flâneuse*, challenges her definition as consumer and questions the usefulness of this metaphor, particularly as it relates to the original construct of the *flâneur*. This paper is a review of the writing on the *flâneuse* as well as an exercise in deconstructing one of her likenesses. I argue that the consuming-*flâneuse* is at odds with the entire premise of *flânerie*. In the translation from *flâneur* to *flâneuse*, the physical similarities may have been accounted for but the ideology of *flânerie* – what makes the *flâneur* such a powerful metaphor – has been lost. I suggest, therefore, that a new image of modernity needs to be found for women, one that provides a more balanced perspective of women's experiences and that takes women out of the very limited arenas of consumption.

Key words: *flâneur*, *flâneuse*, space, consumption, modernity, women, department store, shopping, consumer culture, consumerism

Abstract - en français

Des théoriciennes féministes récentes ont prétendu que le flâneur – figure et concept clé de la modernité – avait une soeur qui, même si elle n'était pas l'égale exacte de son frère, jouait néanmoins un rôle important dans le paysage moderne. Comme son avatar masculin, la *flâneuse* contemplait le spectacle de la vie urbaine même si elle se situait dans le paysage de rêve que constituait le grand magasin. Mais quelle est l'importance de ce concept de la flâneuse? Est-il un concept utile ou trop limité, un concept qui définit la *flâneuse* principalement comme spectatrice et consommatrice dans les grands magasins? Analysant les textes qui proposent et traitent l'idée de la flâneuse, cette dissertation examine le concept de la flâneuse, notamment ses liens de parenté avec le flâneur, et conteste la définition restreinte de la *flâneuse* comme consommatrice. Dans cette dissertation, je prétends que la conception de la *flâneuse* comme consommatrice va à l'encontre de l'idée et de l'idéologie originales de la '*flânerie*', même s'il existe des ressemblances physiques entre la *flâneuse* et le flâneur. Je propose donc qu'il faut trouver une alternative, un nouveau concept pour exprimer le rôle de la femme dans la modernité, c'est-à-dire un concept qui peut englober toute la gamme des expériences féminines et qui peut libérer la femme des espaces restreints des grands magasins.

Mots clés: le flâneur, la flâneuse, l'espace, la consommation, la modernité, la femme, les grands magasins, la société de consommation, le consumérisme

Introduction:

The figure of the *flâneur* needs little introduction. He is the human face of modernity, the metaphor for its changes and, as a powerful and evocative figure, he has become ubiquitous within studies of the modern period. The avatar of the modern experience, this idle stroller was the eyes and ears on the changing face of the urban landscape. Where once he was set in a particular time and place - that of nineteenth century Paris - he has become geographically and temporally flexible, now used by social and cultural commentators in countless ways "to get a grip on the nature and implications of the conditions of modernity and post-modernity."[1] Prolific because of his very malleability, the *flâneur* has become a recurring motif in the literature, sociology and art of urban and, most especially, of metropolitan existence.[2]

Given his popularity as a figure of public life and as a representation for the birth of the nineteenth century metropolis, it is not surprising that efforts have been made to locate a female figure in his place: that of the '*flâneuse*.' The exercise has been one of gendering a motif and, at the same time, of finding women within public space during the period. A wide range of academics from diverse backgrounds have sought out the *flâneuse*, exploring the possibility of her existence and examining the viability of her use as a symbolic figure. As a result, a number of incarnations of the *flâneuse* have been suggested: the female rag-picker, the prostitute, even the philanthropist. Still, one of the most popular and longstanding images remains that of the 'consumer-*flâneuse*,' the middle-class woman found wandering the brightly-lit halls of the late-nineteenth century department store. But how truthful is this

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[1] Tester 1994: 1

figure of the '*flâneuse*-a-shopping' to the original construct of the *flâneur*? Can she – despite, or regardless of, her gender – legitimately take on the role of *flâneur* as Benjamin or Baudelaire envisioned? Is her role as consumer appropriate for the *flâneur*-as-subject and does shopping constitute *flânerie*? Moreover did the space of the department store in any way parallel or mimic the streets of nineteenth century Paris or did it demand completely different facilities of the *flâneur*? Given the prevalence of the figure of the *flâneuse*-consumer in recent literature, these concerns – particularly the meaning and location of this *flâneuse* - warrant investigation.

The construction of this *flâneuse*-consumer also raises a number of smaller but no less significant issues, which I consequently touch on in this paper. These include questions about the social and cultural practices of production and consumption and about the meaning of these practices, the gendering of consumption, and the relationship between Benjamin's original concept of the *flâneur*, the commodity and the market. Finally, this study adds to the debate on the *flâneur*'s meaning, the parameters of his use, and his relevance (or even lack of relevance) within contemporary academic discourse. I discuss this final matter in the summary of this paper.

In this thesis I argue that this *flâneuse* – the avid consumer in the spectacular world of the nineteenth century department store – cannot and should not be considered a female *flâneur* for she has little resemblance to the *flâneur* as he was first imagined. It is not merely a matter of taxonomy or that this *flâneuse* may lack many of the key attributes of Baudelaire's *flâneur*. Rather, it is that her entire mode of being and her meaning as consumer are so completely opposed to the *flâneur* and what he stands for. While the *flâneuse* need not be a direct translation of the *flâneur*, in her guise as *flâneuse* there lies

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[2] Tester 1994: 1

the assumption that she maintained ideological and physical similarities and that she shared similar perspectives and experiences as the *flâneur*. And it is these similarities which allow her to take on the same allegorical role as the *flâneur*.

There is no question that the 'woman-out-shopping' is an excellent example of middle-class woman entering the public sphere in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. However, I argue that in this woman's role as consumer she did not, nor was she able to take on the role of critical observer that was so central to the *flâneur*'s identity. As an extension of my argument, I suggest that the department store was not conducive to *flânerie*, despite the many links that have been made between shopping and *flânerie* and between the department store, modernity and the *flâneur*. Ultimately I must protest against using the *flâneuse*-as-consumer as a trope within academic discourse; if we are to uphold the origins of the term *flânerie*, then to do so would be not only inaccurate and inappropriate, but also irresponsible. At the end of the day this thesis is about terminology; about the use of a term, the translation of a motif and about the challenge of authenticity and, specifically, the need to uphold a degree of authenticity as it relates to a motif.

Part of this exercise is about pinpointing the factors that might be responsible for the oversight or slippage in meaning that has allowed the *flâneur*-to-*flâneuse* translation to occur. The shopping-*flâneuse* seems to be the product of earnest attempts by overzealous feminist academics to locate a female *flâneur*. In their desire to find women within the urban sphere, and in their drive to feminize a crucial motif of modernity, these academics make the grave error of equating a woman in the public sphere with that of the *flâneur*. The production of the female *flâneur* gone-shopping is also, I suggest, based on overly optimistic ideas about consumer culture (themselves based on a very

limited, very contemporary perception of woman's experiences in shopping spaces), which form just a small part of the critical writings about the market and consumer society. Finally such an exercise is problematized by misconceptions of the *flâneur* and the confusing, and sometimes contradictory readings of this figure and his practices. Of particular note is the relationship of the *flâneur* to the market and the commodity, and his apparent role as 'consumer,' both factors which I believe, have seriously informed this construct of the consumer-*flâneuse*.

In my attempt to challenge the *flâneuse* as consumer, I begin by examining the efforts that have been made by academics to posit the *flâneur* as *flâneuse* – the sister figure to the *flâneur*. To do this I start by returning to the initial construct of the *flâneur*, describing his genesis and explaining his significance. (I believe it is important to look return to the original concept of the *flâneur* as his meaning and application has become muddled over time.) Following this, I explore the modes or ways in which he has been translated from male to female, from *flâneur* to *flâneuse*. This work becomes the precursor to the main thrust of this thesis: the analysis of the '*flâneuse* as consumer.' Here I use Mica Nava's article on the subject, "Modernity's Disavowal: Women, the City and the Department Store" as my focus. Nava is one of the key proponents of this 'consuming *flâneuse*,' her article on the subject has been reprinted a number of times in a wide variety of sources, and it is this work that others cite as reference. I criticize Nava's suggestion that shopping allowed women the opportunity to take on the role of the *flâneuse* and, furthermore, that the space of the department store was akin to the public space of the street. I do this by comparing the streets of nineteenth century Paris with the department store and I return to Benjamin's original description of the *flâneur*. I explore the act of shopping and also challenge its parallels to

flânerie by comparing the tactics of shopping with the tactics of *flânerie*, again as Benjamin had envisioned. Finally I look at the relationship between the consumer and the *flâneur* returning again to Benjamin's work. While I do highlight the potential merits of the *flâneuse*-consumer this exercise is, primarily, meant to expose the problems inherent in Nava's construct.

In Chapter 1 I introduce the concept of the *flâneur*, using primary material from Benjamin and Baudelaire along with well-known secondary sources that interpret his work, in order to reacquaint readers with the character of the *flâneur* and the vision of *flânerie*. Simmel's work on the city and public space - as he expands upon *flânerie* – is also referenced. I describe what I perceive to be the relevance of the *flâneur* and his role as an iconic figure within the literature of modernity. I then explore some of the key arguments around '*flânerie*.' It is, of course, impossible to provide a detailed description of the *flâneur* but I choose to focus on some salient features, as it is these that I refer to later in this paper when I explore his or her specific role as consumer. I then discuss some of the epistemelogical problems with the *flâneur* and *flânerie* – the limitations and the possibilities of this activity, which will ultimately affect his translation from male to female. This work helps to set the stage for the chapters that follow.

In Chapter 2 I detail the motivations behind locating a *flâneuse* and the apparent relevance of locating her as an academic exercise. I examine the attempts to posit a '*flâneuse*' as part of an effort to include women within the discourse on modernity, tracing the trajectory of thought and looking at the small but relevant body of work on the subject. I explain why the *flâneuse*-as-consumer may have come about and I detail her construction and use by a number of writers. By documenting this development and the motives behind it I reveal the extent of the investment in such an exercise.

Chapters 3 and 4 divide my argument into two sections. The first critiques the historical accuracy of *flâneuse*-as-consumer by exploring the practices and spaces of consumption during the period. The second critiques *flâneuse* as metaphor by examining the concept of the consumer as modern subject and by asking whether *flâneur*-as-consumer fits into the role of *flâneur* as Baudelaire, and particularly Benjamin had imagined him. In Chapter 3 I look at the location of the department store and the consumer's experience within the department store, as it is here that Nava situates the *flâneuse*. I also examine the activities within the stores, which include shopping as well as visual consumption. I critique the *flâneur*'s location and activity in two ways: I use historical accounts of women's experience within the department store to reveal the limitations of these spaces and I argue for a more balanced perspective on the site, which includes highlighting its drawbacks and, in particular, exposing its 'mechanisms of control.' I also compare the department store with the street as liminal spaces that allow for *flânerie*. While a direct comparison may rely too greatly on a literal translation of the *flâneur*, such a comparison does expose the weaknesses of this consumer-*flâneuse*. This analysis naturally leads to a discussion about the act of consuming within these sites. I use recent analyses of shopping and criticisms on consumption, resurrected from a long history of work that dates back to Marx and Veblen and goes right up to the present day, to challenge the perspective of consumption that is at the heart of this construct.

In Chapter 4 I explore the concept of the *flâneuse* as consumer in detail. I list the key 'characteristics' of the *flâneur* and examine how it is possible for him to have been misconstrued as consumer within recent scholarship. The *flâneur's* relationship to the market and to commodities is explored, as is the logic behind the Arcades Project and the relationship between the Arcades and

consumer culture. I believe confusion reigns over the *flâneur*'s relationship to the market and this has fostered the idea that the *flâneur* is bound up in consumption. This chapter refutes this fact, and by revealing that the male *flâneur* is not related to the market, shows there is no grounds for a female counterpart located in the stores/marketplace. As it is difficult to make the distinction between the act of consuming, the consumer and the site of consumption there are bound to be overlaps between the analyses in the two chapters.

In my summary I reiterate my thesis, criticizing the potential for female *flânerie* and for the shopping *flâneuse*. I argue that if we are to use the *flâneuse* accurately, as a viable historical construct, then her other incarnations (as rag-picker, as prostitute) might be more useful. I see this work as part of a larger realization of the limits of the use of *flânerie* as a trope. I also hint at the idea that *flâneur* has, perhaps, run its course. It must be stressed that this is not a complete study or an in-depth analysis; rather, it is a documentation of a concern and an interrogation of one very specific topic related to that concern. While this study may, at times, seem like an exercise in semantics I believe it to be both valuable and timely. For while a number of academics have contributed to the debate on the *flâneuse*, most have focused on the physical aspects of *flânerie* (such as the *flâneur*'s leisurely movement through space) while overlooking, or perhaps consciously disregarding, the *flâneur*'s role as critic. Few writers have ever dissected the various forms of the *flâneuse* and none have published extensive criticisms of her construction as consumer or, for that matter, the *flâneur*'s relationship to consumption. The status quo tends to be upheld as energy, instead, goes toward expanding the scope of the *flâneuse* rather than rethinking the exercise. This paper is an opportunity, therefore, to put the *flâneuse* to the test: to deconstruct the figure and to explore the extent

to which she stands up against the *flâneur*. Again, a literal comparison might seem simple but it is an enlightening exercise.

This work will, therefore, achieve three things: it will challenge the credibility of the consumer-*flâneuse* and, by doing so, both shed light on the meaning of the *flâneur* and examine the feasibility of the female *flâneur*. This exploration also furthers the need to examine female practices in everyday life, one of the goals of feminist cultural studies. Finally it complements a wide range of work that examines the modern experience.

This thesis may be of interest to a wide range of scholars investigating the public sphere and modernity and, by proxy, consumer culture. It will be of particular interest to those working in women's history and feminist cultural studies, including the areas of visual culture and literary criticism. (Given my interest and background in women's history and in consumer culture, this study is one of particular personal interest.) Within these areas of study, I am hoping this piece will re-ignite what has become a fairly dry and repetitive area of inquiry by re-examining the meanings and uses of the *flâneur* and his translation into the female form. It is not my intention here to undermine the efforts of feminist historians in their quest to find women in modernity. It is only to suggest that the use of key words – such as *flânerie* - be tempered, and it reiterates the fact that a degree of caution be injected into the future use and translation of this motif.

Chapter 1 An introduction to the *flâneur*

The human experience of modernity has been, and remains, a point of extensive study and concern within academia. Within this work particular attention has been paid to the period of the mid-to-late nineteenth century when the transition from traditional to modern culture (having its roots in the Renaissance) reached a zenith of sorts with the conjoining of urbanisation, industrialisation, and the shift from a productive to a consumptive economy. Although this transition was to affect countless aspects of life, its pleasures and its discontents were best captured in the city and in the metropolitan experience. The nineteenth century saw the unprecedented expansion of cities, notably London and Paris, and with this development, the emergence of a distinctive urban culture. This expansion, however, was met with equal parts excitement and anxiety; it is this tension that makes the city such a successful site for an interrogation into the modern experience. As sociologist Mica Nava writes, "more than any other social force of the nineteenth century, the city evoked the freedom as well as the menace that characterised the modern experience." [3]

If the modern city was the site of concern, the *flâneur* was the face of this anxiety – the man within the urban complex city who provided a human perspective on the changes wrought by the century's industrialisation, rationalisation and commodification. Cities were opening up and in Paris especially, bourgeois men were "free to explore urban zones of pleasure such as... the Folies Bergères, the restaurant, the theatre, the café and the brothel. The proliferation of public places of pleasure and interest created a new kind of

[3] Nava 1997: 59

public person with the leisure to wander, watch and browse: the *flâneur*." [4] The *flâneur* became a successful motif in the struggle to represent the modern – he is both the product of the city and its "innovative attempt at the appropriation and representation of the city." [5]

Brought to life in the poetry and prose of French writer and critic Baudelaire (in his well-known essay from 1863,"The Painter of Modern Life") the *flâneur* was a bohemian poet-observer who paraded the city streets all the while scrutinising the profane world he encountered. Baudelaire described him as 'the man for whom metropolitan spaces are the landscape of art and existence.' The *flâneur*'s name was derived from the french 'flaner', meaning to saunter about; although this name creates an illusion of an idle character - a 'lounger' or 'gossiper' - such a description is in fact a misnomer as the *flâneur*'s raison d'etre was quiet observation and his lazy walk belied the consciousness behind it, a matter I discuss later in this paper. The *flâneur* had a dual persona. He was, on one hand, a real figure, someone whom Baudelaire could, ostensibly, find on the streets (prototypes - mostly friends, colleagues or associates of Baudelaire - had been identified by the writer). But he was also a representation or personification of the period, a fictional character who embodied the modern experience. It is in this role as metaphor that his usefulness becomes apparent.

Inspired by Baudelaire's creation, German philosopher-cum-sociologist-cum historian Walter Benjamin latched upon the figure of the *flâneur*, expanding his scope and featuring him in his many written reflections on modern living. Absorbed by the way in which cities are experienced by people in the course of their ordinary work and leisure activities, Benjamin made the

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[4] Wilson 1992: 93
[5] Jenks 1995: 1

flâneur a periscope through which to study the city and its masses. The position of Benjamin's *flâneur* is key: Benjamin sought to give a voice to those on the margins for whom the city might render invisible or silent, and he felt the experience of the dispossessed might provide insight into public life. This marginal stance provided the *flâneur* with his unique perspective. Benjamin preferred to use an empirical object through which he could critique; the *flâneur* was one of many social types that Benjamin sourced. Others included the dandy, the gambler, the collector, the worker and the poet - and sometimes the *flâneur* encompassed all of these figures at once.[6]

Describing the *flâneur* is rendered difficult by his ambiguity. If the *flâneur* is the face of the modern experience, then it is a face that contorts, changing often. The *flâneur*'s elusiveness persists, a hundred and fifty years after his 'birth,' in all likelihood because Benjamin and Baudelaire's *flâneur* was itself a shadowy figure. Given this, or despite this, it is important to draw out a few salient features about this figure that provide the basis by which to analyze him. [7]

It is clear that the *flâneur*'s location was vital to his identity. Despite recent work that takes him out of the metropolis, he was produced by the cities where modernity's impact was most pronounced. Here the *flâneur* found himself faced with the ever-changing landscape of modernism, what Baudelaire refers to as "the shock, jolts and vivid present-ness captured by the break with traditional forms of sociation" which modern cities, such as Paris, seemed to bring forth from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.[8] The city posed a

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[6] Bronner 2000: 7

[7] There is a distinction between Baudelaire's flaneur and Benjamin's but the differences are difficult to explain in any succinct way. For this reason I make no distinction between the two. For the rest of the essay I refer to Benjamin's flaneur as it is Benjamin who writes at length about the character. For information on the differences between these two charcters see Cohen 1993 (especially pg 201) and Chambers 1991.

[8] see Featherstone 1991

particular threat that went beyond the physical (such as disease or contagion), but that was about sensual pleasures and desires, what Wilson refers to as the "spectres of sensuality, democracy and revolution."[9] The city itself communicated a modern ideology: Wilson describes how the "break-up of tradition in cities led to the undermining of authority, hierarchy and dignity" and thus raised feelings of freedom and anarchy, rootlenesness and alienation.[10] These changes to the landscape demanded new modes of operating, ones that "tossed aside previous meanings and methods and that required new forms of public interaction." [11] For example in Simmel (1957) is the idea that the city is the location within which both the development of individual freedom of action and the alienating consequences of such freedom can be explored.[12] The *flâneur* encapsulated these tensions embracing the pleasures and ennui of modern city living, while weaving his way through the physical and ideological minefield that was the city.

Logically, the streets of the cities were the *flâneur*'s home. Benjamin describes how the street,

> "becomes a dwelling for the *flâneur*; he is as much at home among the facades of houses as a citizen is in his four walls. To him the shiny, enamelled signs of businesses are at least as good a wall ornament as an oil painting is to the bourgeois in his salon. The walls are the desk against which he presses his notebooks; news-stands are his libraries and the terraces of cafés are the balconies from which he looks down on his household after his work is done." [13]

On the streets one encountered the crowds and it is this encounter with the crowds, writes sociologist Graeme Gilloch, that is the "hallmark of the modern experience." [14] An urban novelty, the city's crowds became a metaphor for modernity, in the way that they revealed new forms of human interaction that

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[9] Wilson 1992: 91
[10] Ibid.
[11] see Featherstone 1991
[12] see Ryan 1994
[13] see Benjamin 1938

were demanded of those within the expanding cityscape. Benjamin notes that, "before the development of buses, railroads and trams in the nineteenth century, people had never been in a position of having to look at one another for long minutes or even hours without speaking to one another." [15] Suddenly the city brought the intermingling of peoples to an extreme previously unknown and with this came a certain unease. The crowd, thus, became the *flâneur*'s muse. But the crowds, like so many aspects of the metropolis, were both alluring and dreadful: "as the medium for endless *flâneries* and adventures, the crowd was an enticing entity for Baudelaire. Yet at the same time its barbarous composition filled him with disgust." [16]

It was, however, the *flâneur*'s visual experience that was the crux of *flânerie*. The *flâneur* was an observer (of people, social types, contexts) and, as such, power lay in his gaze. Situated in the midst of the crowds, "bombarded by a plethora of unassimable stimuli," he was forced to adopt a particular visual register that allowed him to account for the fleeting impressions and images.[17] The city also extended the range of the visible; the expansion of cities was thought to bring about a new cognitive organization of perception that led to radically different ideas about the visual or what constituted the visual.[18] The *flâneur,* therefore, illustrates the intense processes of voyeurism and exhibitionism that, for Benjamin, characterized many of the major cities at the turn of the century.[19] Anne Freidberg, in Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern describes how the trope of *flânerie*

> "delineates a mode of visual practice coincident with - but antithetical to – the panoptic gaze. Like the panopticon system, *flânerie* relied on the visual register – but with a converse instrumentalism, emphasising

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[14] Gilloch 2000: 135
[15] Benjamin 1938:
[16] Gilloch 2000: 142
[17] Gilloch 2000: 143
[18] Gilloch 2000: 145
[19] see Edwards 1996

> mobility and fluid subjectivity rather than restraint and interpellated form."[20]

Here Friedberg is underlining the fact that the *flâneur* existed outside of standard social norms, that his visual and cognitive experience was distinct from the masses. This visuality, it should be noted, was both the *flâneur*'s privy and his obligation and was predicated on his physical and psychic situation. The *flâneur*'s gaze was dependent on his leisurely movement through the city, with *flânerie* described as "moving through space and people with a viscosity that both enables and privileges vision."[21] The *flâneur*'s perspective was driven by his existentialism; Baudelaire described his poet as "a man who is driven out of the private and into the public by his own search for meaning."[22] Historian Elizabeth Wilson, having written extensively on this figure, emphasizes the 'certain desperation' that motivates the *flâneur*'s wanderings. Sociologist Keith Tester adds to this interpretation, noting that the *flâneur*'s quest,

> "is a quest for the Holy Grail of being through a restless doing; a struggle for satisfaction through the rooting out and destruction of dissatisfaction (dissatisfaction being due to the banality of coming across the familiar or across passing friends; dissatisfaction being the sense of finding a world rather than making a world." [23]

The *flâneur* of Baudelaire's creation was a bohemian poet, the opposite of the nouveau bourgeois so pilloried by Veblen. At once immersed in the modern, he maintained a nostalgia for the past and his leisurely appearance was his protest "against the division of labour which makes people into specialists. It was also his protest against their industriousness."[24] At the same time it was a protest against the rationalisation of time (versus, for instance, the natural cycles which *flânerie* is dependent on) and the rationalization of spaces (the *flâneur* sought out the mystery and secrets within such spaces). An aesthetic figure, a dandy

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[20] Friedberg 1993: 16
[21] Jenks 1995: 146
[22] see Baudelaire
[23] Tester 1994: 5

perhaps, his look was both a means of creating distinction and a testimony to visual style - particularly as he was both the object and subject of display. Mike Featherstone notes:

> "The concern with fashion, presentation of self, 'the look' on the part of the new wave of urban *flâneurs*, points to a process of cultural differentiation which in many ways is the obverse of the stereotypical images of mass societies in which serried ranks of similarly dressed people are massed together." [25]

This nouveau bohemian articulated a new sense of freedom offered by the cities: a physical freedom which provided him with the ability to stroll anonymously through the city's spaces, a visual freedom that offered him the ability to gaze without caution and an emotional freedom that removed him from the pressures of bourgeois norms. He represented a lack of obligations, an informality and the multiplicity of possibilities, themselves modern propositions. It was this freedom which provided him with the ability to use cultural signs in free association, giving him control over the sign and its meanings. "The poet is in complete control of his world, " Tester writes. "The dialectic of the poet is, then, one of the sovereignty of individual self-hood in synthesis with a situation in which the practice of self-hood is dependent on the contingencies of spectacles such as crowds. ... the ontological basis of the Baudelarean poet resides in doing not being." [26]

But this freedom was tinged with angst. Despite being produced by the upheavals of modernity and despite the pleasure the *flâneur* took from the crowds and the spectacle of city life, he was its harshest critic. Never complicit in modernity's trajectory, the *flâneur* was, instead, a watchful eye of these changes, conscious of their negative implications and their agenda of progressiveness. An embodied form of cultural criticism his existence, his

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[24] Benjamin 1938
[25] Featherstone 1998: 97

observations, and his status as marginal were his rebellions against the status quo.

If this character seems confusing, the schizophrenic nature of the *flâneur* is a natural part of his makeup. The *flâneur* is a man of contrasts, at once representative and representation, straddling the world of the real and the past, described by Wilson, for instance, as "impassioned yet impartial," and "here and yet elsewhere."[27] He attempts to take on the multiple possibilities of modern identities – Gilloch writes that he gives voice to modernity's paradoxes and illusions – but at the same time he balks at these identities. [28] This duplicity has allowed the *flâneur* to translate across time and to expand in scope but at the same time to retain a degree of mysteriousness. This is why, despite popularisation, "the precise meaning and significance of *flânerie* remains more than a little elusive." [29]

To summarize, the *flâneur* was a figure from the period but he also acted and continues to act as a metaphor, his wandering scopophilia emerging with the conditions of the metropolis. It is in this role, as a channel for inquiry into the urban landscape, that his usefulness becomes apparent. The *flâneur* provides a phenomenology of the urban and his gift is in his ability to encapsulate a number of convergent themes on modernity: that of fluctuating identity, social change, the nostalgia associated with the move from traditional to modern culture, and the fragmentation of experience and commodification. He "opened the way for a micro-sociology of the urban daily life; the observation of the trivial, the ephemeral and the fleeting should lead to a critical analysis of the structural features of urbanity and modernity." [30]

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[26] Tester 1994: 5
[27] Wilson 1991: 87
[28] Gilloch 2000: 134
[29] Gilloch 2000: 101
[30] Jenks and Neves: 1-2

The figure of the *flâneur* is now virtually ubiquitous within studies of modernity; the breadth of the *flâneur*'s application allows him to resonate across a broad range of disciplines, from sociology and social theory to visual culture and urban studies. The *flâneur* has become an important 'location' in critical theory because "he stands at the intersection not only of class, gender and race relations, and also of art, mass production and commodification, but also of the masses, the city, and the experience of modernity."[31] As literary critic Priscilla Parkhurt Ferguson writes, "the *flâneur* now walks abroad in many guises and in many texts."[32] Thus the *flâneur* appears as tourist, shopper, tramp, immigrant, even virtual wanderer on the internet.[33] *Flânerie*, the activity of the *flâneur* – suggesting a means of walking through and appreciating spaces as well as a mode of viewing, from a marginal perspective, with a detached gaze or with fleeting glances – has developed a particularly wide application and multiple meanings. *Flânerie* has been described as a narrative device (denoting a narrator's freedom to define meaning),[34] a mode of thinking,[35] and a method for reading, producing and constructing texts.[36] It has even been used to refer to very specific activities such as touching,[37] eating,[38] and hearing.[39] *Flânerie* has become associated with a type of film spectatorship and even as a method by which to peruse the internet.[40] Furthermore *flânerie* has also been recognised as a way to approach an issue; it is a 'magpie' methodology and one that implies an ad hoc or random observational method

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[31] Pile: 229
[32] Parkhurst Ferguson 1994: 22
[33] see Steven and Betsy Wearing, 1996; Featherstone 1998
[34] Tester (p 11) refers to Robert Musil's novel, The Man Without Qualities stating that the novel "expresses a kind of dialectic of flanerie; a dialectic of incognito observation," which is based on the position of the narrator and what he sees.
[35] David Frisby 1994 refers to an 'intellectual flanerie'
[36] Featherstone 1998: 910
[37] see Frisby 1994
[38] see Smart 1998
[39] see Mazlish 1994
[40] see Featherstone 1998

that Simmel and Benjamin himself, favoured.[41] The *flâneur* is consistently referenced within academia and, given the prevalence of this figure in recent scholarship, seems to be experiencing a renaissance of sorts.

In this chapter I discussed the figure of the *flâneur*, returning to Benjamin and Baudelaire's description in an attempt to grasp the *flâneur*'s construction and context within the metropolitan centre of nineteenth century Paris. (The basic description I provide here is expanded in Chapter 3 when I pit the *flâneuse*-as-consumer against the *flâneur*.) I showed how the *flâneur* was both a physical character and metaphor and that he had quite discrete characteristics which informed his role as allegory. Finally I described how and why the *flâneur* became associated with a variety of activities - such as consumption and walking - as well as a particular viewpoint, and I provided insight as to why he expanded to the extent that he did.

In the following chapter I outline the challenge to locate the *flâneur* as *flâneuse*, documenting the attempts that have been made to imagine a female *flâneur*. I critique these translations and the motives underlying their construction. This chapter becomes preparation for my analysis of the *flâneuse* as consumer in Chapters 3 and 4.

[41] Simmel's broad analytic stance is suggested as being akin to the flaneur or flanerie in Frisby 1981 and Weinstein & Weinstein 1993. Jenks and Neves 2000 suggest flanerie is highly instructive, a way to confront urban life or ethnography.

Chapter 2 Finding the *flâneuse*

Given the power of the image and its frequent, almost perpetual use as a metaphor for the modern experience it is not surprising that feminist critics sought to appropriate the *flâneur*. Hence, a number of recent attempts have been made to substitute men for women in the role of *flâneur*.

The barriers to this exercise are, however, immediately obvious for it is clear that the *flâneur* was a male character. As Anne Friedberg emphasises, in the work of Baudelaire and Crary most theories of the 'observer' in the nineteenth century are either ungendered or resolutely male. "Baudelaire was quite explicit about the gender identity of the poet," explains sociologist Frank Tester in his introduction to an anthology on the subject, and this fact is reiterated by a number of writers in later references to the *flâneur*.[42] Any vagueness about the figure's gender fades when the element of vision, and the uses of this vision, are understood. As Friedberg claims, nineteenth century perceptual theories may not have addressed sexuality but once we examine the cultural uses of perceptual apparatuses (the function that they serve in the experience of everyday life), "then the question of gender in the 'body' of the observer becomes a far more pertinent aspect in the arrangements of social power."[43] The *flâneur*, and his mode of vision, were clearly, intentionally masculine.

Recent analysis has challenged the gender of this figure and by nature, his activities. Historian Deborah Parsons' meticulous reading of Baudelaire has

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[42] Tester 1994: 2; "To Baudelaire, this 'perfect spectator' was resolutely male, an observing 'prince' who was allowed the paradoxical pleasure: to be at home away from home, in the midst of the world and yet hidden from it, impassioned and yet impartial, here and yet elsewhere. The Baudelairean observer was a (male) painter or a (male) poet – a *flâneur* – whose mobility through the urban landscape allowed him access to the public sphere of the streets and to the domestic realms of the home. He has a fluidity of social position, a mutable subjectivity." (Friedberg: 29)

revealed that Baudelaire's poet is much more 'gender-neutral' than previously assumed.[44] She writes that the *flâneur* motif "is ambiguous in terms of class and gender" and that the *flâneur* "has become anything but a rigid category for cultural analyses." [45] Her findings therefore, suggest that the *flâneuse* could very well fit into Baudelaire's paradigm.

The possibility that women, too, could take on the role of the *flâneur* or have been *flâneuses* themselves throws open new ideas about the scope of women's experience and particularly, their role within the development of modernity. The attempt to find a *flâneuse* becomes an part of an ongoing exploration to find women in public spaces during the last half of the nineteenth century - a time when women (certainly the middle-class) were relegated to the private sphere, and when the presence of women in these spaces was looked upon with suspicion. In her study of gender and space in the city, Doreen Massey comments on the spatial and social implications of the ideology of separate spheres, claiming that "the attempt to confine women to the domestic sphere was both a specifically spatial control and, through that, a social control on identity." [46]

The debate on the *flâneuse* was ignited with the recognition that women had been excluded from the literature on modernity.[47] Janet Wolff's (1985) article "The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity" is the seminal piece that brought the concern to light. In Wolff's account, the literature of modernity focuses on men's experiences and men's spaces. It "accepts the confinement of women to the private sphere and, hence, fails to

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[43] Friedberg 1993: 35
[44] see Parsons 2000
[45] Parsons 2000: 92
[46] Massey 1994: 179
[47] Berman and Harvey's 1989 analyses have been singled out for its 'malestream' accounts of modernity which focus on male spheres (eg. politics) or distinctly male perspectives of public and city life. See Wolff 1985: 34 and Ryan 1994: 36 for details.

delineate women's experience."[48] Wolff does admit that there might be 'differently-gendered' ways to see the city and that the world-view of the modern city dweller is 'different' depending on the gender of the holder.[49] But Wolff suggests that during the 'period of modernity' women were excluded from the public sphere, either somewhat or altogether. This claim is later reiterated by feminist art historian and critic Griselda Pollock in her article, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," published soon after. Pollock believes that women (middle-class women at least), "were denied access to the spaces of the city" and she cites as example, a successful painter of the period named Berthe Morisot whose work – unlike that of her male contemporaries that focused on outdoor spaces – was limited to interiors and domestic scenes. [50] Although both Wolff and Pollock acknowledge that women could be found in public space this, they feel, was undermined by the fact that "the ideology of women's place in the domestic realm permeated the whole of society." [51] So while women may have been out in public, they were not out on the same terms as men. As a result they missed the 'experience of modernity,' lacked presence, and were, therefore, excluded from the more meaningful 'public sphere.' This omission, Wolff feels, is not intentional but due to the nature of sociological investigation, (which has resulted in a 'partial' conception of modernity), and due to misinformation about the reality of women's place in society. Wolff's goal therefore, as Ann Friedberg explains, was to "produce a feminist sociology that would supply the experiences of women." [52]

This recognition of exclusion provided the motivation for other academics to seek out the *flâneuse*. Following the publication of Wolff's article, a flurry of

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[48] see Wolff 1985
[49] Ryan 1992: 3
[50] Wilson 1992: 98; see Wilson 1985: 37
[51] see Wilson 1992: 98
[52] Friedberg 1993:

female academics soon sought to debate the potential for and merits of the *flâneuse* and a small but significant body of work was produced as a result.[53] These writers came from a variety of disciplines, no doubt the result of the wide scope for *flânerie* and the ability of the *flâneur* to move across a range of disciplines.[54] Overlooking some of the leaps in logic required for such an exercise, these academics suggested that the role of the *flâneur* could, indeed, be reclaimed and reconstituted in the female form: as the '*flâneuse*.' Within this re-composition lies the assumption that the nineteenth century female figure might have experienced the same pleasures: the mobility, the visual power and the apparent ontological or emotional freedom that was the privilege of the *flâneur*. And implicit to their argument is the suggestion that the *flâneuse* had actually existed - that skimming along the walls of the city, hiding behind the street lights or nestling in the shadow of the bohemian dandy *flâneur*, one could find a female figure exercising the same power and sharing a similar perspective.

The interest in this subject matter was timely as, within sociology, geography and studies of culture, concerns about space and culture were figuring prominently.[55] Increasingly debates centred on the gendered nature of urban and public space and questions about the visibility (or possible invisibility) of women in cities were being asked. At the same time the predominance of debates on the social, economic, and political organisation of societies that characterised modernity (particularly questions on the location of modernity and its impact), naturally led to the call for alternative narratives of modernity.

Interestingly, a number of motivations seem to be at hand in this quest to locate the '*flâneuse*.' (These motives require explanation for they provide

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[53] see Wilson 1992; Friedberg 1993; Ryan 1994; Nava 1997
[54] see Friedberg 1993; Lury 1996; Bowlby 1985

insight into the way or ways that the *flâneuse* has been constructed.) First, it is an exercise in historical archaeology, an attempt to reveal women's experience in the public sphere; to develop a more precise understanding of the position of women within the changing space of modernity, and to find them within spaces previously unsuspected. It is an opportunity, in Mica Nava's words, "to put women back on the public stage from which they had previously been excluded." [56] By doing so, it gives credence to women's experience. The challenge of the '*flâneuse* project', therefore, becomes one of reasserting women's status within the urban mélange of the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Hence, within the literature on the *flâneuse* there seems to be an overwhelming preoccupation with ascertaining whether the female *flâneur* could have existed or did exist. Thus Nava refers to her interrogation into this subject as a 'genealogy of absence.' [57]

At the same time this exercise is part of a desire to gender an otherwise masculine figure. It is a challenge to the historical accuracy of a primarily theoretical motif (for Benjamin the *flâneur* is, above all, a critical metaphor) by grounding it in some semblance of 'reality.' [58] And although *flânerie* refers to a mode of being that does not seem to reference, rely on, or assume gender, feminists writing about space or visual culture will claim that such processes are always gendered, regardless of intentions. Thus the exercise in locating the *flâneuse* also becomes one of symbolic inclusion, an understandable attempt to write women into the picture of modernity by ensuring they are represented in the ongoing use of a key theoretical motif. It is also an attempt to ensure

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[55] see Robertson 1992, 1995; Lash and Urry, 1993; Featherstone 1993
[56] Nava 1997: 38
[57] Nava 1997: 38
[58] In Walter Benjamin: Some Biographical Fragments Lloyd Spencer stresses that "Benjamin's stance throughout his life and in almost everything he wrote was critical. His contestation of any form of continuity with tradition remained a constant element of his thinking." (pg 4); The streets of Paris weren't necessarily strewn with flaneuse/there certainly wasn't a flaneur at every corner.

women are represented in the discourses of modernity and by doing so, to break down the previously totalising perspectives of modernity.

Finally this project is also about gendering the 'gaze.' The *flâneur* has been described as the embodiment of the male whose mode of viewing has become understood as the quintessential 'male gaze' and whose object of focus is, naturally, the female in the city.[59] "Women," Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson writes, "are essential components of the urban drama 'consumed' and 'enjoyed' along with the rest of the sights that the city affords."[60] The *flâneur*'s erotic gaze becomes the prototype for later constructs of the male gaze. Although I would challenge the assumption that the *flâneur* embodies a decidedly male gaze that fixates upon women, this belief figures widely in descriptions of the *flâneur*. Social geographers, Chris Jenks and Tiago Neves write that, "women become a part of the urban spectacle or drama for the *flâneur*,"[61] while Elizabeth Wilson claims that the *flâneur* "represents men's visual and voyeuristic mastery over women... and hence the *flâneur*'s freedom to wander at will through the city is essentially a masculine freedom."[62] As a result, "the *flâneur*'s.... movements through a newly configured urban space often transformed the female's presence into a textual homage." [63] The exercise in locating the *flâneuse* becomes an opportunity to deflect this gaze and to explore the potential for female spectatorship during the period.

To summarise, there are two strands of thought in the debates around the *flâneuse*. The first is the possibility that the *flâneuse* existed, that a woman could be found in the cities engaging in what might be called '*flânerie*'. The second is that the *flâneuse* might take on a symbolic role of equal breadth and

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[59] For instance Wilson (1991: 5) argues that women become a part of the urban spectacle or drama for the flâneur.
[60] Parkhurst Ferguson 1993: 28
[61] Jenks and Neves: 6
[62] Wilson 1992: 98

importance as the *flâneur*. In the discussions around the *flâneuse*, it seems necessary for the former to be true (for a female *flâneur* to have existed during the period), for the latter symbolic figure to be credible and thus usable within academic discourse. This may be because, as Wolff so astutely notes, we "cannot resolve questions of women's relation to modernism purely at the level of representation." [64] What becomes apparent in this exercise is how very much is at stake in finding the *flâneuse*.

Using Wolff's article as their impetus, and with complete exclusion as their starting point, a number of academics (primarily feminist critics) have sought out the *flâneuse* within the Victorian cityscape.[65] Elizabeth Wilson finds her in the wanton prostitute of the nineteenth century streets;[66] this grisette becomes a popular translation that is repeated often within academic discourse. Of note, Susan Buck-Morss, who famously interpreted Benjamin's Passagenwerk, elaborates on the importance of the prostitute as a figure within the Arcades Project and Benjamin's reading of the city.[67] Others find the *flâneuse* in the bedraggled 'rag-picker' scurrying to salvage the detritus on the city streets.[68] A greater challenge has been to find middle-class women within the diverse milieu of the city. Hardy historians began to unearth accounts of middle-class women having been exposed to public life, entering 'theoretically prohibited' areas such as the slums of the city by way of, for instance, their involvement in philanthropic work.[69] It was soon discovered that women of the

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[63] Friedberg 1993: 33
[64] Wolff 1990: 4
[65] This exercise, of course, is based on certain preconceptions about the 'modern' period and modernity, the primary assumption being that women were physically and ideologically removed from the public sphere. This premise is flawed – for it is now recognised that the line between private and public was much fuzzier than imagined. I discuss this matter later in this paper.
[66] see Wilson 1992, 1991
[67] see Buck-Morss 1992, see also Wilson 1992: 93
[68] see Parsons 2000
[69] see Walkowitz 1992, Bland 1992

period had inhabited a range of public/private spaces such as tea-rooms, restaurants, hotels, museums, galleries and exhibitions.[70] Nava writes:

> "What begins to emerge is a picture in which middle-class women were much closer to the dangers and the excitement of city life than the notion of separate spheres would lead us to anticipate ...so it is clear that middle-class urban women were not confined to their homes all the time."[71]

While these authors did not always suggest that by appearing or by participating in the public sphere such women necessarily engaged in *flânerie*, there is the implication that they may have been *flâneuses*. There is a lax use of the term, references to the *flâneuse* abound in their work and *flânerie* is used interchangeably with the activities of women in public. As well, some authors have suggested that certain attributes of the *flâneur* were decidedly feminine: Rey Chow "suggests that the aimless, non-purposive character of strolling and loitering is a 'feminine' mode." Other writers have tried to feminise aspects of Benjamin's work or site of study: Victor Burgin, for instance, argues that the arcades should be perceived as maternal space.[72] Above all this work provided, and provides, an opportunity to debunk the very stale notion of separate spheres of the Victorian period and thereby open up a discourse on women's experience outside the home.[73]

Mica Nava also argues against women's exclusion in the development of modernity and she suggests another possible location for the *flâneuse*. In Nava's article - in part, a critique of the limits of Wolff's thinking - Nava claims that Wolff focused too greatly on the "subordination of women and their marginalisation in mainstream historical accounts." [74] Moreover, Nava claims that Wolff's focus on mid-nineteenth century modernity pre-empted women's

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[70] Featherstone 1998: 915, referring to Wilson 1991, Friedberg 1994, Nava 1997, Abelson 1989
[71] Nava 1997: 61
[72] Wolff 2000: 122
[73] see Davidoff & Hall 1997
[74] Nava

experiences of early modernity, and Nava suggests instead that women were present but 'late-starters' within the modern public sphere, not revealing themselves till later in the century. Nava also suggests that Wolff's *flâneur* is far too fixed, particularly in the strict confinement of gender, and she believes that Wolff's *flâneur* "excludes the everyday spectatorship of ordinary people, and especially ordinary women."[75] Nava attempts to make a 'different reading of women's participation in modernity' and she suggests that a figure such as the *flâneuse* could have very well existed but in a different site and context than that of the *flâneur*.[76] Rather than on the bustling city streets of nineteenth century Paris, it was in the department stores – such as the famed Bon Marché - that Nava found, or more appropriately, chose to locate her *flâneuse*. Thus Nava identifies the *flâneuse* as 'consumer,' and shopping as *flânerie*.

Nava's approach is to pull together a wide range of newly published historical accounts of consumerism, shopping and the spaces of consumption. Nava focuses, in particular, on women's experiences in the stores and on the impact that shopping had in bringing women out of the homes. This information, she believes, challenges women's exclusion from the public sphere and shows that women might have made a dent in the social and moral order of the period. Nava's goal is to demonstrate that the spaces of consumption were unique, acted as 'women's spaces' and offered a site for female *flânerie* greater than most other spaces available to women during the period.

Interestingly Nava's interpretation is quite different than Wolff's. Wolff does acknowledge that "consumerism is a central aspect of modernity and that the establishment of the department store in the 1850s and 1860s created a

[75] Nava 1997: 58
[76] Nava 1997: 41

new arena for the public appearance of women." [77] And she states that "by the end of the nineteenth century shopping was an important activity for women, the rise of the department store and of the consumer society providing a highly legitimate, if limited, participation in the public sphere." [78] But Wolff does not consider the female consumer an important figure primarily because the literature of modernity, she claims, was never concerned with shopping. Wolff acknowledges the importance of consumerism as an aspect of modernity but she believes that

> "the peculiar characteristics of 'the modern' which I have been considering – the fleeting, anonymous encounter and the purposeless strolling – do not apply to shopping or to women's activities either as public signs of their husband's wealth or as consumers." [79]

However one could argue that since the publication of Wolff's article consumerism has received significant attention within academia, moving out of the dusty corners of business studies to become a legitimate area of study within disciplines as broad as history, sociology, anthropology and cultural studies. As a result there has been an explosion of material on the subject, covering everything from the meaning of consumption and the history of consumer society, to more specific work on the spaces of consumption or shopping practices. There is now a much clearer acknowledgement of the link between modernity and consumer culture and, specifically, in this instance, much lengthy documentation on the experience of shopping and consumer culture in the nineteenth century.[80]

Despite Wolff's misgivings, Nava firmly believes the *flâneuse* could be found within these burgeoning department stores. Nava does not deny that the

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[77] Friedberg 1993: 37
[78] Wolff 1990: 58
[79] Wolff 1985: 46
[80] This, of course, depends on the writer. Although it is generally acknowledged that consumption became widely available and hence 'mass consumption' in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, some

other constructs of the *flâneuse* – such as the prostitute – are legitimate or useful, but she implies that in their role as consumers they may have had a better opportunity to engage in *flânerie*. For instance she states that those women who 'made it' onto the streets, "were unlikely to have lingered in parks and other public places to observe the ephemera of urban life – especially feminine life – in quite the voyeuristic style attributed to Baudelaire's *flâneur*."[81] Instead Nava suggests that the department store provided "a spectacular environment in which to stroll aimlessly, to be a *flâneuse*, to observe people, to admire and parade new fashions."[82] Given that the prostitute and the rag-picker are both figures from the lower-classes, locating the *flâneuse* within the department store also becomes an opportunity to explore the possible engagement of middle-class women with the public sphere. This becomes particularly relevant at a time when the '*flâneuse* as whore' was, I suggest, over-used within recent scholarship and when it was acknowledged that the prostitute conveyed a lower/working-class point of view.

This concept of the *flâneuse* as consumer has been reiterated, and hence reinforced by a number of key academics. Sociologist Mike Featherstone freely makes the connection between shopping and female *flânerie* in his article "The *Flâneur* in the City" (1998). He writes, "if the *flâneur* was evidently a male social type, then the rise of the department stores can be seen as involving a process of the feminization of the *flâneur*." [83] Anne Friedberg also makes the connection when she writes that "the department store may have been, as Benjamin put it, the *flâneur*'s last coup, but it was the *flâneuse*'s first." [84] In her compelling text, The Gender of Modernity, Rita Felski writes that "the

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believe it to be associated with the modern (Slater), others with the late-modern or the post-modern (Baudrillard). The distinctions remain fuzzy.

[81] Nava 1997: 62

[82] Nava 1997: 72

[83] Featherstone 1998: 914

department store... gave women a space in which they could wander and observe in a similar manner," paying special attention to the erotic gaze of modernity that is a "determining feature of women's voyeuristic relationship to the commodity." [85] The idea that the *flâneur* moved directly from the arcades, straight through the grand doors of the department store has become standard within discussions on the later stages of the *flâneur*'s 'life.' [86]

Increasingly shopping and the tactics of consumption, have become associated with *flânerie*; alternately, the term *flânerie* has been used interchangeably with shopping in descriptions of contemporary consumption practices. For example, in the introduction to their anthology The Shopping Experience, Pasi Falk and Colin Campbell argue that the contemporary shopper is a *flâneur/flâneuse* as she is "a consumer of experiences and (she) seeks out the stimuli and aesthetic sensations of urban spaces, enjoying the freedom of mingling in the crowd and mingling with the world of goods on display." [87] Friedberg also refers to the shopper as *flâneuse*, writing that her freedom "was equated with shopping on her own." [88] In her review of the key debates around consumption, aptly entitled Consumer Culture, Celia Lury readily makes the suggestion that shopping encourages and relies on *flânerie*.[89] More recently Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, in her contribution to the compilation, The *Flâneur*, has noted that "for the texts of *flânerie*, shopping seems to be the strongest social marker of female activity." [90] What became a suggestion has now become fixed within academic discourse. At present, only a few select academics have acknowledged problems with this construct, and their concerns

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[84] Friedberg 1993: 37
[85] Felski 1995: 70
[86] see for instance Shields 1994: 66
[87] see Falk and Campbell 1997
[88] see Friedberg 1993 etc
[89] see Lury 1996
[90] Parkhurst Ferguson 1994: 27

have not been widely vocalized.[91] Given this, such an idea clearly requires interrogation.

In the chapters that follow I discuss this concept of the *flâneuse* as consumer in detail. In Chapter 3 I examine her location in the department store as Nava's argument centres on the department store as a key site for women and as a key cultural construct. I outline Nava's argument and then explore the site and shopping, examining its potential for *flânerie*. Following that, in Chapter 4 I look at the consumer as *flâneuse*, a study that leads to questions about the original *flâneur* as consumer and his relationship to the market.

[91] see Parkhurst Ferguson 2000, Parsons 2000, Wolff 1990

CHAPTER 3 The *flâneuse* goes shopping

Nava's choice of settings - the department store - seems a fitting one in which to place the female figure of modernity, the *flâneuse*. Considered to be one of the most important structures of the modern period, the department store has received substantial attention from academics who have written about the store's social and cultural relevance and particularly its relevance in regards to architecture, design and the built environment.[92] These grand stores were, like museums or great exhibitions, key iconic structures of modern urban society.

For Nava the department store's distinctiveness lay in its provision of spaces for women and, Nava suggests, its potential for female *flânerie*. It is now common knowledge within academia that the department stores of the nineteenth century were some of the first spaces outside the domestic sphere to be accessible to women.[93] Although most public spaces in the mid-to-late nineteenth century were considered off-limits to middle-class women (and increasingly an ideology of separate spheres pushed women back into the home), the department store was one of the few spaces perceived as respectable.[94] Thus it has been suggested that shopping brought women out of the domain of the private, providing them with a very visible public presence. Shopping, too, became a "socially acceptable leisure activity for bourgeois women, as a pleasure rather than a necessity" that "encouraged women to be peripatetic without escort." [95] A trip to the stores allowed women the opportunity to move through public space, as Rachel Bowlby notes when she

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[92] see Martin 1992; Falk 1996; Adburgham 1979;
[93] see Felski 1995, Laermans 1993
[94] see Wolff: 12-33
[95] Friedberg 1993: 36

writes: "given the assignment of women to the domestic sphere, shopping did take them out of the house to downtown areas formerly out of bounds."[96]

Within the cities, consumption had moved out of small and often simple retail spaces and into these purpose-built palaces. The department stores provided a range of goods previously unavailable, displayed to an extent never seen before. The stores were exotic and glamorous, referred to as 'palaces', 'theatres', and 'dream worlds' and customers were encouraged to wander amid this panorama of goods. Mass production created the availability of the goods in these stores, while demand for goods increased alongside improvements to the standard of living, the growth of disposable income, and new attitudes towards leisure and consumption.[97] The link between women and consumption quickly became naturalized, predicated on a male/female production/consumption (and spiritual/material) binary and although consumption had not as yet become associated with the 'domestic,' it was, by then, associated with female desire, luxury and even excess.[98] This period also saw an industry develop around the stimulation of desires: the rise of advertising, the launch of magazines and the development of notions of lifestyle that were meant to encourage consumption, particularly among women.[99]

Nava suggests that the stores offered multiple benefits to women at the time. She writes:

> "The department store was an anonymous yet acceptable public space and it opened up for women a range of new opportunities and pleasures – for independence, fantasy, unsupervised social encounters, even transgression – as well as, at the same time, for rationality, expertise and financial control. Shopping trips, sanctioned by domestic and

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[96] Bowlby 1985: 22
[97] Leach 1989: 101
[98] see Fine and Leopold 1993: 69; Carter 1984: 110
[99] For more information on women's relationship to early consumption see: Fine and Leopold 1993:69, Carter 1983: 110. It should be noted that recent studies, particularly those by Frank Mort, have revealed how men had important roles as consumers and were also the target of early advertising.

> familial obligations, justified...relatively free movement around the city and travel on public transport in the proximity of strangers." [100]

It is clear that department stores had a function that went beyond the provision of goods: They were a venue that gave women an opportunity to be among other women.[101] Historian Rudi Laermans writes about the stores increasingly becoming the equivalents of male downtown clubs and cafés, with a number of stores providing free meeting rooms for womens' organisations, reading rooms, and even nurseries.[102] Other historians have detailed the extensive services provided by department stores of the period which included everything from hair and manicure services, baths and health clubs, children's playgrounds and even zoos.[103] Historian Elaine Abelson notes that these stores had few male customers and those that did visit tended to be infrequent visitors. With a predominantly female clientele, these stores provided women a space of their own.[104] Moreover, department stores were some of the first public spaces to be designed with women in mind – the implication that these 'bespoke spaces' were more conducive to a particularly female experience.

Because these stores provided public space for women where it was otherwise non-existent, Laermans suggests that, "department stores played a role in emancipating women."[105] Historian Susan Porter-Benson also writes that these stores "offered quite a new way of women experiencing their relationship to the social, offering forms of definition not confined by work or home.

Nava suggests that the department stores provided women with their greatest freedom outside of the home, offering them an opportunity to experience modernity through the eyes of the *flâneur*. A quite different and

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[100] Nava 1997: 53
[101] see Wolff 1985
[102] see Chaney 1983, Dowlin 1993
[103] Porter Benson 1986: 20-21; Reekie 1993 (from Swanson: 10)
[104] see Abelson 1989
[105] Laermans 1993: 89

more dramatic suggestion is Nava's claim that certain elements of the 'department store experience' were conducive to *flânerie*, such as the open spaces and the unique and exotic display of visual stimuli. Nava believes it was in this arena, "that the everyday lives of large numbers of ordinary women were most deeply affected by the process of modernity."[106] On initial inspection such a suggestion is easily made, for the parallels between the street and the department store are obvious. In the section that follows I look at the similarities between the street and the department store using the descriptions from Nava and others, in order to understand the extent of this similarity.

As on the street, in the department store one experienced a barrage of visual images in the panoramic, colourful displays located throughout the stores. Nava focuses on the sights in the stores and how, like the streets of the city, they were "transfigured by the 'social multiplication of images."[107] Within these spaces visitors experienced the "rapid flow of signs and images which saturate the fabric of everyday life in contemporary society." [108] Lefebvre's description of the contemporary city with its "consuming displays, displays of consuming, consuming of signs, signs of consuming" could aptly describe the interiors of the early department store.[109] The commodities on display, therefore, were not unlike the people and images passing the *flâneur* by on the street.

Looking was the *flâneur*'s job and "the multifarious sights of the astonishing new urban spectacle constituted (his) raw material ....the *flâneur* spends most of his day simply looking at the urban spectacle."[110] One of the challenges of locating women within the modern sphere as *flâneuse* has been to

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[106] Nava 1997: 64
[107] Friedberg 1993: 16
[108] Friedberg 1993: 16
[109] Lefebrve 1971: 114
[110] Wilson 1992: 94

find a space that provided an opportunity for women to look, and for women to re-appropriate the male gaze of the *flâneur*. The spectacle within the stores encouraged, even demanded, such a gaze. Friedberg writes: "The paradise of the department store relied on the relation between looking and buying, and the indirect desire to possess and incorporate through the eye." [111] The stores provided a legitimate opportunity to look, to be both subject and object of the gaze - "appropriating at one go the pleasure/power of both the voyeur and the narcissist" - and it sanctioned this looking and desire.[112] And although the stores were just one of an increasingly long line of 'new visual cultures' that included advertising, photography and later film, the department store was one of the few places where engaging in this visual culture was acceptable. Nava writes that the stores legitimated "the desire of women to look as well as being looked at." [113] The stores, in which female shoppers became involved in the new image-worlds of modernity, enabled women to explore their own desires outside the domestic sphere.[114]

The stores exotica and the element of fantasy it produced could be associated with the phantasmagoria that Benjamin describes when referring to the multiple visions of the street and the arcades. Benjamin writes about the transformed city landscape, "likening it to the shimmering images of a magic lantern show: 'the phantasmagoria, where it appears sometimes as a landscape, sometimes as a room.'" [115] The stores were intoxicating dream worlds that, some say, allowed visitors to explore the world of their unconscious. This element of dreaming was a key aspect of Benjamin's work. There is a link between the mode of shopping, the mentality of consumption

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[111] Friedberg 1993: 42
[112] Nava 1997: 63
[113] Nava 1996: 53
[114] Lury 1996: 144
[115] Cohen 1993: 235

and the mindset of the *flâneur*: Gilloch refers to *flâneur*, for instance, as a 'somnambulist' and a 'dreamer' - the same characteristics define the consumer and of the commodity. Commodities "have a somewhat dreamlike quality even in terms of their use-value, for they are less often connected with labour or the small necessities of life (for example, needles and thread) than linked to leisure and a designer lifestyle."[116] Featherstone also writes about the dream-element of shopping, about the "tensions and swings between day-dreaming and careful observation, immersion in sensations and civil inattentiveness may occur in contemporary women shoppers."[117] The world of goods provides a distraction, offering the consumer an opportunity to "surrender oneself to the pleasure of distraction, to allow oneself to be led by fancy and caprice... the fundamental basis of the heedless wanderings of the dawdling *flâneur*." [118]

It can be argued that the department store also offered women the ability to look critically and to create their own meanings in the same way as the *flâneur*. The role of consumer was the perfect guise: it demands the ability to create meanings, and produce new identities. Consumption, in its most simple definition, is premised on the ability to destabilise the original notion of use or meaning of goods and attach to them new images and signs "which can summon up a whole range of associated feelings and desires."[119] Objects become, like the cityscape and the crowds, foci which to interpret.

Looking relies on a certain modus operandi; a particular mode of walking and negotiating one's way through the city. The *flâneur* was not rambling by chance, but by necessity – it was inherent to his being, allowing him the scope of vision that those in the crowd may have missed in their hurried rush through the city. The *flâneur*, Featherstone writes, "points to the centrality of

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[116] Morse: 105
[117] Featherstone 1998: 916-7

locomotion in social life: the stroller is constantly invaded by new streams of experience and develops new perceptions as he moves through the urban landscape and crowds."[120] Whereas in the hostile environment of the city streets women may have had little opportunity to stroll, ensconced within the commercial dream-land of the department store there was opportunity for rambling in comfort. Chaney suggests that in the open plan of a large store "the customer is ostensibly freer, she decides upon their itinerary and chooses their purchases at their own time."[121] Furthermore, with their extensive use of glass and provision of spaces that seemed at once open and closed, the department stores straddled the public and private, providing the sort of liminal space that was the domain of the *flâneur*. In this way the department stores shared the same qualities as the arcades, the subject of Benjamin's lengthy study.[122]

Finally, if the *flâneur* was meant to meld anonymously into the crowd the department store offered this sort of anonymity, so claims sociologist Peter Corrigan. He writes that these spaces offered "the possibility to escape not only the domestic sphere but also the neighbourhood, and (to) swap the pleasures and restrictions of the known community for the quite different pleasures and restrictions of the community of strangers who thronged the city centers."[123] Within the department store one witnessed the ultimate convergence of consumerism and the spectacle; the stores could easily be interpreted as an extension of the contemporary city or, its internal space as a microcosm of the street.

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[118] Gilloch 1996: 85
[119] Featherstone: 115
[120] Featherstone 1998: 910
[121] Chaney 1990: 22
[122] see Walter Benjamin's Passagenwerk (Arcades Project) 1938
[123] Corrigan 1997: 61

Nava makes a convincing argument for the liberating spaces of the department store that provided the capacity for free movement, for looking and for desiring. But I argue that if we are to interpret *flânerie* sympathetically, as more than just a mode of looking or of walking, we must fairly explore the limitations of these department stores for female *flânerie*. Therefore I must address what I perceive to be the two main problems with Nava's assumption. The first is that the Bon Marchés did not offer the same type of visual and physical mobility as the street, for in their layout and design they were much more akin to Foucault's panopticon. This element of social control, that was such a crucial aspect of the design and structure of the retail environment, retarded the department store's ability to act as a space for *flânerie* and inhibited the production of a critical pose so demanded of the *flâneur/flâneuse*. Secondly, the desire for historical accuracy that dogs much of the search for the *flâneuse* is impeded by the paucity of information on women's experiences in these nineteenth century stores. Without such insight, specifically without an understanding of how women used the stores, it becomes difficult to make any claims about women's role as *flâneuse* in these spaces.

Nava's construction, and the criticisms against such a construction ultimately become a matter of perspective. Was the space of the department store liberating or oppressive? Did women consider shopping to be leisure or work? Is the consumer active or passive? Is consumerism good or bad? I believe Nava, and others writing about the shopping-*flâneuse*, over-extend the potential merits of consumerism and the activities within the spaces of consumption. Their perspective, which informs this work, sorely needs to be addressed. Nava's argument is marred by an overly optimistic view of consumer culture, one that I believe is taken from revisionist accounts of consumerism that stress the positive, liberating aspects of consumption as

negotiated by an empowered consumer. Moreover the idea of this active intermediary within the spaces of consumption is historically restricted; it is a new idea that relies on a post-modern environment and consumer. Therefore it should not, I believe, be applied to early accounts of consumption. Such a perspective taints Nava's ability to provide an objective outlook or to mention many of the concerns associated with consumption. Had she been more suspicious of women's experience of early consumerism and/or consumer culture, she might not have placed the *flâneuse* in the much-maligned site of the department store.

If we are to assume the *flâneuse* in the department store maintained a high degree of similarity to the *flâneur*, then this *flâneuse*-a-shopping construct implies a high degree of agency and authority on the part of female shoppers of the period. It assumes these women were free to wander, like the *flâneur*, and lacked any ideological or physical manipulation. However, if we are to maintain historical accuracy - assuming that the *flâneuse* was a figure with the characteristics of the *flâneur* - then we must acknowledge that most accounts of department stores of the period (the mid-to-late nineteenth century) contradict this fact. Nava fails to recognise the department store's 'production of desires,' a perspective that figured prominently in early accounts of shopping spaces, but which has been waylaid in more recent analyses. Accounts of early consumption frequently focus on the department store – like early modernity - as a site of surveillance and control. They were much more akin to Hausman's grand boulevards as expressions of social control. The manipulation of the consumer was articulated in a number of ways, which I describe briefly in the section below.

Early merchandising tactics were, even then, sophisticated and growing rapidly in their sophistication. William Leach describes the exotic displays in the

stores as surrealist and theatrical, transforming objects into what they were not.[124] The use of light (many stores provided the first use of electric light) enhanced the theatrics of display, allowing for a level of spectacle and illusion that was perceived as overwhelming. The literature of the period details the narcotic effects of the spectacle. Chaney writes that the "spectacular is a form of narrative and part of the innovatory force of department stores was to create spectacular imagery for a culture of consumerism." [125] If the displays offered a particular way of reading goods, how significantly were women able to 're-read' objects or subjects within that space? Mike Featherstone notes that, "advertising and the display of goods in the 'dream-worlds'... of department stores and city centres plays upon the logic of the commodity-sign to transgress formerly sealed-apart meanings and create unusual and novel juxtapositions which effectively rename goods. Mundane and everyday consumer goods become associated with luxury, exotica, beauty and romance with their original or functional 'use' increasingly difficult to decipher." [126]

The stores did provide the ability to look at goods, but *flânerie* you might recall, relies on the ability to look *with a particular perspective*. It is this detached gaze that provides the critique. *Flânerie* is also about a unsanctioned looking for, in Bauman's words, 'the art the *flâneur* masters is that of seeing without being caught looking.'"[127] If the department store encouraged modes of looking then where were the opportunities for alternative or resistant gazes? Furthermore how significantly could women shoppers remain detached from the process of consumption? The *flâneur*, according to Benjamin, "takes the urban scene as a spectacle, strolling through it as though it were a diorama, that is,

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[124] Leach 1989: 100
[125] Chaney 1990: 52
[126] Featherstone 1991: 85
[127] see Bauman 1994

detached from involvement with its practical concerns and purposes." [128] The *flâneur* acknowledges the spectacle but he is able to resist against its lures, unlike the shopping *flâneuse* for consumption relies on succumbing to these 'lures.' Once again these concerns come back to the ongoing questions of agency.

This ideological control continued through the store's provision of education. Unlike the *flâneur* who was autonomous and self-sufficient, female shoppers were – in many accounts - in need of assistance while shopping. In their heydays the department stores provided formal instruction to new consumers on methods of consumption. These sites were, to quote Leach, "schools for taste" and were the premiere spaces for the emergent middle class to "learn how to use commodities as symbolic goods which was crucial in the formation of a distinctive middle-class culture."[129] Historians Abelson and Armstrong both document the stores' provision of domestic training for the purpose of developing shopping competencies.[130] Promotions, demonstrations and displays provided the shopper with further insight on how to use new objects; even basic instruction was given on how to purchase goods and interact with store staff.

If stores attempted to control visitors' visual apparatus, they were also interested in controlling visitors' physical movement through space. Unlike the *flâneur* who found his way on the familiar city streets, many women had to be assisted around the early department stores. Robyn Dowling's work reveals that department stores in Vancouver, up to and including the 1920s, employed male floorwalkers to guide women around the store and help them control their urges to purchase. This practice was common across major north american and

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[128] Weinstein and Weinstein 1991: 157
[129] Hollows 2000: 116

european department stores of the period.[131] The store staff assumed they were dealing with a 'bewildered housewife' who was treated as irrational and in need of expert knowledge to help her select the right product for herself and her family.[132] Neil Harris writes about the "manipulation and self-consciousness" of the early department stores where "little is left to chance." [133] This element of control limits the ability for the female-shopper to experience the 'chance distractions' of the *flâneur* who was meant to wander through the labyrinth of these spaces without a particular destination in mind. In fact it becomes difficult to suggest that there were any random or secret spaces for the female *flâneur* to find, or to hide in. In the oft-referenced text from the period, Au Bonheur des Dames, the head of the department store, named Mouret, actually surveys the female shoppers from the vantage point of his office "confident in his ability to control the ebb and flow of female desire." [134] This idea of the producer being able control the consumer was prevalent in the period. Rita Felski, for instance, notes that "rather than exemplifying a zone where abstract rationality and instrumental calculation hold sway, economic relations between producers and consumers are shown to be saturated with fantasies of sexual power and domination." [135] These concerns about control are reiterated in the writing of sociologist Peter Corrigan who reminds us that, "it ought not to be forgotten that the stores tried to reshape women in an image that suited their own retailing purposes."[136]

The idea of the irrational consumer, which dominated these practices of control, soon saturated popular perceptions of consumers within these spaces.

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[130] Abelson 1989: 23-24, Armstrong 1990: 15-28
[131] Dowling 1993: 202
[132] Dowling 1993: 310
[133] Harris: 282
[134] Felski: 71
[135] Felski 1995: 71
[136] Corrigan 1997: 63

Women's entry into consumption was described as 'fervent,' and allusions were made to women's hysteria and anxiety. One one hand, these negative allusions did have a basis in fact. Historian Elaine Abelson reveals that countless women were so 'overcome' by the plethora of goods on display in the early Bon Marchés and department stores that they took to shoplifting. The phenomenon was so rampant that it became a concern of some magnitude for store-owners. Public discourse was peppered with cautionary tales of shoplifters caught thieving while over the course of the last half of the nineteenth century the middle-class female kleptomaniac became an increasingly familiar figure within popular culture.[137]

Still much of this rhetoric was based on fear and stereotypes of women who were seduced by the marketplace and the world of goods: the irresistible touch of silk and satin, the visual seduction of the displays and the thirst for possessions.[138] For instance, cultural historian Neil Harris refers the work of William Dean Howells, an American social realist, noting that Howells' writing "evoked the fierce intensity of the female shoppers, clasping parcels to their hearts and co-ordinating the immense task of moving from store to store in each of bargains which they could tote back to their suburban homes." [139] The female consumer was perceived as irrational, overcome by sensual impulses, experiencing a loss of self as she was sutured into consumption. Words like 'orchestrating' and 'architecture' suggested the degree of manipulation of consumers. Some writers suggest that the fears over women consumers could be perceived as an extension of the public's fears of women in the city, whose sexual presence was though to be a threat to the moral order.[140]

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[137] see Abelson 1989
[138] Wilson 1985: 150
[139] Harris 1990: 178
[140] see Roberts 1992; see also Walkowitz 1983, 1992

Much of these accounts, and the negative rhetoric associated with consumerism, are familiar within studies of consumption where they are repeated often and have, I believe, become quite fixed. (Recently, however, historians and sociologists have begun to challenge such one-dimensional perspectives; Nava's *flâneuse* is one example of this work.) But the question remains as to whether one can find examples of empowered consumer-*flâneuse* within the department store. If, as appears to be the case, the *flâneuse* must be situated within history, as a real living person rather than a phantom metaphor, she proves difficult to find in these stores. A number of resources are available to help illuminate women's experience in the stores during the period, all of which I have used in my account in the previous pages: historical fact-based accounts, fictional accounts and/or analyses by theorists and critics. It is the fact-based information that helps us 'prove' the existence of the *flâneuse*. Unfortunately, a high proportion of historical, experiential accounts focus on the post-war period (when many pundits suggest mass consumption accelerated into a full-blown consumer culture).[141] The work that examines the experience of the mid-to-late nineteenth century lacks an experiential component. Instead texts detail accounts of fictional characters within the grand department stores. French essayists and writers such as Zola, Dreiser and Gissing are referenced often within studies of the period (most particularly in Bowlby's well-known analysis) but it needs reminding that their accounts are fictional, although insightful and amusing! Otherwise analysis of this period is dominated by social commentary that offers a primarily male perspective and that stresses the amoral or degenerate nature of the consumerist ethos. Here we find an extensive body of work with a long history, starting with Marx and

Veblen and moving up to the Frankfurt School and later to the panicky post-war treatises of writers like Marcuse and Vance Packard. Again, little information has been published that details women's experience of the stores or women's perspective on consumption during the nineteenth century. McRobbie notes that aside from the studies by Lunt and Livingstone (1992) and their analysis of attitudes towards money and goods, "there are few detailed accounts of consumption." Furthermore, McRobbie is unaware of "any feminist work which (looks) at how women actually shop and what sort of issues influence their choices."[142] Cultural historian Neil Harris (writing in 1990) states that although there is quite a bit of information available on most aspects of early consumer culture, "the role and character of the retail buyer remain mysterious."[143] If the goal of feminist historians is to locate a historically situated, legitimate *flâneuse* then this process is impeded by the lack of information on how women negotiated or used the spaces of the department stores. Nava's speculation alone somehow does not seem to be adequate for finding the *flâneuse*.

With little historical information, the possibility of the *flâneuse* becomes a matter of perspective, a choice between regarding early female consumers as passive, mindless subjects or as active agents firmly in control of the processes of consumption (the *flâneuse* would assume and require the latter). The argument that consumers are free to make whatever meanings they wish from goods,

> "reverses the terms of previous debates: the meanings of goods inscribed in production are no longer seen as all-determining, and are increasingly seen as infinitely plastic and ineffectual. This ignores the way that struggles over the meanings of goods take place in power

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[141] An example of a well-documented, almost ethnographic work is Erica Carter's study of working-class housewives in the 1950s and their experience transgressing through the purchase of 'inappropriate' objects. Oral histories and actual accounts of resistance are documented.
[142] McRobbie: 81
[143] Harris 1990: 174

> relations, as was shown in the previous section, in which neither production, mediation, distribution nor consumption is determining (see Appadurai 1986, Hebdige 1988)."[144]

Nava's previous writing shows her firm belief in the latter premise: that women do have agency in these stores. In other work she suggests that shopping provides women with an opportunity to explore choice - writing that "it was women who first of all encountered new fashions and domestic novelties and decided whether they were worth adopting."[145] And Nava suggests that shopping gives women an opportunity to articulate their desires or needs which is of particularly potentency given the limited opportunities for women to do so.[146] Nava writes that through shopping "women developed a new consciousness of the possibilities and entitlements that modern life was able to offer."[147]

It is useful to delve into this matter as I believe Nava's perspective seriously informs her *flâneuse*. Nava is one of a select clique of contemporary feminist cultural analysts who have recently produced revisionist accounts of consumption. Challenging a long history of puritanical commentary on consumerism these writers have sought out the more positive aspects of consumer culture either through a re-examination of history or by applying new or alternative frameworks to theories of consumption. This work has been an attempt to move away from production-based accounts of consumption to understand how consumers create meaning in their consumption activities and in the objects they purchase and use. This work has also been influenced by key ideas in Cultural Studies: notions of resistance, the potential for alternative readings of texts and the value of everyday practices.[148] Finally this work also

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[144] Hollows 2000: 130
[145] Nava 1997: 66
[146] Nava 1997: 66
[147] Nava 1997: 72
[148] see, for instance, Fiske 1989, Radway 1984, Modleski 1982, Rabine 1985

seems to be a distinctly feminist practice, part of the larger project in womens' studies to re-examine, give credence to, and find oppositional meanings or readings in typically undervalued female cultural products and practices.[149] As an example, Hilary Radner's study of consumption was meant to break from the assumption that women are "shopping addicts narcoticized by the media."[150] Other work has sought to challenge the alignment between 'inherently' feminine qualities and consumption and to recognise consumption as socially valuable labour.

This 're-appropriation of consumerism' comes in many forms. There is potential for empowerment through the negotiation of financial transactions, the acquisition of goods[151] or the mastery of practices of consumption.[152] Transgressions (even those in "more minutely personal forms" are thought to be important) can be articulated through the expenditure of money[153] or through the purchase of inappropriate goods.[154] The space of the department store offers potential for transgression, fantasy, inversions and pleasure,[155] providing, as well, an opportunity for women to claim space. Shopping can be perceived as a form of protest,[156] an opportunity to announce allegiance, with the potential for trickery[157] and play.[158] Goods provide the resources that may "help women challenge gender inequality and their own objectification"[159] and

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[149] see also Langman 1992, Williamson 1982
[150] see Radner 1995
[151] Williamson (unbelievably!) states that acquisition and ownership is "the only form of control legitimized in our culture." (1986: 231)
[152] see Douglas 1997, Bowlby 1985, Lury 1996, Ferrier 1987, Williamson 1978, Fiske 1989. Ferrier believes power is produced through enacting and mastering the role of consumer. She writes that, for women, "there may be a sense of empowerment from their competency in shopping operations, their familiarity with the terrain and with what they can get out of it." (Ferrier: 23)
[153] Bowlby 1997: 102
[154] Carter 1984: 120
[155] Ferrier 1987: 4
[156] Douglas 1997: 17
[157] Fiske 1989: 14
[158] Lury 1996: 144
[159] Lury 1996: 143

"create or modify the context of everyday life and thus the meaning it bears."[160] So common have these assumptions become and so prolific their expanse that it has resulted in some fairly inane suggestions such as Rachel Bowlby's simplistic belief that to 'go out and buy' invokes a relative emancipation in women's role as active consumers.[161] Nava is part of this camp and she suggests, in an earlier article, that consumption offers women "new areas of authority and expertise, new sources of income, (and) a new sense of consumer rights." She adds that, "one of the consequences of these developments has been a heightened awareness of entitlement outside the sphere of consumption." [162]

It is important to have detailed this thinking because it does seem to be responsible for informing the development of this consumer-*flâneuse*. Such thinking obviously influences Nava, obscuring her from providing a more objective perspective on shopping, particularly one that highlights the drawbacks of life within these dream worlds of mass consumption. These drawbacks have been well detailed in what Dick Hebdige refers to as the 'negative consensus' (the work of Veblen, Marx, the Frankfurt School that was mentioned previously). Up until recently feminist perspectives of consumption have been equally, if not more, cynical. Vickery writes that "much feminist scholarship has displayed equal suspicion of the world of commodities, viewing fashion in particularly negative terms." [163] This also includes the work of materialist feminists that stress the work of consumption disguised as leisure and the oppressive nature of retail environments.[164] These concerns "about the moral consequences of new patterns of consumption... have persisted with

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[160] Fiske 1989: 26
[161] Bowlby 1985: 22
[162] Nava 1992: 166
[163] Vickery 1994: 274
[164] see Oakley 1976; Winship 1987; Huws 1988

remarkable tenacity from early in our history."[165] Angela McRobbie is one the few contemporary female writers in this field to be critical of this new canon of work, believing it to wrongly portray "a social scenario of delights, pleasures and achievements rather than miseries and exclusions."[166] Therefore I believe that the fascination with the department store is based on a one-sided interpretation of consumption.

I suggest, too, that the premise of the empowered agent-consumer (which the *flâneuse* is) is a post-modern one that can only apply to contemporary experiences. It relies on strong consumer competencies and a high degree of consumer knowledge (knowledge about the market and the processes of consumption). It demands an ability to negotiate the marketplace and an understanding of the limits of consumption. Finally it requires a degree of reflexivity and self-referentiality – an understanding of how to subvert consumption or the consumer experience, to bring in ideas of play, transgression or resistance. Ultimately it requires an experienced, knowledgeable consumer, well versed in the rigours as well as the subtleties of the consumer experience – someone seeped in 'consumer culture.' Those consumers born and bred in the late modern, when consumption was a defining ethos, are readily able and equipped to take on this role of active agent. However it is foolish to apply this thinking to the 'time of the *flâneur*' when mass consumption was new, and when it was only beginning to be understood and negotiated.

Above I detailed the problems with the space of the department store and with the assumptions that are part of this choice. The impossibility of the *flâneuse*-in-the-department-store is confirmed by one of few recent writers who

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[165] Horowitz 1985: xvii
[166] McRobbie 1997: 79

doubts the potential for a female *flâneuse*. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson writes: "When *flânerie* moves into the private realm of the department store, feminisation alters this urban practice almost beyond recognition and jeopardises, when it does not altogether obliterate, the identification of *flâneur* and artist." [167] I discuss this transition from male to female, from the street to the department store further in chapter 4.

I have identified additional problems with the *flâneuse*-shopper which I detail below. These have less to do with the space of the department store than with the visitors to these grand magasins. These relate to class and to the activity of shoppers.

We must remember that the *flâneur* was a marginal character. Admittedly his class origins are confusing: Wilson writes about the fact that the role of the *flâneur* was "open to one narrow segment of the population only, educated men.... although *flânerie* often led to poverty and obscurity." [168] Still his position was on the sidelines and this was mandatory for his perspective. Department stores of the period were limited to women of the middle-classes and most stores formally denied access to those on 'the margins,' specifically the lower classes. Historians have written about the surprisingly select clientele of the department stores. Laermans (1993) notes how these stores attracted neither upper-class nor working-class women. "The upper classes would continue in their own luxurious way without needing the department stores" while the working classes "could certainly enter the big shops, but they might do rather more looking than buying."[169] This space was especially out of reach for the working-class. Angela McRobbie reveals that women were not invited to consume and that they did not have the means or inclination to consume, while

[167] Parkhurst Ferguson: 23
[168] Wilson 1991: 106

a number of historians have shown how the working-class had a staggered entry into the world of rationalised pleasure. [170] This fact then begs the following questions: could these middle-class women produce a marginal perspective? And who was their 'crowd'? Rather than looking at a multifarious collection of people, were these *flâneuses* not merely looking at their own mirror reflections? The stores were clearly not littered with outsiders - it was, as Wilson writes, 'the glamorous section of society' who visited the department stores.

This element of marginality becomes a concern when we realise that department stores were socially sanctioned spaces, not the alleyways or shadows in which the *flâneur* roams. This consuming *flâneuse* could not be a rebel figure for her involvement in consumption and the space in which she consumed were socially approved and endorsed by the community. The *flâneuse* is meant to stand outside, to be aloof and blasé. "He heroically resists incorporation into the milieu in which he moves." [171] Weinstein and Weinstein note that, "in making public places into playgrounds, the flâneur takes advantage of the systems of public order and control, and of production, which permit him to stroll safely and be entertained by the human comedy. He does not contribute to the maintenance or alteration of these systems, but has a parasitical relationship with them." [172] Moreover the *flâneur* is always meant to

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[169] Corrigan 1997: 59
[170] McRobbie 1997: 74 – see also Carolyn Steedman (1986) who points out that the working class know that their desires have to remain subordinated to the needs of others, usually men and children. Historical analyses of the working class found that "immigrant workers and their families entered hesitantly, if at all, into the developing infrastructure of bourgeois consumption – the sanitised 'dream worlds' of the movie palace, department and chain stores." (Agnew 1993: 27) "A number of studies have traced its origins back to the eighteenth century for the middle classes in Britain (McKendrick et al, 1982) and to the nineteenth century for the working classes in Braint, France and the United States." (Bailey 1978, Ewen and Ewen 1982; RH Williams 1982)." (Featherstone 1991: 113) Studies of consumer culture and class found that "immigrant workers and their families entered hesitantly, if at all, into the developing infrastructure of bourgeois consumption – the sanitised 'dream worlds' of the movie palace, department and chain stores." (Agnew 1993: 27)
[171] Gilloch 1996: 113
[172] Weinstein and Weinstein 1991: 157

be in exile, never in a comfortable space that he can call home. This is very unlike the department store's comfortable spaces – its rooms and parlours – designed and designated for middle-class women.

The activity of shopping itself, also goes against the *flâneur*'s rebellious character, a problem I discuss further in Chapter 4. Shopping was a modern pursuit but the *flâneur* was a nostalgic who "turned away from the belching factories to cultivate counterpoint lives of idleness and eccentricity." [173] Shopping was, for middle-class women in the late-nineteenth century, an approved activity (despite the rhetoric about women shoppers out of control) but the *flâneur*'s activity, his "parasitic role as a loiterer and man of the street" was one for which he faced social stigma.[174] Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, one of the few writers to critique the *flâneuse*-consumer, suggests that the shopper is not able to attain the aesthetic distance required for *flâneur*'s superiority. She writes:

> "(the female shopper) is unfit for *flânerie* because she desires the objects spread before her and acts upon that desire. The *flâneur*, on the other hand, desires the city as a whole, not a particular part of it. Shopping poses such a threat because it severely undermines the posture of independence that affords the *flâneur* his occupation and his raison d'etre. The intense engagement of the shopper in the urban scene, the interrogation into the market and the consequent inability to maintain the requisite distance, preclude the neutrality and objectivity that the *flâneur* cultivates so assiduously." [175]

Engaged in shopping, the existentialist pursuit that is *flânerie* gets thrown to the wayside in favour of a very materialist pursuit. If Baudelaire's poet is 'driven out of the private and into the public by his own search for meaning' then what of the shopper?[176] Sociologists writing about shopping claim it requires a level of attention and a psychic investment in objects along with a degree of self-determination, all of which is counterintuitive to the rebellious *flâneur*'s position

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[173] Dameron 2000: 136
[174] Chambers 1991: 145

on the sidelines as 'non-participatory.'[177] Shopping is a purposeful activity, whereas for the *flâneur*, "his highest ambition is to promenade without purpose." [178] Shopping requires and produces the systemisation of goods and practices. But the *flâneur* is opposed to systemisation and "has no interest in systematising the fragments of urban life."[179] Shopping is about pleasure, or certainly it was positioned as such (as a leisure activity) during the period. Daniel Miller describes how the shopper "is imagined engaged in pure self-indulgence following the dictates of individualised hedonism. Shopping comes to objectify a form of absolute freedom that fantasises a separation off from being defined by any social relations and obligations." [180] In his novel on the grand magasin Zola writes that the purpose of these 'ladies paradises' was their opportunity for pleasure, specifically for the pleasure of looking. For the *flâneur*, casual strolling is work. "It is the fate of the *flâneur* to never enjoy being because of the relentless doing of *flânerie*.....Hence the consumer society must not be regarded as only releasing a dominant materialism for it also confronts people with dream-images which speak to desires, and aestheticize and derealize reality." [181] This analysis makes apparent the very obvious contradictions, in fact the extreme differences between the *flâneur* and the shopper.

In this chapter I revealed that there is an inadequacy of information available to help understand how women use the space of department store for *flânerie*. And I suggested that theorising or making suppositions based on theory is not enough on which to base the construction of the *flâneuse*. A

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[175] Parkhurst Ferguson 1994: 27
[176] Tester 1994: 2
[177] see Morse 1998: 119
[178] Gilloch 1992: 109
[179] Weinstein and Weinstein 1991: 158
[180] Miller 1998: 96
[181] Featherstone 1991: 68

flâneuse based on theory alone lacks the necessary credibility that feminist academics have identified as a requirement. The attempt in this chapter to compare key elements of *flânerie* against the *flâneuse*-shopper, to make a direct, literal comparison between the *flâneur* on the street and the *flâneuse* in the store seems somewhat simpleminded. But this lengthy exercise was staged to prove to those academics who desire a historically situated *flâneuse* that the *flâneuse*-as-shopper doesn't fit, that she doesn't and couldn't exist in the department store as *flâneuse*. I argued that Nava doesn't have a full picture of the department store and her overly optimistic conception of these spaces disregards the control associated with department stores and ultimately weakens her argument.

In the chapter that follows I examine at the relationship between the consumer and the *flâneuse* as well as between the *flâneur*. My interest is in exploring how the *flâneur* has been referred to as consumer and his relationship to commodities.

Chapter 4 The *flâneuse*, the *flâneur* and the consumer

Of all the aspects to the *flâneuse*-a-shopping, the most contradictory is the assumption that she is a consumer. The location of the *flâneuse* implies such a role, while this role is stated more directly in recent academic work, referenced in Chapter 2, which describes the activity of shopping as *flânerie*.

But I argue that the frequent pairing of the *flâneur* with the consumer is predicated on a number of quite incorrect assumptions about *flânerie*, thus making the female *flâneur* as consumer suspect. I suggest these stem from a flawed conjecture: that of the longstanding and quite confusing relationship between the *flâneur* and the market, from the *flâneur*'s location in the arcades and his link to the commodity, to *flânerie*'s association with window-shopping and the world of goods. In this chapter I return to Benjamin and Baudelaire's reading of the *flâneur*, while I attempt to understand the thinking behind Benjamin's Arcades Project in order to comprehend how the *flâneur* was to be used and perceived. By revealing the *flâneur*'s very sketchy relationship to the world of goods and Benjamin's extremely critical reading of consumer culture, I show that the *flâneur* – in his figurative construction - cannot be a consumer. This analysis becomes a further opportunity to debunk the consumer-*flâneuse* model, which I showed in the last chapter to be historically questionable, and which I now show in this chapter to be ontologically impossible.

Much confusion reigns over the association between the flâneur of Benjamin's creation and consumer culture; this confusion has tainted current understandings of both the identity of the flâneur and the practice of *flânerie*. On the surface he appears bound up in consumption: his association with the visual, aesthetics and style, his role as dandy – thought to be a precursor to the

consumer - and his description as a 'commodity' makes a reading of *flâneur* as consumer quite reasonable.

But while the crowds may have gazed longingly through the store windows, and the consumer-*flâneuse* upon the exotic goods in the market, the *flâneurs'* gaze was fixed on the constant flow of fragmentary visual stimuli passing him on the streets. Here his task was more than just to view these objects; his was to make a mental record of his impressions.[182] Still, this aspect of looking so often makes the *flâneur* "an easy prototype for the consumer, whose perceptual style of 'just looking' was the pedestrian equivalent of slow motion." [183] Admittedly the *flâneur's* mode of viewing did delineate a certain way of perceiving or gazing that has become discretely associated with, and perhaps required for, the visual consumption of the new spectacles which included the objects on display within the Bon Marchés. Friedberg explains that in the nineteenth century, a wide variety of apparatuses "turned the pleasures of *flânerie* into a commodity form and negotiated new illusions of spatial and temporal mobility." [184] It is important to stress that the *flâneur* was never meant to be gazing at objects with desire or with intentions to consume; rather he was gazing with a sense of awed detachment at the blurry continuum of stimuli passing him by. In Benjamin's long essay "One Way Street," published in 1928, Benjamin reads his way along an imaginary street 'stringing his meditations from the hooks provided by its apartments, shop fronts, displayed commodities, signs, graffiti and advertisements.' [185] The commodities formed just a few of the many stimuli that the *flâneur* encountered on his travels - they provided somewhere for the flaneur to rest his eyes.[186]

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[182] Featherstone 1994: 913
[183] Friedberg 1993: 34
[184] Friedberg 1993: 37
[185] see Benjamin 1979
[186] Barry 1982: 14

What is unique is that the objects on 'One Way Street' do not answer to the interpreter's gaze: "the luxury goods swaggering before us now parade such brazen solidity that all the mind's shafts break harmlessly on their surface." [187] The *flâneur* might pass by the shop window but he only 'tastes' their delights, "without 'really' consuming them "in what Balzac, in the 'Physiologie du Mariage', calls a 'gastronomy of the eye.'" [188] It was not the *flâneur,* it was the others in the crowds – the masses – who were the consumers of objects. The *flâneur* collected observations rather than goods.

It is also easy to position the *flâneur* as consumer given his early location within the arcades. The department stores seem a natural progression from the arcades, where Baudelaire's *flâneur* 'first strolled with turtles.' [189] Admittedly the arcades made shopping new and exciting, as a specifically urban pursuit. For the *flâneur* the arcades were sites in which he could find distraction, novelty and pleasure. As a space the arcades were 'passage worlds,' dreamy artificial landscapes, enclosed social worlds through which the *flâneur* could stroll in comfort and leisure.[190] The arcades were also perceived as places of escape from the "rapid and uninterrupted fluctuation of external and internal impression" although they offered their own distinct form of stimulation.[191] Further clarification of Benjamin's perspective on the arcades is required.

The arcades were chosen for their ability to encompass the ideological and physical changes in the city – and hence encompass modernity – and they provided a complex site for interrogation. It was, of course, important that the arcades were the centre-point of an emerging consumer culture but this was

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[187] Indyk 2000: 4
[188] Parkhurst Ferguson 1994: quoting Balzac Vol 1: 930
[189] Benjamin (1938) notes that around 1840 it was fashionable to take turtles for a walk in the arcades
[190] see Benjamin 1973: 194

merely one facet of the new environment that Benjamin sought to critique. For Benjamin the arcades became the focus by which to actively explore the idea of 'false consciousness.' As well, the objects on display in the arcades and the arcades' propagation of consumerism allowed Benjamin to explore, for instance, the question of choice: "The Arcades Project was, of course, an attempt to create an objective context of signification wherein the subject might orient his or her choices." [192] Making choices was one of the new requirements of modern living. Scott Lash writes about de-traditionalization in the modern period that results in the receding of natural ordering which makes individuals "forced to make choices in all spheres of everyday life." For Lash the shift from mass to specialised consumption "implies a certain set of decisions that must be made....that depend on more than just resource maximization and cost-benefit thinking and assume an important expressive dimension alongside the utilitarian one." [193] The ability to make choices was one the most obvious needs for visitors to the arcades.

It is clear that Benjamin's study of the arcades was, in large part, a criticism of consumer culture. Terry Eagleton describes Benjamin's Arcades Project as "a parable of modernity that depends on figuring consumption as a seductively fallen state." [194] This interpretation is reiterated by Daniel Miller when he writes: "Yet when we look more closely at his (Benjamin's) attitude towards consumption, it has been argued that he saw the arcades and department stores as superficial: commodities were to be distrusted for they occluded the 'essence' of a better world."[195] Certainly given Benjamin's criticism of consumer culture, the choice of arcades seems strange – to be

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[191] Simmel 1950
[192] Bronner 2000: 4
[193] Lash 1993: 5, 19
[194] Eagleton 1981: 23
[195] Miller 1997: 35

immersed in, yet ideologically removed from them, as the *flâneur* was meant to be. The very contradictory nature of this choice has not been lost on Susan Buck-Morss. She asks, "If the Passagen-Werk was to have been more than a critique of false consciousness, just what is Benjamin doing in the phantasmagoria of the marketplace, the commodity-filled dreamworld of the *flâneur*/consumer?" [196] Here Buck-Morss is admitting to the somewhat inappropriate choice of location on Benjamin's part, which may account for the confusion over the relationship between the *flâneur* and the marketplace.

Equally confusion surrounds the *flâneur*'s relationship to the department store. In many readings of the *flâneur* there is the assumption that the arcades are the forerunners to the department store or that the Bon Marchés might be the next logical step up for the *flâneur* of the arcades. However, as I had hoped to show in Chapter 3, *flânerie* changes dramatically in this shift, for "although the department store is a logical outgrowth of the arcade, the new site alters *flânerie* almost beyond recognition."[197] Benjamin makes clear his feelings about the department stores in the following, lengthy quote. He writes:

> "On his peregrinations the man of the crowd lands at a late hour in a department store where there are still many customers. He moves about like someone who knows his way around the place... if the arcade is the classical form of the inté which is how the *flâneur* sees the street the department store is the form of the inté decay. The bazaar is the last hangout of the *flâneur*. If in the beginning the street had become an inté for him, not this inté turned into a street, and he roamed through the labyrinth of merchandise as he had once roamed through the labyrinth of the city... The *flâneur* is someone abandoned in the crowd in this he shares the situation of the commodity." [198]

While the department store may be a natural progression from the arcades from a retailing point of view, or even an architectural perspective, the department store was not the domain of the *flâneur*. The contradictions between this figure

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[196] Buck-Morss 1996: 107
[197] Parkhurst Ferguson: 34
[198] Benjamin 1938

and the store are apparent: the department store was a modernist statement and the *flâneur* was a nostalgic. In the novels of Zola the department stores "symbolize the forward momentum of the age: the bold new forms of capitalism." [199] This site is incongruous with the *flâneur* who held a nostalgia for traditionalism and a defiance against capitalism. In the quote above Benjamin appears to be stating that once the *flâneur* steps into the department store he no longer exists – he disappears, he loses his identity and evaporates into the masses. The transformation of the *flâneur*'s social space from the street to the department store or alternately to Hausman's grand boulevards and planned streets signifies the decline of *flânerie* and the figure of the *flâneur* in his guise. While this move may appear to be a matter of semantics it clearly indicates a non-relationship between the *flâneur* and the department store. I discuss this aspect of the *flâneur*'s next step, or evaporation later in this chapter.

The *flâneur*'s dandyism was also a critical component of his makeup, but one that can also be easily misread. With his discerning taste, decadent aestheticism and look-at-me attitude, the dandy has often been referred to as the precursor to the consumer.[200] For instance Nava, in describing the female consumer-*flâneur*, writes that one of her key characteristics was her skill at parading new fashions and this helped to define her role as *flâneuse*.[201] Nava makes the link between dressing up and *flânerie*. But for the *flâneur*, dandyism was less style statement than critical commentary. First brought to attention by Beau Brummel in early nineteenth century England, dandyism

> "stressed the quest for special superiority through the construction of an uncompromising exemplary lifestyle in which an aristocracy of spirit manifested itself in a contempt for the masses and the heroic concern

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[199] Chambers 1991: 143
[200] see Williams 1982 for further information on the rise and demise of the dandy.
[201] Nava 1997: 72

> with the achievement of originality and superiority in dress, demeanour, personal habit and even furnishings – what we call lifestyle."[202]

The dandy was a counter-cultural figure yet he aligned himself with the aristocracy (or, more accurately, he clung to whatever bits of aristocracy he could find.) His was a protest against the bourgeois: their work ethic, their desperate need for emulation and at the same time distinction (so detailed by Veblen), and their alliance with industrialism and consumerism.

Sociologist Graeme Gilloch makes a case for this link between dandyism and the world of goods. For Gilloch the dandy/*flâneur* is "the ultimate embodiment of Simmel's notion of fashion as social distinction."[203] But Gilloch stresses that this *flâneur*, rather than embracing the tenets of the emerging consumer culture finds that - as with so many aspects of modern culture that he confronts - consumer culture has failed him. This deflated *flâneur* has,

> "heroically failed to perceive that fashion itself was the great nothing-new, the thinly disguised always-the-same of commodity production and fetishization, the very source of the uniformity he so despised. For Baudelaire 'dandyism is the last spark of heroism amid decadence.' Its passing is a source of melancholy." [204]

Thus the dandy realises that the 'heightened display' of subjectivity through personal display is a self-defeating mechanism "since it strengthens the very social nuances and sensitivities to differences for which it is coping strategy."[205] The *flâneur's* attitude toward the move to mass production and consumption is therefore, it seems, tinged with the same nostalgia he holds for so many passing traditions of pre-modern culture. Rather than being caught up in the wave of mass consumption during the late-nineteenth century the *flâneur* is removed from this scene - both physically and ideologically - and he views this shift from his perch with a sense of disenchantment. And this is because the

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[202] Featherstone 1991: 67, see also Williams 1982
[203] Gilloch 1992: 114

flâneur/dandy was "the (last) expert consumer" who "was soon to be supplanted unceremoniously by the mass consumer...and for this he mourned."[206]

The exhibitionist nature of the *flâneur*'s dandyism is difficult to deconstruct. On one hand his attention to dress and his donning of stylish frippery can be perceived as a glorification of the growing importance of external appearances and surface impressions that are "linked inextricably to these commercial developments - and also a crucial component of the concept of modernity." [207] But his exuberant dress was merely one of many tactics he adopted to stand out in the crowd. Simmel suggests that the city dweller's preoccupation with personal display and adornment is actually a "defence against the psychic overload that the city provokes." [208] One can also regard the *flâneur*'s dandyism as conveying a sadness for a dying age, before individuality gave way to mass consumption, before the middle classes sought to emulate a dying aristocracy (the dandy imagined himself to be associated with the elite), and before the blurring of class lines produced the need to create distinctions.[209] Stuart Ewen writes that the dandy's 'armour for city life' was "a feature of the specific historical conjuncture under review, which was characterised by an escalating instability of class and geographical boundaries." [210] Thus the *flâneur*'s dress becomes a form of nostalgia for a period of perceived authenticity and a protest against the scrupulous attention to dress and the burgeoning material culture.

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[204] Benjamin Das Passagen-werk 1972: section 1, D5, p. 167
[205] Ryan 1992: 3
[206] Gilloch 1992: 114
[207] Nava 1997: 47
[208] Ryan 1992: 3
[209] see Bourdieu 1984 for instance
[210] Nava 1997: 47

As dandy the *flâneur* met a tragic self-referential end as he turned from pleasure to disillusion and as his perspective on life became one of melancholy. Benjamin claims that for Baudelaire "dandyism is a setting sun; like a declining star, it is superb, without heat and full of melancholy."[211] Dandyism and the characteristics of the *flâneur* become part of a continuum of critical analysis on the culture in which the *flâneur* finds himself: that of consumer culture.

The *flâneur*'s relationship to the process of production and consumption is equally complicated. It is acknowledged that "above all he stands wholly outside production" which would, logically imply that he is associated with consumption.[212] But the *flâneur* is a producer of meanings and is removed from the productive economy that is associated with goods. If he is any kind of producer, Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson sees him as a producer of art and suggests that the reconstruction of the *flâneur* as consumer and the redefinition of *flânerie* as consumption "effectively ends the *flâneur*'s connection with creativity." [213] Again the *flâneur* exposes the transparency of the move from a productive to a consumptive society. Buck-Morss writes: "The relation of the industrial worker to the thing-world of production, Benjamin is arguing, is not different from the relation of consumers to the thing-world of consumption. Neither is social experience of a type that could lead to knowledge of the reality behind appearances."[214]

Given the above analyses, it becomes difficult to suggest that either Benjamin or Baudelaire envisioned a *flâneur* as consumer - whether it be purchasing goods on the streets or in the department store. Neither was the *flâneur* to be associated with the desire that was produced by and demanded of

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[211] Benjamin Das Passagen-werk 1972: section 4, J6a p312
[212] Wilson 1992: 95

consumer culture. Although Baudelaire referred to him as a "kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness with an insatiable appetite," this appetite was metaphorical, or even literal (but referring specifically to visual consumption), for the *flâneur* was meant to consume the visual images as they passed by. Consumer-sociologist Tim Edwards cautions against seeing the *flâneur* simply as "some kind of pleasure-seeking hedonist" and suggests he should be regarded, instead, "as an empty-headed, disenchanted and cynical consumer in vain search of satisfaction."[215] The enjoyment that the *flâneur* seeks or feels is not *in*, but *from* society as he is a semi-detached spectator of urban capitalism. It is important to note, as well, that the *flâneur* was regulated by a principle of 'looking but not touching' and this lack of engagement with the commodity is, Buck-Morss feels, a key principle that is clearly laid out in the Passagenwork.[216] As such the *flâneur* experienced all the pleasures and frustrations of the voyeur, the person who watched but could not appropriate or consume the experiences which passed before him. In addition, *flânerie* was never meant to be a practice for the art of consuming even if the *flâneur* may have had the trappings or modern skills that allowed him to shop. Buck-Morss states emphatically that the *flâneur* was not a consumer but, rather, a way for us to reveal or "recognise our own consumerist mode of being-in-the-world because he is the mode of being."[217]

If the *flâneur* was not a consumer he was, if anything, its object: the commodity. This is where the *flâneur* becomes useful and powerful as an allegory. Benjamin describes the *flâneur* as a man who being abandoned in the crowd "shares the situation of the commodity" while Gilloch describes him as

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[213] Parkhurst Ferguson 1994: 35
[214] Buck-Morss 1996: 108
[215] Edwards 1996: 22
[216] Benjamin, Das Passagen-Werk: 968
[217] Buck-Morss 1996: 105

the "strolling embodiment of the commodity" and writes that, as the finely dressed dandy, he "took the concept of consumption itself for a walk."[218] The *flâneur* is part of this constantly changing flow of commodities, images and in the *flâneur*'s case, bodies. The *flâneur* identifies with the commodity: Weinstein and Weinstein write that "in Benjamin's hands, Baudelaire's disponibilité of the imagination becomes empathy with the commodity, which means identification with it: Baudelaire speaks as/for the commodity." [219] Like the commodity the *flâneur* circulates: hence the *flâneur*'s constant walking. Both Baudelaire and Benjamin view the metropolis as the site of the commodity for it produces people and turns them into commodities...subject to the vagaries of the market.[220] But as commodity the *flâneur* is empty. Graeme Gilloch writes how "for Benjamin the commodity both exhibits characteristics similar to the allegorical – it is 'hollow' – and is the object of the allegorical gaze – as a result of which, it becomes a ruin. The commodity is in the realm of artifacts what the allegory is in the realm of words." [221] As in modern material culture, the meaning of the object has been lost or emptied out and this loss of exchange value, this idea of 'reification,' is embodied in the *flâneur*. The *flâneur* again becomes a commentary on the commercialization of society and its commodity fetishism, faced with the knowledge that the value of the commodity is determined by the socially necessary labor time of its production.

In his final manifestation it is suggested the *flâneur* becomes the sandwichman, a human advertisement walking the city streets.[222] The reference to this sad, display-of-a-man was a commentary on the commercialism and the 'aestheticization of everyday life' associated with

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[218] Benjamin 1983: 5; Gilloch 1992: 116
[219] Weinstein and Weinstein 1991: 155
[220] Mazlish 1994: 47
[221] Gilloch 2000: 135
[222] Benjamin Das Passagen-werk 1972: section 2, M19, 2 PW p 565 see also M17a,p 562

commodity culture. Jenks and Neves refer to this sandwichman as a "puppet in the hands of capitalism and the mass industry."[223] As Elizabeth Wilson sees him, "the degenerate and thus quintessential *flâneur* is a walking commodity who, like the dandy, attracts the attention of passers-by, only now as a pauper not a peacock."[224] As the sandwichman, the *flâneur* has become reduced to the figure of the sign, part of a symbolic recognition that the whole of society was engaged in a sort of gigantic prostitution, that everything was for sale. As Buck-Morss writes: "In commodity society all of us are prostitutes, selling ourselves to strangers." [225] As a sign he became an example of the obliteration of the use-value of goods and the move to an exchange-value, revealing, therefore, the arbitrariness of the system of signifiers.

This was an apt finale for the *flâneur*. Despite his protests, the *flâneur* becomes inscribed within consumer culture, and as such is a 'fallen man.' The *flâneur* represents 'how we all have become' or how modern man must become. If the *flâneur* has disappeared as a specific figure, "it is because the perceptive attitude which he embodied saturates modern existence, specifically the society of mass consumption (and is the source of its illusions)." [226] This tension between being removed from and being a part of the masses has always hung over the *flâneur* – after all he can't stop gazing at the alluring sites of modern culture. Eventually, however, he succumbs. The inevitability of this process is acknowledged when Benjamin notes that "the heroic figures of modernity are characters embodying the prevailing tendencies of their epoch, while seeking (pretending) to resist them."[227] The *flâneur* is doomed and has little choice in his destiny: Benjamin's argument, Tester suggests, is that "the rationality of

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[223] Jenks and Neves 2000: 15
[224] Gilloch 1992: 116
[225] Buck-Morss 1993: 104
[226] Buck-Morss 1993: 104
[227] Gilloch 2000: 111

capitalism and, especially, commodification and the circulation of commodities, itself defined the meaning of existence in the city so that there remained no spaces of mystery for the *flâneur* to observe." [228] As Tester writes, "*flânerie* is rendered less and less likely by the increasing domination of rationality and of an order which is imposed on the city as if by necessity." [229] The city was changing and soon there was nowhere on the margins for the *flâneur*; there were no secret spaces – like those that may have been found in the medieval city. The social and spatial organization of the city removed the potential for a marginal existence. This rationalization of the city becomes a metaphor for the all-encompassing social control that characterized the move to the modern period. As for consumer culture in particular, mercantile capitalism ultimately pushed *flânerie* off the streets. Jim Dameron writes:

> "Once a symbol of protest, the *flâneur* now stands at the edge of the street, fearful of entering the mob, disdainful even as he is tempted by the energy and chaos of the city. Stripped of his economic position, jostled by the swelling crowd, lacking political clout, the *flâneur* has no place of refuge." [230]

It is important to point out that in succumbing, the *flâneur* no longer exists. He has melded into the 'dreaded' masses, and any semblance of his rebellious identity has been absorbed by these masses. Gilloch writes that the mass is "the final extinction of the bourgeois individual" and that the *flâneur* is "precisely the one who heroically resists incorporation into the milieu in which he moves. Indeed, the disappearance of the *flâneur* into the crowd, the instant in which they become 'one flesh', is the moment of extinction of the *flâneur*." [231] Moreover, the *flâneur's* visual experience is no longer unique. He promoted a style of observation that, at once unique, permeated the nineteenth century.

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[228] Tester 1994: 13
[229] Tester 1994: 13
[230] Dameron 2000: 144
[231] Gilloch 2000: 147, 153

Some interpreters suggest that the *flâneur* is not gone but that he has lost his critical perspective. Felski, for instance, notes that in entering the world of consumption "the *flâneur*'s aloof detachment" is perhaps "replaced by a more intimate relationship between surveyor and surveyed, a complex of intermingling of active desire and surrender to the lures of images, objects and lifestyles." [232] And despite the fact that the flâneur succumbs, he maintains a distance – Benjamin is in no way suggesting that there is no choice but to become one with the uniform masses. Benjamin – and the *flâneur* by proxy - is conscious of this inevitability, but neither condones it. "While condemning the contents of modern culture, it found in the dreaming collective created by consumer-capitalism a ready-at-hand receptacle for its own political phantasmagoria." [233]

And this is why the department store is such an inappropriate place for the flaneur, whether male or female. Although Benjamin sees the department store as 'the last territory of the flâneur', *flânerie* is practiced very differently there than in the arcades. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson writes,

> By abolishing the distance between the individual and the commodity, the feminization of *flânerie* redefines it out of existence. The *flâneur's* dispassionate gaze dissipates under pressure from the shoppers' passionate engagement in the world of things to be purchased and possessed. The *flâneur* ends up going shopping after all. And retreat is no option. The *flâneur* who withdraws from the promiscuity of the city and flees the blatant commercialism of the department store, participates in the expanding realm of capitalism every bit as much as the shopper. No more than the public *flâneur* in the city can the private *flâneur* at home escape the century." [234]

In summary, an oft-forgotten element of the *flâneur* is his articulation of a distaste for modern consumerism and his early realization that the promises of consumer culture are, indeed, empty. And this is why the easy or natural

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[232] Felski 1995: 70
[233] Buck-Morss 1996: 117
[234] Parkhurst Ferguson: 35

assumption that the *flâneuse* could exist in the department store and as consumer is so flawed. It assumes a direct association between *flânerie* and consumption, one that completely dismisses the ontological character of the *flâneur*. The *flâneur*'s role is as critic rather than as participant in consumer culture; instead of engaging in the practices of the day he viewed them with a distant and defiant gaze. Moreover, once in the department store the *flâneur* no longer exists – he melds into the masses. Despite the potential for multiple readings of Benjamin, this fact is clear and it persists, rising above various translations and interpretations of this figure and his activities. Therefore, I suggest that in the same way Wolff saw women 'not being in modernity because they lacked presence' the *flâneur* cannot be in the department store because there he also lacks presence and is invisible. Putting women in the department store, situating them as consumers and then labeling them *flâneuse* is, therefore, a very flawed endeavour indeed.

Conclusion

The *flâneur* is a useful construct, not only for describing the new visual experience of the modern sphere but for articulating the ennui associated with modernity's physical and social upheavals. As a trope he provides an easy short cut for explaining the changing demands of public life and culture; he also works as a successful critique of this culture. Equally, *flânerie* has wide application: as a method of observation; as a type of active engagement with the new field of the visual; as a mode of physically negotiating the spaces of the city; and as a way of apprehending and reading "the complex and myriad signifiers in the labyrinth of modernity." [235] It is understandable that attempts have been made to re-assign the gender of this figure, particularly as part of a larger project to challenge the gender-bias inherent in key motifs. As Nava notes, part of the project of academic feminism has been "to prise open this sort of narrative and make sense of the marginalisation of women, both theoretical and historically wherever possible." [236] This makes sense, and I would propose that there is no harm in such a project.

Neither is there harm in an exercise that resurrects aspects of women's history or unearths women's experiences by investigating the city of the nineteenth century in more finite detail. The need to pull women from the margins of these spaces and, particularly, to challenge the trope of separate spheres remains strong. Latching onto the site of the department store is logical as these stores were some of the few public spaces available to women during the period.

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[235] Frisby 1986: 93
[236] Nava 1997: 57

To be fair, when Nava suggests that the *flâneuse* might exist in the department store I doubt she is suggesting that this figure is meant to be an exact translation or replica of the *flâneur*. Nava may have had in mind only the visual aspect of *flânerie* as she relates it to the experience of perusing the world of goods. What Nava means is slightly unclear. (However Nava is just one of the many contemporary writers using the trope of the consumer- *flâneuse* in their work.) Still, it must be understood that by claiming such women took on the role of *flâneuse*, considerable suggestions are being made: Primarily there is the implication that the figure took on, or adopted, all the characteristics of the *flâneur*. The first error of Nava et al was to suggest that *any* woman outside the home in the nineteenth century was necessarily a *flâneuse*. As I have shown, a clearer understanding of *flânerie* and the *flâneur*'s meaning reveals that this is not the case. The second error was to create a *flâneuse* based on the visual and physical aspects of *flânerie* without taking into consideration the *flâneur*'s critical pose that was at the heart of his construction. The final error was to place the *flâneuse* in the department store, where her role as consumer is diametrically opposed to the rebellious *flâneur*'s ideology. To then assume that she might be able to critically engage in the marketplace by attributing very contemporary ideas about consumption - such as the notion of an empowered consumer – to her situation is unsound. Perhaps the largest error made by Nava and other academics is to have become embroiled in a debate that seems to go in circles, with no particular outcome! On the other hand, as my account in Chapter 2 has revealed, there is much at stake in this exercise and it is understandable that the search for the *flâneuse* continues.

If the translation from *flâneur* to *flâneuse* is bumpy, the *flâneur* has much to blame in this confusion, as do academics. The *flâneur* was never a particularly legible character to begin with and as Jim Dameron explains in his

recent reading of Benjamin, "anyone who ventures into a Benjamin text must come to terms with the man's vagueness, with his obliqueness."[237] Spencer, too, refers to him as "tantalising, complicated and somewhat speculative."[238] On the other hand, the *flâneur*'s malleability, and hence versatility was, and remains, part of his attraction. Over time, however, the meaning of the *flâneur* has become fuzzy. As Graeme Gilloch states so succinctly,

> "the very proliferation of this figure has led to the hollowing out of 'any precise meaning and significance.' In popularisation, in becoming 'commonplace', the *flâneur* enjoys an exemplary afterlife and experiences a second demise. Ubiquity involves a radical indeterminancy: the *flâneur* becomes a figure signifying anything and nothing." [239]

Academics are indeed partly to blame, for in their effort to stretch the meaning and application of the *flâneur* there has been laziness on their part. Their inability to return to the primary text and to try to be true to the *flâneur*'s origins has resulted in his meaning becoming lost, what Gilloch refers to above as a 'hollowing out.' It now seems just about every figure from the modern period can be found anytime, anywhere 'botanising on the asphalt.' [240] Some writers suggest that this ubiquity is inevitable and unproblematic. Others believe that the *flâneur*'s multiple identities are evidence of post-structuralism at work, and that the breakdown in his meaning is symptomatic of scholarship in the post-modern.[241] In a recent article Wolff complains that the debates about the *correct* interpretation of Benjamin's position have been going on for far too long - fifty years if not more - and she seems to admit to the futility of this debate. (Wolff acknowledges the importance in addressing the 'contradiction, resolution and development of Benjamin's mode of analysis' but also realizes that a correct interpretation cannot be agreed upon. She admits

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[237] Dameron 2000: 140
[238] Spencer 2000: 7
[239] Gilloch 2000: 102
[240] Benjamin 1971: 36

that it is "impossible to deny alternative readings."[242]) Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, on the other hand, warns against this widening of meaning. She writes that, "abstraction has its costs. Isolating the *flâneur* from the time, the place and the texts in and from which this urban personage emerged turns the figure into an analytical category that, by definition, lies outside history."[243] While I am not advocating the historical confinement of the *flâneur*, I do advocate limits in the way he (or she) is used. Perhaps I am also advocating a puritanical approach, one that doesn't stretch the meaning of the *flâneur* so significantly that he is allowed to become anything to anyone. In this sense, I do consider myself a purist and one of my goals in writing this paper has been to demand that a certain level of authenticity be retained with reference to the original *flâneur*.

In writing this thesis my primary goal has been to examine the viability of one type of *flâneuse*. My goal has not been to add to the canon but to expose the limitations of the concept which, by exploring the historical and theoretical accuracy of it, I believe I have achieved. This thesis also exposes the difficulties inherent in trying to locate a '*flâneuse*' and, having waded through this somewhat silly comparative exercise, I now question whether the *flâneur*'s female counterpart ever existed (or needs to exist). Although a discussion on this topic means making a tangent, I feel elaboration is required. Given the difficulties in trying to locate a *flâneuse*, perhaps it might be useful to return to Wolff's early analysis and her astute claim that there is no possibility of inventing the *flâneuse* as "such a character was rendered impossible by the sexual divisions of the nineteenth century." [244] This leads to questions about the overall relevance of this exercise. Perhaps we should heed Mike

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[241] see Friedberg 1993, Wolff 2000
[242] Wolff 2000: 113

Featherstone's warning when he asks if we might "regard *flânerie* as a cultural form from a specific time and place which is now dead?" [245] If the *flâneur* is a bygone figure then "any generalization of the figure an the activity would be historically questionable at best."[246] And if the *flâneur* disappeared because he came to represent everyone in modernity and the development of the masses, then I wonder if he has any place in the analysis of present-day situations when, apparently, *we all* engage in *flânerie*? Is the relentless quest for the *flâneuse* as shadowy and transparent as the *flâneur* himself? Perhaps this exercise of 'cut and paste' (as I have done, comparing and contrasting the *flâneuse* with the *flâneur*) merely showcases the difficulty of trying to take a primarily 'metaphorical' figure and find him within the historical landscape? These questions and concerns remain, and are indeed worthy of an entirely separate thesis if not a dissertation!

As for the *flâneuse*, if for the purposes of recognition, desire or academic necessity a *flâneuse* must be identified, then I believe the streetwalker or even the rag-picker might be preferable choices. In a recent article historian Deborah Parsons seconds that notion. She writes that,

> "the image of the female shopper as *flâneuse* certainly corresponds to the arcade-based *flâneur*, but she is less ambiguous and less adaptable as a metaphor for the practice of the modern artist. Rather than attempting to identify women as separate from or equal to the autocratic *flâneur*, a consideration of the marginal figure of the surrealist rag-picker might offer a potential model for women's role as observers and artists of the modern city." [247]

If, given my admission on the impossibility of locating her, the *flâneuse* still holds interest for academics perhaps they need to look outside the department store. Nava mentions that middle-class women traveled to the stores from their

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[243] Parkhurst Ferguson 1994: 22
[244] Wolff 1985: 47
[245] Featherstone 1991: 910
[246] Tester 1994: 13
[247] Parsons 2000: 94

suburban homes however, to date most academic attention has been paid to their experience within the department stores. What about the journey to and fro? Surely this constitutes another, perhaps greater opportunity to engage in public space and to look? In her very recent (2000) article, Deborah Parsons suggests that there is still work to be done on the exterior space of the city street but using "a less affluent and bourgeois metaphor than that of the late nineteenth century shopper." [248] Such work might illuminate the experiences of women and better yet, put an end to the debate of her existence or location. If anything it might take her out of the department store and remove her from the role of consumer - a role that has become so prevalent within academic discourse, but that is so against *flânerie*'s underlying principles and the *flâneur*'s most basic ideology.

[248] Parsons 2000: 94

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