

## Women in motion

By Adèle Cassigneul

Neither *passante* nor pedestrian, the *flâneuse* has been left out of history books. Yet, according to Lauren Elkin, *flânerie* is connected to emancipation, and to revolt. Is urban space then a feminist issue?

Review of: Lauren Elkin, Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London, London, Chatto & Windus, 2016, 317 p.

"Let us go then, you and I..." T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917)

To haunt boulevards and avenues and to let oneself be enthralled and caught by their sinuous tours and detours; to anchor oneself in the city with every step so as to belong to it; and to inscribe oneself through the written words in the place one inhabits by walking—such are the *flâneries* of the *flâneuses*, and of Lauren Elkin. And there is something viral and enchanting in her invitation to dally along the streets and to follow her passionately learned *dérive*.

From New York, where she was born, to Paris, where she now lives, through London, Venice and Tokyo, the author wanders between academic research, journalistic criticism and fictional writing (Elkin is a lecturer at the University of Liverpool, a critic for the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *New York Times Book Review* and the *Paris Review*, and the author of the novel *Floating Cities*). She is a city butterfly who embarks you in her intimate and literary urban frolicking.

Claiming a right to roam, this resolute wanderer presents us with an essay in every sense of the word: an exploratory text that dares to propose novelty and invents a new term for a hitherto nameless experience—flâneuserie. In so doing, she upsets prevailing definitions (according to French dictionaries, the "flâneuse" is a wooden folding lounge chair). At the crossroads of literary

criticism, biography and autobiography, *Flâneuse* revisits the cultural history of a long neglected figure, that of the woman who freely walks the streets.

## Wandering Psychogeography

The primary aim of this singular text is to characterize the *flâneuse*, a little-known figure who is neither a walker (overly associated with the streetwalker) nor quite the female version of the Baudelairian *flâneur*. Since always visible, as she too walked the streets, but never truly considered nor written about, she has been left out of history books. And yet, she has always been there, that restless stroller! So Lauren Elkin gives her back significance and life, she re-inscribes her in the urban landscape to unravel what the city experience meant to her, thus redefining the masculine concept inherited from Poe and nineteenth-century poetry.<sup>1</sup>

Located in the in-between, at the interface of a concrete topography and an individual cartography,<sup>2</sup> the *flâneuse* occupies and appropriates urban space in order to make it an "intermediate area of experience", that is, according to Winnicott, a potential space that allows for experimenting with creative life.<sup>3</sup> The author's reflection is thus grounded in her personal experience. Stemming from her academic research, Elkin's study took shape through her wanderings over three continents; it is the result of an academic, personal and geographical journey.

As she explores the neighborhoods she loves, Lauren Elkin experiences *flânerie*, revives her childhood memories and the fantasies she had as a young American. She wanders about, indulging in the attractions of the city, reading it as one would a novel. The pedestrian reverie she offers summons what the psychogeographer Guy Debord called "unities of ambience" <sup>4</sup>: the unprecedented interaction between the atmosphere of a place and the emotional behavior of the person occupying it. Walking to (re)invent herself, she takes possession of a metropolitan space haunted by the works of a flock of women artists and their heroines.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> There is of course Baudelaire's "passante" (The Flowers of Evil, 1857), but also Gérard de Nerval's young lady ("A path in the Luxembourg Gardens," 1832). The motif survived into the early twentieth century, in Proust's young girls in flower (1918) or in Breton's Nadja (1928).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> See Thierry Davila, *Marcher, créer. Déplacements, flâneries, dérives dans l'art de la fin du XXe siècle*, Paris, Éditions du Regard, 2002, p. 3.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, London, Routledge, 2005, p. 2.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> For an introduction to psychogeography, see Merlin Coverley, *Psychogeography*, Harpenden, Pocket Essentials, 2010.

# "For we think back through our mothers if we are women"5

By mobilizing novelists (George Sand, Jean Rhys and Virginia Woolf), reporters (Martha Gellhorn) and plastic artists (Sophie Calle and Agnès Varda) who have accompanied her throughout the years, the essayist builds up a matrilineal heritage and makes urban space a feminist issue<sup>6</sup>. The *flâneuse* moves from being a reified fantasy to being a visible and engaged being who embraces the utopia of an unfettered space, the dream of a city that has become a shared common ground, at once neutral and ungendered. In this sense, the essay covers issues that are now being addressed by French researchers in urban studies and geography, but also in sociology and anthropology.<sup>7</sup> It shows that for a woman, walking in the street remains a subversive and even political act.<sup>8</sup>

Thus urban *flânerie* is connected to emancipation, but also to revolt (sometimes revolution) and to protest. *Flâneuses*—those deliberately unassignable women in motion—claim their "right to disturb the peace, to observe (or not observe), to occupy (or not occupy) and to organize (or disorganize) space on [their] own terms" (p. 288). And it is in Tokyo, where being a woman means being confined indoors, that urban wandering becomes fully outrageous and even rebellious.

But freeing oneself also entails drifting, a letting go that calls for open-mindedness, adaptation, and becoming—a plastic receptiveness that gives birth to writing. In this sense, *flânerie* takes on an experiential and existential dimension (see the pages expressing self-doubt or those on the uncomfortable position of the "good" immigrant). As she relates her readings to her cosmopolitan experiences—Jean Rhys and the discovery of Paris, Sophie Calle and the labyrinthine exploration of Venice—Lauren Elkin records the particular phrasing of cities so as to elaborate her own urban style.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own, New York, Harvest, 1989, p. 76.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> See her recent article, "Donald Trump, anti-flâneur", in the *Literary Hub*: http://lithub.com/donald-trump-anti-flaneur/#

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> See, for instance, the radio programs broadcast on France Culture, "L'espace urbain est-il machiste?" ("Is urban space sexist?") (2014) and "La ville à l'épreuve du genre" ("Gender in the city") (2015), which brought together researchers from different disciplines.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> On 8 March 2010, the city of Santiago de Chile placed on its town hall façade a large and tall banner picturing a line of proud townswomen marching forward. In bold red letters, it read: "No retrocederemos ¡Palabra de mujer!" ("Woman's promise: We shall not backtrack!"). I am also thinking of the campaign "Stop, ça suffit!" ("Stop!"), launched this year by the French government to fight sexual harassment in the streets and in public transportation.

### The Urban Sentence

Thus the chapters of Flâneuse trace a sensitive and sentimental constellation to form a "researchtext"9 whose peripatetic manner nurtures a formal hybridity and expresses the writing self. Shaped by images (ekphrasis, cinema and photography), the essay is openly polymorphic, it integrates diaristic fragments (correspondence, notebooks and diaries), excerpts from texts or films (Lost in Translation by Sofia Coppola and Cléo from 5 to 7 by Agnès Varda), as well as quotations from academic studies. In this way, *flânerie* becomes a writing strategy.

Walking and writing, Lauren Elkin asserts a rigorous subjectivity, which she claims as both an ethical and poetic stance—"[t]o include myself in the frame, to acknowledge who was speaking and where I was coming from, seemed like a crucial gesture"10. At ease, she injects a lively and serene spirit, a boosting "joy" that triggers "amusement and playfulness." Before each new chapter, she smartly offers topographic directions: short paragraphs that launch the walk, throw the text forward and take the reading in their wake. As they enticingly branch out, the paragraphs make of *flânerie* a ritual and modern practice, a daring and creative experience.

#### For further information:

- Interview with Lauren Elkin by RhysTranter, https://rhystranter.com/2016/09/23/lauren-elkin-flaneuse-women-walking-cityinterview/
- Charles Baudelaire, The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays, 1863, http://www.columbia.edu/itc/architecture/ockman/pdfs/dossier\_4/Baudelaire.pdf
- Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man of the Crowd," 1840, http://pinkmonkey.com/dl/library1/crow.pdf
- Guy Debord, "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography," 1955 http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/geographv.html
- Guy Debord, "Theory of the Dérive," 1956, http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/2.derive.htm

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Ivan Jablonka, L'Histoire est une littérature contemporaine. Manifeste pour les sciences sociales, Paris, Seuil, 2014, p. 298.

Rhys Tranter, "Lauren Elkin on Her New book, Flâneuse," rhystranter.com, 23 September 2016.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Jean-Christophe Bailly, *La Phrase urbaine*, Paris, Seuil, 2014, p. 177.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> La Phrase urbaine, p. 177; Theodor Adorno, "The Essay as Form," Notes to literature, New York, Columbia University Press, 1991, p. 4.

- « La ville à l'épreuve du genre », *Sur les docks*, France Culture, http://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/sur-les-docks/la-ville-lepreuve-du-genre
- « L'espace urbain est-il machiste ? », *Planète terre*, France Culture, http://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/planete-terre/lespace-urbain-est-il-machiste

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