Research Article

Isabel Argüelles Rozada*

Feminist Urban *Paideias*: The Need for New Imaginaries of the Aesthetic Walk

https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2025-0063
received March 13, 2025; accepted July 10, 2025

Abstract: The contemporary defense of urban strolling finds one of its fundamental legacies in *flânerie* due to its aesthetic nature and its resistance to utilitarianism. Despite the ethnocentric and androcentric origins of the *flâneur*, there has been a strong revival of this figure from egalitarian, postcolonial, and gender perspectives, as exemplified by theories on the *flâneuse*. However, this study argues for the need to abandon this canon due to its limitations in accounting for the specific experiences and needs of female urban strollers. By demonstrating the "aesthetic injustice" of the traditional *flânerie* approach through various examples of poems, novels, and films from different Western urban contexts, this work proposes a recovery of narratives that have portrayed female urban strollers in alternative ways. These narratives will provide insights into a specifically feminine understanding of urban experience – one shaped by exposure to the male asymmetry of power that governs women's symbolic access to public spaces, but also by the ability of these characters to momentarily subvert the frameworks of aesthetic injustice through creativity and idleness. Through this analysis, a new horizon of thought will emerge, envisioning alternative forms of urbanity that are authentically sensitive to the feminist perspective.

Keywords: city, feminism, *flâneur*, urbanity, urban strolling

1 Introduction

With the intensification of the globalization processes that began in the nineteenth century, intra- and inter-urban mobility has become one of the key geographical, anthropological, and sociopolitical issues of our time (Shortell & Brown, 2014, p. 5). In this context, the feminist question holds a significant place in debates on the construction of a just city (Massey, 2001). In addition to the classic demands regarding women's socioeconomic equality in access to and enjoyment of urban spaces, recent claims have applied Fricker's (2007) concepts of "epistemic" and "hermeneutical justice" to other cases of gender vulnerability, such as that of queer individuals (Jenkins, 2017). Furthermore, this perspective is no longer solely ethical-political but also concerns the equitable redistribution of spaces for different non-normative corporealities in a symbolic sense.

However, these reflections do not always sufficiently address the specificity of what would constitute "aesthetic justice." As recently theorized by Dalaqua (2020) and Hofmann (2023), aesthetic injustice would refer to the systematic marginalization of certain groups from participating in or shaping the aesthetic dimensions of public and political life due to their appearance, revealing how aesthetics are not neutral but can perpetuate social hierarchies and exclusion.

This study aims to analyze the issue of aesthetic injustice experienced by female urban characters, as well as the strategies they employ to subvert it, in literature and film based on Western city models. Specifically, it will examine the aesthetic relationship these characters have with the urban space in the contexts of Paris,

* **Corresponding author: Isabel Argüelles Rozada**, Department of Philosophy, University of Oviedo, Oviedo, Spain, e-mail: arguellesisabel@uniovi.es

Open Access. © 2025 the author(s), published by De Gruyter. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

London, Bruges, Madrid, and New York. From this comparative analysis, a series of practical insights, expectations, and strategies employed by these characters to make the most of the aesthetic experience of walking in the city will be inferred. This amalgam of knowledge will be conceptualized as a feminist urban *paideia*, following the Greek idea of education as a shaping of identity in not only an intellectual but also a moral, aesthetic, and civic sense.

2 The *Flâneur*: An Egalitarian Urban Model?

Flânerie refers to the activity of leisurely, slow strolling without a specific destination or aesthetic pretensions, traditionally associated with nineteenth-century artists in major European cities (Benjamin, 1982). However, it remains a relevant academic concept today, as it is often linked to an opposition against rectilinear, predictable mobility optimized for the maximization of time and resources in capitalist cities. This definition can be found in several scholars (Frisby, 1994, p. 86; Kramer & Short, 2011, p. 337; or Tucker, 2019, p. 100; among many others). These advocates of *flânerie* trace its intellectual origins to opposition against the Haussmannian urban model, as reflected in authors such as Baudelaire (1869), because this transformation of Paris emphasized not only the modernization of infrastructure – such as sewage systems and public parks, – but wide, geometric street layouts that aimed to improve circulation, hygiene, and social control within the city that also entailed the demolition of medieval neighborhoods and the displacement of many residents. Thus, this opposition is considered a precedent for contemporary defenses of walking over standardized and rapid modes of transportation.

In this sense, the *flâneur* would challenge the sociopolitical power relations embedded in the urban fabric (Meagher, 2007). As Maffesoli (1997) states, "*l'archétype d'une forme de résistance en ce qu'il met l'accent sur l'oisiveté, avec tout ce que la morale économique va appeler les 'vices' qui lui sont liés*"[1] (p. 30). Similarly, Matysová (2011) views this activity as an act of "resistance" or "combat" against capitalism (p. 102). Particularly, the theory of the *flâneuse*, a feminist reinterpretation of the traditionally male, Western, and socioeconomically privileged *flâneur*, exemplifies these critical readings, both within urban studies and art theory and film criticism: among other concerns, it examines both the reproduction of gender stereotypes in the *flâneur*'s narratives and the *flâneuse*'s potential to generate alternative models of urban occupation (Buck-Morss, 1986; Elkin, 2017; Friedberg, 1994; Nesci, 2019). Agnès Varda's film *Cléo from 5 to 7* is the example paradigmatically analyzed in these studies (Chan, 2018).

Therefore, what all these aesthetic-political interpretations of the *flâneur* have in common is their participation in the aesthetic-moral superiority of its original formulation, albeit tempered in the form of a social claim foreign to its initial definition. This paradoxical transformation leads to a reinterpretation of *flânerie* in which the spaces revindicated involve an escape from its clichéd aesthetics, prioritizing the liminal areas of the city as a critique of speculation and gentrification; or even, in an increasing number of cases, to the attempt to contextualize the *flâneur* in spaces far removed from its original European canon (Brydon et al., 2021). In this sense, *flânerie* is almost understood as a "right to the city" in Harvey's (2006) terms and, consequently, as a criterion for assessing the democratic health of urban environments (Careri, 2013; Speck, 2012).

The critical relevance of the above-mentioned theories regarding the contemporary urban model is indisputable. However, they overlook the mythologized nature of the *flâneur*, simplifying it as a stroller who playfully engages with the city in opposition to capitalist productive time, while bracketing its elitist and androcentric character, already noted by Benjamin (1982, V, p. 424). Among the various reasons for understanding *flânerie* as an elitist rather than a merely playful activity, one of the most significant is *his* emergence as a reaction against modern modes of transportation due to their democratic nature. The development and widespread affordability of railway travel, along with the increasing availability of vacation packages, led to a significant rise in tourism in major Western cities during the nineteenth century, as well as a greater speed in intra-urban movement, facilitated by the expansion of Haussmann's boulevards and avenues (Benjamin, 1982, V, p. 728). For instance, urban mobility in Paris saw the introduction of trams in 1853,

1 "The archetype of a form of resistance in that it emphasizes idleness, along with all the 'vices' that economic morality will associate with it." [*The translations are our own.*]

initiated by Alphonse Loubat (Price, 2001, p. 27); in the omnibus, by definition, all passengers were customers on equal terms, distinguished only by their appearance and fashion. As a result, urban transportation ceased to be a clear marker of social distinction (Benjamin, 1982, V, p. 447): more than ever, walking became an idle activity championed in opposition to the movement of the masses. Consequently, the activity of *flânerie* is contextually defined by its opposition to collective and "democratic" modes of transportation, which renders it an elitist practice and, as such, one that is both individualized and individualizing, as it sets its practitioner apart from the vast majority of urban dwellers.

It must be acknowledged that there are passages in Walter Benjamin's work where *flânerie* appears to be understood as a form of resistance. However, he repeatedly insists that such a "protest" is, in any case, "unconscious" and driven by motives unrelated to socialism (Benjamin, 1982, V, p. 338, 345, 723). Throughout his *Passagen-Werk* and even in his correspondence with Theodor Adorno, Benjamin underscores the asocial, amoral, and petit-bourgeois nature of Baudelaire, the model for his theory of the *flâneur*. In fact, while Benjamin's work frequently presents a distinctly political understanding of the discriminatory distribution of urban space, the concept of the *flâneur* is notably absent from these discussions:

> Vorstädte. Je weiter wir aus dem Innern heraustreten, desto politischer wird die Atmosphäre. Es kommen die Docks, die Binnenhäfen, die Speicher, die Quartiere der Armut, die zerstreuten Asyle des Elends … der Ausnahmezustand der Stadt, das Terrain, auf dem ununterbrochen die große Entscheidungsschlacht zwischen Stadt und Land tobt […][2] (1982, IV, p. 363–364).

Therefore, *flânerie* is an urban aesthetic practice of a playful nature that, nevertheless, emerges tied to socio-economic and gender privileges and is carried out in strict solitude. While it has undoubtedly inspired other forms of aesthetic urban strolling, as evidenced by movements such as Situationism[3] (Debord, 1957), it is inherently individualistic.

3 The Aesthetic Injustice of *Flânerie* Narratives

It is now necessary to examine the consequences of this original social inequality in the case of female characters to determine whether *flânerie* can serve as a minimally valid model for a feminist urban aesthetics.

According to Michelle Perrot (1997, p. 12), an expert in nineteenth-century women's social history, bourgeois women began to gain access to public spaces during the July Monarchy (1830–1848) through mass secular activities such as carnivals, popular festivals, and revolutionary events. Notably, the emergence of department stores created feminized forms of leisure as well as new employment opportunities for women. As a result, the symbolic distribution of urban spaces became somewhat more dynamic: autonomous urban mobility, free from the risk of reputational loss, was no longer limited to neighborhood conversations, church attendance, or strolls in the park – usually accompanied by their father or husband – opening the door to other forms of public presence (Wiggers, 2014, p. 39). This increased visibility of bourgeois women on the boulevards led authors such as Honoré de Balzac to portray them as a kind of "female *flâneurs*" in his *Traité de la vie élégante*:

> Quel plaisir ineffable, pour l'observateur, pour le connaisseur, de rencontrer par les rues de Paris, sur les boulevards, ces femmes de génie qui, après avoir signé leur nom, leur rang, leur fortune, dans le sentiment de leur toilette, ne paraissent rien aux yeux du vulgaire, et sont tout un poëme pour les artistes, pour les gens du monde occupés à flâner! […][4] (1854, p. 84).

---

2 "Suburbs. The farther we step out from the city center, the more political the atmosphere becomes. There appear the docks, the inland harbors, the warehouses, the quarters of poverty, the scattered asylums of misery … the state of exception of the city, the terrain on which the great decisive battle between city and countryside is continuously waged."

3 This mid-twentieth-century avant-garde movement critiqued capitalist urban life through the concept of the spectacle, highlighting how cities foster passive consumption and alienation. In response, Situationists proposed practices like the *dérive* and psychogeography to reclaim urban space through spontaneous exploration and emotional engagement, challenging the city's functionalist design.

However, these walks along the boulevards were usually brief and justified by an errand or, in the case of gardens, for medical reasons; otherwise, they were undertaken by carriage, which further emphasized their status in contrast to lower-class women – who were forced to commute from the outskirts for work and were often driven into prostitution (Tamilia, 2011, p. 11). Baudelaire's (2009, p. 151) famous *passante* from 1857 is, therefore, most likely a prostitute, as respectable women were forbidden from being on the streets at night (Wood, 2005, p. 13). Thus, in contrast to men, a *fille publique* was opposed to a *femme honnête*, that is, a married woman tied to the domestic sphere (Perrot, 1997). Consequently, the notion of a female *flâneur* – now referred to as a *flâneuse* – can generally be regarded, within the sociocultural framework of the nineteenth century, as an oxymoron.

This asymmetry of civic power leads to the woman in *flânerie* narratives adhering to an image of idealized femininity, being encapsulated in a role that is not only secondary but always and necessarily erotic-romantic, driven exclusively by the expectations of the protagonist, who also holds the narrative voice. Therefore, these urban narratives are completely indifferent to the thoughts, capacities, desires, and agency of the female *flâneur*, effectively degraded to being "the one who passes by," and never understood as an autonomous citizen capable of strolling idly and freely. As theorists of the *flâneuse* argue, the male character is always the observer, who is only observed when he wishes it; whereas, she is found by him, observed by him, and, typically, pursued by him (Friedberg, 1994; Tiller, 2015; Wilson, 1992).

In this way, the female *flâneur* becomes the target of voyeuristic and sexualizing commodification, that is, of the male gaze (Brey, 2021), which here could be referred to, due to its specificity, as the urban male gaze. As Nesci (2019, p. 32) points out, "*à la pulsion d'errance de l'artiste moderne, qui fait de l'extérieur son foyer de création, correspond l'exode forcé de la jeune fille en quête d'un statut social respectable*,"[5] such that the inclusion of women in this aesthetic is merely ornamental and phantasmagorical, in Benjamin's sense, and not genuine. For example, in "Le Peintre de la vie moderne," Baudelaire stated that women "*existent bien plutôt pour le plaisir de l'observateur que pour leur plaisir propre*"[6] (1868, p. 106). As Wolff (1985) soon noted, through an essential sociological analysis of nineteenth-century literature, *flânerie* narratives never considered the experiential domain of women, stripped of urban-narrative power.

As seen, the *flâneur* tries to deceive himself into thinking that he is the one who decides to "invest" the auratic object with the capacity to return his gaze. As a consequence, the gaze of a female urban character, even if it shares with the *flâneur* her idleness, consumerism, detachment, and even elitism, will not be objectifying but, rather, confrontational. Even Franz Hessel, whom Benjamin (1982, III, p. 194) considered the one responsible for the "return of the *flâneur*" – *die Wiederkehr des Flâneurs* – in Berlin, described, in 1929, his excessive gaze towards women in these terms:

> Die hurtigen, straffen Großstadtmädchen mit den unersättlich offnen Mündern werden ungehalten, wenn meine Blicke sich des längeren auf ihren segelnden Schultern und schwebenden Wangen niederlassen. … In stilleren Vorstadtgegenden falle ich übrigens nicht minder unangenehm auf[7] (2001, p. 18).

Therefore, in the nineteenth century, women's opportunities for strolling, both in reality and in fiction, were severely constrained, being largely limited to contexts of erotic and sexual objectification. A "respectable" space associated with femininity was the activity of shopping. Gustave Flaubert documented, in 1856, the proliferation of businesses associated with feminine beauty and how women would stroll through Paris, even imaginatively, to surround themselves with these shop windows:

---

4 "What an ineffable pleasure for the observer, for the connoisseur, to encounter in the streets of Paris, on its boulevards, these women of genius who, having inscribed their name, rank, and fortune in the sentiment of their attire, are anything but vulgar and constitute an entire poem for artists and for the worldly individuals engaged in *flânerie*! […]."

5 "The wandering impulse of the modern artist, who makes the outside world his creative home, corresponds to the forced exile of the young girl in search of a respectable social status."

6 "[…] they exist more for the pleasure of the observer than for their own pleasure."

7 "The hurried and energetic young women of the big city, with their mouths always open, show their anger when my gaze rests on their shoulders as they navigate the street or on their cheeks that seem to float. (…) In quieter suburban neighborhoods, I attract attention in no less unpleasant a manner."

> Comment était ce Paris? Quel nom démesuré! Elle se le répétait à demi-voix, pour se faire plaisir; il sonnait à ses oreilles comme un bourdon de cathédrale, il flamboyait à ses yeux jusque sur l'étiquette de ses pots de pommade[8] (2015, p. 120).

This was also reflected by Émile Zola (2015) in Au Bonheur des Dames, written in 1881, a time when Paris already had six major department stores – Le Bon Marché (founded in 1852), Les Grands Magasins du Louvre (1855), À la Belle Jardinière (1856), Le Bazar de l'Hôtel de Ville (1856), La Samaritaine (1865), and Les Grands Magasins du Printemps (1865) – (Fonseca, 2023, p. 119; Robbins, 2018, p. 187). Moreover, this novel accounted for the psychological effects that the fetishistic scenery had on the female population, such as kleptomania[9] or obsessive consumerism, in addition to the sexual harassment exercised by employers. In this way, Zola ironically echoed an epochal saying: the capital was considered the "paradise of women" (Robbins, 2018, p. 185). Furthermore, he revealed that women were indeed associated with *flânerie* in these spaces, although, in contrast to men, it was understood as a sign of idleness and superficiality, unlike the cultural renown of this activity when it was associated with male poets and artists. This can be read in the words of the department store inspector, speaking about the female workers:

> Bientôt le comptoir fut couvert d'une fortune. Dans un coin du rayon, l'inspecteur Jouve, qui n'avait pas lâché Mme de Boves, malgré l'apparente flânerie de cette dernière, se tenait immobile au milieu des poussées, l'attitude indifférente, l'œil toujours sur elle[10] (Zola, 2015, p. 876).

It is profoundly paradoxical that women who took breaks during their workday or who spent their leisure time engaging in one of the few urban activities that social conventions permitted them were nonetheless harshly criticized by the male gaze, accused of frivolity, idleness, and trivial consumerism. This paradox becomes even more striking when considering that many urban artists regarded as canonical and indisputable *flâneurs* – including Baudelaire and Gérard de Nerval in the nineteenth century, as well as Louis Aragon and Benjamin himself in the last century – engaged in the commodification of women in its most extreme form: sexual slavery (Iglesia, 2019; Sennett, 2002, p. 30; Wolff, 1985). However, this form of consumerism never led to any of these authors – nor to any contemporary interpreter – being excluded from the category of *flâneurs* or from the prestigious cultural aura associated with the term.

This conceptual dissonance continues to affect, in many cases, the way female walkers are interpreted in academic publications. It is not always acknowledged that women who spent their leisure time wandering through the shops of boulevards and department stores may have strategically used this activity as a means to express their aesthetic and playful agency with impunity. For instance, in 2010, Wolff altered her stance on the figure of the "invisible" *flâneuse*, going so far as to label her as impossible. As surprising as it may be to acknowledge, this logic – despite being defended from a deconstructive and egalitarian perspective – ultimately reinforces the deep inequality embedded in a discourse that was already prevalent in the nineteenth century.

4 The *Flâneuse*: A Truly Desirable Feminist Model?

After the last considerations, the key question is whether the theoretical proposal of the *flâneuse* can preserve all the positive aspects of the original *flâneur* model – such as the idea of aimless wandering, a rejection of short-term utilitarianism, and an escape from consumerist logic – while also incorporating the principles of the feminist agenda and acknowledging the specificity of the strolling experience when practiced by women

8 "How was Paris? What an exaggerated name! She repeated it to herself half aloud, to please herself; it buzzed in her ears like a cathedral bumblebee, it shone in her eyes even on the labels of her ointment jars."

9 Just as female hysteria is a consequence of the level of physical and symbolic confinement of women confined to the domestic sphere, kleptomania was recorded in the nineteenth century as a condition particularly dominant among women (Tamilia, 2011, p. 12). Zola (1883) represents this affliction through the character of Madame de Boves.

10 "Soon the counter was covered with fortune. In a corner of the hall, Inspector Jouve, who had not let go of Mme de Boves, despite her apparent idleness [*flânerie*], remained still amidst the crowd, his indifferent posture, his gaze always fixed on her."

from diverse sociocultural, ethnic, and identity backgrounds, as defended by theorists like Massey (2001) and Kern (2020). To explore this, this section will analyze, on the one hand, examples of *flânerie* narratives featuring female protagonists who are entirely free from the sexist codes that traditionally shape urban space, assessing the extent to which these characters can be understood as *flâneuses*. On the other hand, it will examine the case of women who are frequently included within the aesthetic canon of *flânerie*, evaluating to what extent they constitute a viable model for feminist urbanism.

A classic yet less frequently studied example of *flânerie* narratives featuring female protagonists – compared to paradigms like *Cléo from 5 to 7* by Agnès Varda – is *Nadja à Paris* (*Nadja in Paris*), directed by Éric Rohmer (1964). The film presents a day in the life of Nadja (Nadja Tesich), a doctoral student at the Sorbonne University who has both the time and financial means to stroll, as she herself acknowledges: as in traditional *flânerie* narratives, she is the protagonist, the subjective gaze, and the narrating voice. Her appearance also differs from that of Baudelaire's *passante*: she wears a *garçon*-style haircut, a striped long-sleeve shirt, pants, and sneakers – comfortable clothing for wandering for hours, her primary occupation, at the pace she desires. This freedom extends to her relationship with her surroundings: she can sit, walk, and run, safely use the metro and the tram, visit bookstores and antique shops on the *rive gauche*, go to the cinema and theater, and maintain or suspend her detached observation of the crowds at will. Most notably, in a bar scene, the men treat her as a perfect equal. Additionally, she lives in the highly desirable location of the Cité universitaire, which allows her to visit the most romantic areas of Paris, particularly the Latin Quarter and Montparnasse, where she interacts with other artists. At a street stall, she even states that she enjoys "looking around calmly" (3'38"): she is an unobserved observer, whose aesthetic sensibility and physiognomic disposition are highlighted – "*je regarde (…) la manière de marcher des gens, la manière dont ils regardent*"[11] (4'24").

Therefore, Nadja's portrayal aligns with the "universal" model of the bohemian-romantic *flâneur*, despite her Yugoslav-American background. Although there are moments of critique – such as when she remarks that Saint-Germain has become a "bourgeois" neighborhood (5'15") or when she appreciates the working-class district of Belleville – the crowd remains a dynamic and picturesque backdrop from which she stands apart.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge the fictional nature of these kinds of narratives: at no point are the protagonists reduced to an objectified condition – in contrast with *Cléo from 5 to 7*, which does depict the challenges a woman faces in becoming an unseen observer and, consequently, in practicing *flânerie* –. Nadja appears in crowded spaces, some of them dominated by male presence, yet she remains an anonymous observer rather than an intruder. As a result, the film does not depict a woman truly engaging in *flânerie* but, at best, an idealized version of fleeting moments of leisure that an idle female wanderer might experience – thus distorting her reality. Nadja would not have been possible in 1960s Paris; in essence, she represents a *flâneur*, much like, for instance, the young girl in *Zazie dans le métro* (1960), directed by Malle. Similarly, Eva (Itsaso Arana) in *La virgen de agosto* (*The August Virgin*), by the Spanish director Jonás Trueba (2019), is not a true *flâneuse* either. Dressed in red, like José Luis Guerín's *passante* of *In the City of Sylvia* (2007), and introduced as a false "virgin," the narrative seemingly overlooks the real consequences of her impending single motherhood: during her wanderings, she casually follows a tourist in order to, like Baudelaire, experience other lives. It is August in a serene, everyday Madrid, where the sun does not scorch, where feet – encased in leather-buckled shoes – do not swell or grow weary, and where men exist only as potential friends and egalitarian lovers.

Thus, our thesis at this point is that presenting or interpreting these types of female characters as fully realized *flâneuses* may be counterproductive. The reason for this is that these narratives, when read through the deconstructive lens of Ostriker's (1982) feminist revisionist mythmaking, simultaneously render urban women's problems invisible and assume that the role of the *flâneur* is the unquestionable model of aesthetic experience. Kracauer (1977, p. 163) diagnosed romantic comedies in which a young woman from a lower social class married a man of considerable wealth, rather than leading female audiences to adopt a critical stance, instead pushed them toward fostering empty hopes and falling into inertia. Similarly, *flânerie* cinema featuring "female" protagonists, despite its commendable female gaze in some cases, ultimately may remain a "manufactured dream" that paralyzes the transformative energies of the real, existing city.

11 "I observe (…) the way people walk, the way they look."

Nevertheless, on the other hand, there were cases of renowned nineteenth-century women known not only for engaging in *flânerie* within their respective cities, but also for addressing it in their artistic works. Within a context of *flânerie* predominantly shaped by white, bourgeois masculinity, it is at least worth questioning whether these women represent exceptions to the rule, or rather whether they should not be considered genuine *flâneuses* – that is, whether it might be preferable that they not be assimilated into its established canon.

It can be asserted that many female urban artists sought to carve out a place for themselves in the city through the only available means: by imitating men. Paradigmatic cases include Flora Tristan and her *Promenades dans Londres*, from 1840; Delphine de Girardin and her *Chroniques parisiennes, 1836–1848*, and the aforementioned George Sand, all cited as precursors of the *flâneuse* (Nesci, 2019). However, defending the female wanderer based on these examples leads to the unsatisfactory conclusion that only women who are extraordinarily gifted in creativity are worthy of comparison with the male artist. This implies not only that being a *flâneuse* requires privilege but also that these women are "accepted" within *flânerie* as minor equals in a *bohème* that is primarily and fundamentally male, as Jennie Olofsson (2008, p. 77) has astutely observed.

In other words, it is not a genuine solution for the male wanderer to condescendingly "share" the role of *flânerie* with women, as some proposals suggest, nor for women to have to disguise themselves as *flâneurs* to survive and navigate the city (Coates, 2017). Rather, disguise should be a tactic of infiltration into a male-dominated world to ultimately overthrow it from within, rather than a forced means of integration. An example of this is shown by Virginia Woolf in a short story from 1927, still little studied by feminist urban theory, although it has already begun to be reclaimed by authors such as Elkin (2017), titled *Street Haunting: A London Adventure*. Consider the following revealing excerpt:

> No one perhaps has ever felt passionately towards a lead pencil. But there are circumstances in which it can become supremely desirable to possess one; moments when we are set upon having an object, an excuse for walking half across London between tea and dinner. (...) and getting up we say: "Really I must buy a pencil," as if under cover of this excuse we could indulge safely in the greatest pleasure of town life in winter—rambling the streets of London" (Woolf, 2015, p. 7).

As theorists such as Friedberg (1994, p. 37), Rendell (2000, p. 135) and Murphy (2006, p. 33) have pointed out, many so-called female "shoppers" used to carry a bag with a book or household items, in order to ensure their decency and be able to go out into the streets, becoming idle and aimless observers. It must be admitted, along with several theorists of the *flâneuse*, that having to resort to a subterfuge like shopping is not *flânerie*, not *sensu stricto*. However, this should not be thought of as having less value: it is, in fact, a masterful example of the creative use of the narrow margins of aesthetic freedom by women and their ingenious capacity to reverse the "urban injustice" that, on the other hand, generates the need for such creativity. Evidently, this is not about romanticizing that women should turn necessity into a virtue, but rather about making visible these practices for what they reveal about the limits and the liberating strategies as experienced by women and female characters.

It can be concluded that women suffer from "aesthetic injustice," as discussed by Dalaqua (2020) and Hofmann (2023), in *flânerie narratives*, not only due to their nineteenth century-sexism but also because the real experiences, knowledge, and needs of urban female characters are not taken into account outside a vocabulary originally constructed by men and from a distinctly masculine perspective. It is not so much a question of whether women, socialized in objectifying gender schemes and wandering in spaces symbolically restricted by patriarchal logic, can engage in the practice of *flânerie*. Undoubtedly, women should have access, both in reality and narratively, to a leisurely, carefree walk full of creative potential. However, why should we assume the role of the *flâneur* as the only philosophical horizon in our urban narratives? Even from feminist coordinates, we may overlook other forms of feminine creativity by starting from this particular *a priori*.

5 The Search for New Models of Urban Agency: A Proposal

As studied by various gender studies scholars, any female urban presence that operates outside the logic of power would attract the attention of cisheterosexual male passersby, the symbolic owners of our cities (Kern, 2020). However, as feminist theory has always maintained, being a victim of patriarchal signifying codes also

simultaneously implies being a subject of resistance – albeit to varying degrees – against these discourses. It also becomes evident that the idea of *flânerie* is embedded within a highly poeticized discourse that romanticizes a practice which, in reality, was often sexist and even violent toward the city's marginalized subjects – particularly those women who neither are nor can be *flâneurs*. After deconstructing this model of playful urbanity, a series of clues must now be presented to begin constructing a new cosmos of meaning about the significant and collectivized feminist urban experience, which we have termed "feminist *paideia*."

Based on the previous considerations, it must first be affirmed that women have indeed engaged in an aesthetic, idle, and playful form of strolling based on aimless wandering, albeit under more or less oppressive urban and sociohistorical conditions. As argued, thinking about the urban rights – political, but also aesthetic and artistic – of female wanderers should not equate to theorizing about specific women who may have approached a space dominated by the artist; rather, it should be about creatively philosophizing a revolutionary model of urbanity that provides a new vocabulary for constructing the right to active, creative citizenship. To achieve this, narrative references to female characters who meet certain conditions should be sought:

(a) They must be presented from a female gaze, meaning from a narrative voice that does not objectify their bodies or subordinate their appearance to the romantic or erotic demands of a male protagonist (as opposed to the *flâneur*'s canon).
(b) They must depict a woman or group of women who wander through the city, creatively utilizing public spaces (for instance, Vivian Gornicks' *Fear Attachments*).
(c) The previous two conditions must highlight the objectification and discrimination faced by these women based on their gender, appearance, age, ethnicity, and physical and mental abilities (that is, aesthetic injustice).

The first condition excludes from this new feminist urban canon literature and cinematography of *flânerie* written by normative male authors; the second ensures that the identified characters serve as models for the aesthetic and playful use of the city; and the third avoids falling into narratives that idealize these experiences in a mythologizing way, turning the female wanderer into a copy of the *flâneur*. Combined, these conditions will provide a philosophically interesting account of the particular use of public space by female characters and the resistance strategies they mobilize in opposition to sexist power structures.

One option for constructing a canon from scratch involves turning to the great classics of literature, and from there, drawing on an increasingly broad artistic corpus, with works spanning different genres, geographical locations, and periods. Specifically, these narratives will be read "against the grain," following Benjamin's maxim – "*die Geschichte gegen den Strich zu bürsten*" (1982, I, p. 697) – avoiding the usual "complicity" – "*Komplizität*" (X) – with the creators of the canonical narrative, a methodology that will be modulated by the feminist critical tendency of revisionist mythmaking as proposed by Ostriker (1982).

In this case, the approach will begin with *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf (1925), to reread it from a new perspective. In a passage from the novel, an anonymous and racialized female passerby flees from the pursuit carried out by Peter Walsh through the streets of London. The chase is automatically justified for the London *flâneur* for several reasons. First, the man compares this woman to other stimuli that catch his attention and that he impulsively follows; in fact, she seems to blend in with the shop windows and the goods displayed in them. Additionally, his pursuit is justified by his youth and bachelorhood – "but she's not married; she's young; quite young […]" (Woolf, 1996, p. 52) – and, above all, by her auratic appeal, which is explicitly characterized as a veiled appearance accentuated by an imaginary breeze – "[she] seemed …, to shed veil after veil, until she became the very woman he had always in mind" (p. 52). This impression is particularly striking, as she is a black woman walking completely alone through central London, dressed lightly, allowing her skin color to be visible.

All these reasons lead Walsh to affirm the existence of a luminous connection between them, a language intelligible only in the cabalistic city of the *flâneur*'s imagination. Furthermore, he alone perceives himself as the legitimate figure to question the social status of the other, as revealed by his brief moment of doubt regarding the passerby's respectability – "Was she, he wondered as she moved, respectable?" (p. 52). The crowd, in turn, is solely what disturbs his approach, never other potential *flâneurs* – "but other people got between them in the street, obstructing him, blotting her out" (p. 52). Thus, he assumes that she will have no

problem accepting his company – "[…] if she stopped he would say 'Come and have an ice; he would say, and she would answer, perfectly simply, 'Oh yes'" (p. 52).

However, Woolf's prose reveals that this series of preconceived notions is nothing more than impressions fabricated by the mind of the male passerby, which will ultimately be disproven over the course of a walk in which his gestures gradually take on the characteristics of an English hunter in pursuit of his prey within the urban forest:

> Straightening himself and stealthily fingering his pocket-knife he started after her to follow this woman, this excitement, which seemed even with its back turned to shed on him a light which connected them, which singled him out, as if the random uproar of the traffic had whispered through hollowed hands his name, not Peter, but his private name which he called himself in his own thoughts. 'You', she said, only 'you', saying it with her white gloves and her shoulders. Then the thin long cloak which the wind stirred as she walked past Dent's shop in Cockspur Street blew out with an enveloping kindness, a mournful tenderness, as of arms that would open and take the tired (p. 52).

Up to this point, the female passerby maintains the usual passive relationship toward the *flâneur*. However, her disappearance no longer is a poetic necessity to preserve the idealized essence of the beloved figure; her supposed auratic elusiveness is revealed for what it truly is – self-deception meant to prevent the destruction of "his" city. The *passante* is a woman with her own agency; she is the one who ensures that the encounter does not materialize:

> Laughing and delightful, she had crossed Oxford Street and Great Portland Street and turned down one of the little streets, and now, and now, the great moment was approaching, for now she slackened, opened her bag, and with one look in his direction, but not at him, one look that bade farewell, summed up the whole situation and dismissed it triumphantly, for ever, had fitted her key, opened the door, and gone! (…) And it was smashed to atoms – his fun, for it was half made up, as he knew very well […] (p. 53).

Consequently, despite the usual radical asymmetry between urban men and women, Woolf's *passante* deploys ingenious strategies to escape male objectification. She takes advantage of the aesthetics and architecture of the modern city to become blurred and elusive, outmaneuvering a *flâneur* who does not know London's intricate urban fabric as well as she does. Even though her appearance is still framed within the constraints of the *éternel féminin*, the tension between this ideal and her role as a modern strolling woman creates a stark contrast, ultimately leading to the demystification of the romantic *flânerie* canon: this narrative axis is not only momentarily destabilized but, more significantly, revealed as a legitimization of street harassment.

The *flâneur* in Georges Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-Morte* (1892) also belonged to a Bruges that was already dead; his encounter with Jane grants him access to a modern city that he ultimately fails to accept, leading him to murder that contemporary woman who walks alone, dresses, and wears makeup as she wishes:

> Jane, de son côté, se lassait de ses humeurs noires, de ses longs silences. Maintenant, quand il arrivait, vers le soir, elle n'était pas revenue, attardée à des flâneries en ville, des achats dans les magasins, des essayages des robes. (…) Où allait-elle? (…) Inquiet, triste, craignant les regards, il marchait sans but, à la dérive, d'un trottoir à l'autre, gagnait des quais proches, longeait le bord de l'eau […][12] (2005, p. 95).

Jane is, therefore, the new painter of truly modern life: she strolls leisurely through the boulevards and avenues of Bruges, taking advantage of the crowds and shop windows that fill them to construct her own idea of happiness in the city. Hugues, however, belongs to a dead, pre-modern Bruges. This is what drives him to strangle Jane: she symbolizes a new way of relating to the city, one that escapes the sexist patterns of objectification.

It is very interesting to consider that the skills displayed by these female passersby are not innate; they are acquired. Through her prose, Woolf implicitly demonstrates that women learn distinctly urban techniques:

---

12 "Jane, for her part, was growing weary of his dark moods, of his long silences. Now, when he arrived toward evening, she had not yet returned, delayed by her *flâneries* through the city, shopping in stores, trying on dresses. … Where was she going? … Anxious, sad, uneasy under others' gazes, he walked aimlessly, adrift, from one sidewalk to another, made his way to the nearby quays, and followed the edge of the water […]."

using storefront reflections to keep track of a potential harasser and evade him, adjusting their pace strategically to mislead him, and, ultimately, mastering the intricacies of their cities to alter their routes as needed. All of this underscores the capacity – born out of necessity – that normative men do not possess: the development of a specifically urban and gendered praxis of knowledge, strategically employed to safeguard their leisurely and playful stroll when it is threatened by the "scrutiny" imposed on their public presence, which is not shared by the cisheteronormative male identity (Wood, 2005, p. 7; Wolff, 2010).

Thus, taking these narratives as a theoretical reference opens the possibility of a philosophical and sociological inquiry into the series of female strategies that urban characters – and also women – develop in their respective cities. Among other aspects, these feminist urban *paideias* may include, as main elements, informal knowledge such as: the places that should and should not be frequented at certain times, the appearance and behavior of certain men who linger in those areas, and, most importantly, firsthand accounts from women who have experienced harassment in these spaces, along with advice on how to navigate and overcome such situations. This tacit and dialogical knowledge, shared by informal communities of women and other liminal identities in the city, holds the potential to generate, both in reality and in fiction, a mapping endowed with a strict gendered dimension – one that cannot be directly compared to traditional *flânerie*.

These dynamic maps, which theorists like Sarah Deutsch (2000, p. 114) have referred to as "moral geographies," would also be aesthetic-political in nature, following the idea of "psychogeography" (Debord, 1957, p. 172), and would provide insight into the female urban experiences, even allowing a shift from a literary and artistic analysis to a sociological one grounded in feminist citizen science. de Certeau (1990), without explicitly applying his reflections to gender issues, argued – following a Foucauldian lineage – that the urban fabric constitutes a network of power, a *tissu urbain* (p. 155), in which all users participate to varying degrees and where relative voids of authority can be found: unstable spaces of creative freedom generated through walking – "*le marcheur transforme en autre chose chaque signifiant spatial*"[13] (p. 149). Circulation is channeled through regulated pathways that ensure predictability and containment (Benjamin, GS V, E 1a, 4); however, within this rationalized control of movement, the pedestrian, as Certeau asserts, possesses a micro-power: by walking, they can find fleeting moments to engage in improvisational acts that elude such regulation. This possibility of playing within the margins was precisely what Dadaist and Surrealist marches – and their ultimate heir, the Situationist dérive (Careri, 2013) – exploited.

Thus, these practices would find their earliest and often invisible predecessors in the urban women of literary and cinematic fiction, as well as in the real-life inhabitants of our cities, because they demonstrate what Certeau would call an *art de faire* that surpasses that of the *flâneur* and, by extension, the normative citizen. Through their learning and practice, women engage in a process that, although still unsystematic and therefore partial and ephemeral, demystifies the role of the *flâneur* and the normative image of the citizen that he represents: they learn to transgress the sexist ordering principles of space by developing a practical and technical knowledge of urban idiosyncrasies, momentarily disrupting the network of power – an ephemeral yet strategic form of performative, citizen-driven urban science. This knowledge is enacted *in situ* and disseminated through first-person narratives shared among peers. In this way, feminist urban *paideias* would serve as a means to counteract the epistemic, aesthetic, and ultimately hermeneutic injustice experienced by women.

This study has only begun to outline the foundational elements of this feminine *paideia* within the Western artistic context. Further research is needed to explore the contents and structures of this alternative urban praxis and to examine how it is developed by different liminal inhabitants – how urban otherness explores and cultivates new ways of walking, narrating, and poetizing the city, rejecting the experience of urban space and its inhabitants as a mere stage for consumerist, androcentric, ableist, and ethnocentric recreation.

13 "The walker transforms each spatial signifier into something else."

6 Conclusions

This article has sought to advocate for the creation of new aesthetic discourses on urban strolling from a feminist perspective, moving away from the canon established by the *flânerie* model. First, it has been shown that this romanticized figure carries a strong sexist charge, manifested in voyeuristic actions, sexual harassment, and, in extreme cases, femicide, as depicted in various narratives. Furthermore, it has been argued that this narrative framework also devalues and even renders invisible the marginal urban practices developed by female characters in these same narratives.

This demystification has been necessary to propose a rejection of this aesthetic canon and to advocate for a search for alternative narratives that provide clues for constructing a paradigm of feminist urban leisure and aesthetics. This study has shown that a crucial first step is to give visibility to other urban narratives and female characters of our Western tradition, often considered secondary, identifying in them – through a feminist revisionist reading – examples of creative strategies for subversion in accessing and utilizing public spaces against urban power dynamics. Despite their socioeconomic and symbolic limitations, female urban characters exhibit skills – an informal shared *paideia* – that allow them to navigate these restrictions and embrace an enriched experience of the city.

These narratives, along with the lived experiences of their readers and viewers, constitute a tactical feminine and feminist culture that awaits academic exploration. In this way, this new theoretical horizon anticipates the possibility of outlining, in future research, from intersectional approaches that combine the feminist perspective with ethnic and postcolonial issues, as well as the gender and sexual diversity explored in LGBTQ+ studies, the ways in which liminal urban inhabitants – both individually and collectively – generate their own creative sociotechnical practices built through a dialogical and political dimension distinct from *flânerie*. Another model of urban strolling is possible, but to construct it, new urban myths, imaginaries, and ways of narrating the city are needed – a city that, like private rooms, must also belong to women.

Funding information: This work would not have been possible without the funding of the Severo Ochoa 2020 Fellowship from the Principality of Asturias, Spain (PA-21-PF-BP20).

Author contribution: The author confirms the sole responsibility for the conception of the study, presented results, and manuscript preparation.

Conflict of interest: Author states no conflict of interest.

References

Balzac, H. (1854). *Traité de la vie élégante*. Gallimard.
Baudelaire, C. (1868). *L'art romantique. Le Peintre de la vie moderne*. Michel Lévy Frères. http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148.
Baudelaire, C. (1869). *Petits poèmes en prose. Les paradis artificiels*. Michel Lévy Frères. http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148.
Baudelaire, C. (2009). *Fleurs du mal* [1861]. Cátedra.
Benjamin, W. (1982). *Gesammelte Schriften*. Suhrkamp.
Brey, I. (2021). *Le regard féminin: Une révolution à l'écran*. Seuil.
Brydon, L., Burger, B., & Rice, L. (2021). Practicing flânerie: Imagined and applied walking strategies in Pretoria/Tshwane, South Africa. In M. L. Paplas & K. Comfort (Eds.), *New directions in flânerie: Global perspectives for the twenty-first century* (1st ed., pp. 236–264). Routledge.
Buck-Morss, S. (1986). The flâneur, the sandwich-man and the whore: The politics of loitering. *New German Critique*, *39*, 99–140. doi: 10.2307/488122.
Careri, F. (2013). *Walkscapes* (2nd ed.). Gustavo Gili.
Chan, H. (2018). Cléo from 5 to 7 and the performance of the flâneuse. *Cinssu*, *18*, 58–67.
Coates, J. (2017). Key figure of mobility: The flâneur. *Social Anthropology*, *25*(1), 28–41. doi: 10.1111/1469-8676.12381.
Dalaqua, G. H. (2020). Aesthetic injustice. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, *12*(1), 1–12. doi: 10.1080/20004214.2020.1712183.
de Certeau, M. (1990). *L'invention du quotidien, I: Arts de faire* (1st ed.). Gallimard.

Debord, G. (1957). *Guide psychogéographique de Paris*. MACBA.
Deutsch, S. (2000). *Women and the city: Gender, space, and power in Boston, 1870–1940* (1st ed.). Oxford University Press. doi: 10.2307/3185468.
Elkin, L. (2017). *Flâneuse: Women walk the city in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London* (2nd ed.). Vintage Books.
Flaubert, G. (2015). *Madame Bovary* [1856]. Bibliothèque électronique de Québec.
Fonseca, N. (2023). Fisiologias do flâneur: Panorâmicas sobre a experiência estética da cidade. In N. Conceição & N. Fonseca (Eds.), *Leituras críticas sobre a experiência da cidade* (1st ed., pp. 103–128). Planos de Pormenor.
Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: Power and the ethics of knowing* (1st ed.). Oxford University Press.
Friedberg, A. (1994). *Window shopping: Cinema and the postmodern* (1st ed.). University of California Press.
Frisby, D. (1994). The flâneur in social theory. In K. Tester (Ed.), *The flâneur* (pp. 81–110). Routledge.
Harvey, D. (2006). Space as a keyword. In N. Castree & D. Gregory (Eds.), *David Harvey: A critical reader* (pp. 70–93). Blackwell.
Hessel, F. (2001). *Spazieren in Berlin* [1929]. Berlin-Brandenburg.
Hofmann, B. (2023). Aesthetic injustice. *Journal of Business Ethics*, *189*, 1–13. doi: 10.1007/s10551-023-05401-4.
Iglesia, A. M. (2019). *La revolución de las flâneuses* (1st ed.). Wunderkammer.
Jenkins, K. (2017). Rape myths and domestic abuse myths as hermeneutical injustices. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, *34*(2), 191–205. doi: 10.1111/japp.12174.
Kern, L. (2020). *Feminist city: Claiming space in a man-made world* (1st ed). Verso.
Kracauer, S. (1977). *Theory of film* (5th ed.). Princeton University Press.
Kramer, K., & Short, J. R. (2011). Flânerie and the globalizing city. *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action*, *15*(3–4), 322–342.
Maffesoli, M. (1997). *Du nomadisme: Vagabondages initiatiques*. Le Livre de Poche.
Massey, D. (2001). *Space, place, and gender* (1st ed.). University of Minnesota Press.
Matysová, K. (2011). *Écrire le monde en marchant: Une approche de la modernité en Bohême et en France du début du XIXe siècle aux années 1940*. Université de Paris IV & Charles University.
Meagher, S. M. (2007). Philosophy in the streets: Walking the city with Engels and de Certeau. *City*, *11*(1), 7–20.
Murphy, A. (2006). Traces of the flâneuse: From *Roman Holiday* to *Lost in Translation*. *Journal of Architectural Education*, *60*(1), 33–42. doi: 10.1111/j.1531-314X.2006.00058.x.
Nesci, C. (2019). *Le flâneur et les flâneuses: Les femmes et la ville à l'époque romantique* (1st ed.). UGA.
Olofsson, J. (2008). Negotiating figurations for feminist methodologies: A manifest for the fl@neur. *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, *5*(1), 71–93.
Ostriker, A. (1982). The thieves of language: Women poets and revisionist mythmaking. *Signs*, *8*(1), 68–90.
Perrot, M. (1997). *Femmes publiques* (1st ed.). Textuel.
Price, R. (2001). *Napoleon III and the second empire* (1st ed.). Routledge.
Rendell, J. (2000). Ramblers and Cyprians: Mobility, visuality and the gendering of architectural space. In L. Durning & W. Richard (Eds.), *Gender and architecture* (1st ed., pp. 135–154). John Wiley & Sons.
Robbins, K. C. (2018). Exotics to erotics: Exploring new frontiers of desire within Parisian department store décors. In A. I. Lasc, P. Lara-Betancourt, & M. Maile Petty (Eds.), *Architectures of display* (1st ed., pp. 185–201). Routledge. doi: 10.1515/9780691232416-008.
Rodenbach, G. (2005). *Bruges-la-Morte* [1892]. Boucher.
Sennett, R. (2002). *The fall of public man* (7th ed.). Penguin.
Shortell, T., & Brown, E. (2014). *Walking in the European City: Quotidian Mobility and Urban Ethnography* (1st ed.). Ashgate.
Speck, J. (2012). *Walkable city: How downtown can save America, one step at a time* (1st ed). Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
Tamilia, R. (2011). *The wonderful world of the department store in historical perspective: A comprehensive international bibliography, partially annotated*. University of Quebec.
Tiller, E. (2015). *Women walking: The flâneuse and urban tourist in cinema*. University of Stirling.
Tucker, T. (2019). Aimless walks. In *The peripatetic frame* (1st ed., pp. 98–129). Edinburgh University Press.
Wiggers, L. (2014). *Saleswomen and the middle-class: Gender and class conflict within the Chicago department store, 1880–1930*. Illinois State University.
Wilson, E. (1992). The invisible flâneur. *New Left Review*, *191*, 90–110.
Wolff, J. (1985). The invisible flâneuse. Women and the literature of modernity. *Theory Culture Society*, *2*, 37–46.
Wolff, J. (2010). Unmapped spaces – gender, generation and the city. *Feminist Review*, *96*, 6–19. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40928092.
Wood, S. (2005). *The freedom of the streets: Work, citizenship, and sexuality in a Gilded Age city* (1st ed.) University of North Carolina Press.
Woolf, V. (1996). *Mrs. Dalloway*. Penguin Books [1925].
Woolf, V. (2015). *Street haunting: A london adventure*. Five Leaves [1927].
Zola, E. (2015). Au bonheur des dames. Les Rougon-Macquart: Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire, XI [1883]. Bibliothèque électronique de Québec.