Traces of the Flâneuse
From Roman Holiday to Lost In Translation

This article critically considers the trope of the nineteenth-century flâneur/flâneuse as found in two films: Roman Holiday (William Wyler, 1953) and Lost in Translation (Sofia Coppola, 2003). Both films construct a traditional narrative from the adventures of a single female protagonist as she negotiates urban space. In tracing the references to the flâneur/the flaneuse as found in these two films, one can begin to map a certain trajectory of contemporary gender relations in respect to urban space from the post–World War II era to the present, as well as to understand the context in which the “city” itself is seen as a site for such transformations.

Introduction

The city is “masculine” in its triumphal scale, its towers and vistas and arid industrial regions; it is “feminine” in its enclosing embrace, in its indeterminacy and labyrinthine uncenterness.  

Cinematic representations of contemporary urban life in Western cultures are more often than not paradoxical. As suggested by Wilson above, most urban-based narratives develop around some type of dialectic—between the city as the culmination of human civilization or its demise, between the city as the place where one is found or the place where one gets lost. As such, in each narrative the city stands in for larger social metaphors that define the individual characters. Whether a film critiques the city (as in many films noirs) or revels in it uncritically (as in many romantic comedies), the narratives convey the idea that urban experience is not universal but is, in fact, highly contingent upon gender, age, race, and/or class.

Although we are at the threshold of the twenty-first century—an era when an increasingly rapid pace of urban life is expected to impact ever more people worldwide—our cinematic representations suggest that we still look back to a time when such a trajectory was first starting—that is, to the nineteenth century, when the dialectics between the “moral” country and the “immoral” city, between the feminine place of home and the masculine place of work, between the notion of the domestic as stifling and the urban as liberating, all began to be knitted into our collective imagination. This ideological connection to the past is particularly true for gender roles.

Many of the mixed signals given to women (and men) in media today rehearse a dilemma that emerged at the outset of the industrial age when our domestic spheres became radically separated from our workplaces. Jane Rendell summarized the basic conundrum that underlies at least some of the hypercritical ways we deal with gender in popular urban representations today:

In the early nineteenth century increasing urbanization and the expansion of capitalism resulted in the rising cultural importance of certain social spaces of leisure, consumption, display and exchange. These were the sites of conflicting concerns, those of public patriarchs seeking to control female occupation of the city, worried that their female property—mothers, wives and daughters—would be visually and sexually available to other men, and those consumer capitalists aiming to extend the roles of women as cheap workers and consumers in the city.

From the nineteenth century on, with the development of major industrial/global cities such as Paris, New York, and London, these new tensions and their subsequent gender classifications began to have spatial impact in addition to their more obvious social ramifications.

As Richard Sennett suggests in The Fall of Public Man: On the Social Psychology of Capitalism, it is at this point that our collective mapping of urban space began to be defined by and through gender in several significant ways. Sennett states, for example, that for women of this time:

Public and the idea of disgrace were closely allied...In the restaurants of the 19th century, a lone, respectable woman dining with a group of men, even if her husband were present, would cause an overt sensation, whereas...the extramarital liaisons of Victorian men were
sometimes conducted more publicly than one would in retrospect imagine, because they occurred in social space, which continued to be far away from the family; they were “outside” in a kind of moral limbo.3

These spatial classifications extended easily into our colloquial language such as when we define a female of questionable character in urban space as a “street walker.”4

Flâneur: Flâneuse

While the extremities of these issues have been softened by time (yes, most women now feel comfortable in restaurants), these spatial classifications still remain potent reference points and are often used by film directors to explore contemporary and still unresolved gender tensions. Two films produced 50 years apart both explore contemporary gender relations in an urban setting and reveal the subtle transformations in the traditional gender mappings of urban space. The first film is Roman Holiday (1953) directed by William Wyler (Figure 1). The second is Lost in Translation (2003) directed by Sofia Coppola (Figure 2).

In Roman Holiday, Audrey Hepburn portrays a modern day princess on an official visit to Rome. Upon her arrival, she has a bit of a nervous breakdown; after being medicated, she escapes from the palace in the middle of the night. She meets a character played by Gregory Peck who conceals his true identity as a newspaperman wanting to get a scoop on her disappearance so that he can pay off a debt. The two explore the city of Rome together, visiting the sights while skillfully eluding the legion of people looking for the Princess (Figure 3). They eventually fall in love, yet in the end realize that they must part ways.

In Lost in Translation, Scarlett Johansson’s character accompanies her photographer husband on assignment in Tokyo. While lounging around their hotel, she meets Bill Murray’s character, the star of an advertising campaign for Suntory Whiskey. Left to her own devices by a husband either absent or overly attentive to others, Johansson joins Murray to explore Tokyo (Figure 4). They connect deeply with each other, yet as with Hepburn’s and Peck’s characters, eventually realize that they must part ways.

Both narratives are based on the chance meeting of two protagonists in an unfamiliar city. The women in each film are socially defined by a form of patriarchy (Johansson’s character is married; Hepburn’s character is the daughter of the King of England). In each case, the absence of the male patriarch in both foreign settings allows the possibility for these protected women to encounter a more urbanized/globalized older man, thereby setting up a classic triadic structure between the stability of the domestic and the excitement of the city. More importantly, in both narratives, we can see the female characters struggle as they attempt to escape the confines of their own domesticity by adopting characteristics of the nineteenth-century urban flâneur—a desire that runs counter to more stable gender roles found in our popular culture, providing the necessary tension around which to construct each film’s plot as well as the crisis point which will ultimately require narrative resolution.

The flâneuse was the seminal nineteenth-century cosmopolitan male, both real and imagined.

---

1. Audrey Hepburn’s character in Roman Holiday. (Courtesy of Paramount Pictures.)

2. Scarlett Johansson’s character in Lost in Translation. (Courtesy of Focus Features.)

---
for whom mobility through public urban space was key. He was the social body for which the capitalist industrial city was structured—a city with boulevards and cafes, a city based on free financial exchange, separate from the domestic. Through many popular sources, such as the pulp Rambler tales set in London in the early part of the nineteenth century to the more poetic writings of Baudelaire in the later nineteenth century, this character and his spatial transgressions ultimately entered the collective imagination as definitive expressions of a modern urban experience. The figure's very autonomy implicitly excluded respectable women, thereby reinforcing urban experience quintessentially figured as male.

In these two films, the flâneur emerges not only in the male characters (a common cliché in popular culture) but in the female characters as well. As such, these films suggest that, to a large extent, gender relationships have grown more complex or at least more intertwined since the post–World War II era. For both films, the historical icon of the flâneur represents a convenient and powerful mechanism to reexamine each generation's sense of gender classification and its transgressions, ambiguities, and ideological difficulties.

As the female protagonists in these two films struggle to adopt the role of the urban flâneur, several more of the common nineteenth-century gender issues become folded into the narratives. These include the notions that the female body in public space is disruptive to civic order, that there is a relationship of power between being seen and unseen in the visually consumptive landscape of the capitalist city, and last, that a type of existential fallout can occur when anonymous visibility is coupled with a separation from the domestic, undermining a sense of personal value. Each of these connections to the nineteenth-century discourse is discussed here within as evidenced via these two films.

**Stable: Disruptive**

One of the most resilient tropes found in urban literature dating from the early nineteenth century to the present is the notion that the female body disrupts the order of the male-controlled city. As early as London's nineteenth-century Rambler tales, the urban male's constant pursuit of pleasure has been celebrated as urban exploration, harkening back to the explorations of new worlds by adventurous males over the preceding three centuries. In the same schemes, the mobility of the urban female "represent[ed] [the] cause of her eventual destruction. Her movement was transgressive, blurring the boundaries between public and private, suggesting the uncontrollability of women in the city." Over time, this notion entered into literature and later into cinema as a fixture when women expanded their roles beyond that of daughter, wife, and mother—especially in the post–World War II era when women became irreversibly part of the general workforce. Initially, the primary question in these media representations revolved around how men could negotiate this new condition as seen in such films as *The Apartment* (1960) and *Klute* (1971). More recent films such as *Lost in Translation* now extend this question to their female characters, whose portrayals extend far beyond the comedic (*The Apartment*) or the pathological (*Klute*) as victims of male confusion.
Hepburn's victory is that she is able to retain her experiences for herself, outside the confines of any visual authority. This is conveyed at the end of the film when the covert photographs taken of her adventures are discreetly delivered to her without ever being revealed to the public or her family. Johansson's character remains in a more ambiguous state. She nurtures a sense of hope that her time in Tokyo has moved her forward, but the denouement has yet to be written. We are not sure whether she will return to the gaze of her husband or remain comfortably alone with her newfound anonymity and emboldened selfhood.

In 1863, Baudelaire wrote of his poet flâneur:

To the perfect spectator, the impassioned observer, it is an immense joy to make his domicile amongst numbers, amidst fluctuation and movement, amidst the fugitive and infinite. To be away from home, and yet to feel at home; to behold the world, to be in the midst of the world and yet to remain hidden from the world — these are some of the minor pleasures of such independent, impassioned and impartial spirits . . . the observer is a prince who always rejoices in his incognito.¹²

Here Baudelaire identified the most distinguishing characteristic of the nineteenth-century flâneur: his invisibility as the condition of his ultimate mobility and freedom. Baudelaire also states that the flâneur is "one with a love of masks and masquerade, the hate of home and the passion for roaming."¹³ As such, hiding and masquerading have come to be understood as typically MALE characteristics, allowing a man the ability to move through urban space without constraint. Being observed has become a feminizing or constraining characteristic, defining the city for women as a series of sites for exposure or concealment. Once again, this duality also plays out in both films.

Early in Roman Holiday, the Princess changes into the most neutral of attire for her escape from the palace (as compared to the ball gown we saw her in earlier). She wears what amounts to the female version of Gregory Peck's plain gray suit. She later shortens her hair to a more masculine length, and to her delight, several people announce that no one will recognize her (Figure 9). When she finds herself in Peck's pajamas, he states "You should wear my clothes more often." Finally, once she embarks upon her adventure as a flâneuse, she is given a more masculine nickname of "Smitty." As this invisible

9. The Princess getting her hair cut. (Courtesy of Paramount Pictures.)
voyeur, she is able to experience the masculine perspective of freedom in the urban space.

More subtle transformations are registered through her neckwear. She first appears in a feminine, expensive diamond necklace. For her escape, she chooses a masculine-like tie, which changes to a racy scarf midfilm when she is at her most daring. At the end she wears no neck attire at all, as if to say that the masquerade is over.

In Lost in Translation, it is Bill Murray’s character rather than Johansson’s who is caught between the binary conditions of being simultaneously visible and invisible. This, I believe, highlights what Richard Sennett calls the paradox of isolation in a field of constant visibility. In the capitalist city, where all is made visible through architectural transparency and media exposure, the individual has, in fact, been further isolated by such exposure. Being seen by all, Murray’s character is ironically lost to himself, making him more like the compatriot of the nineteenth-century flâneur, the prostitute, or streetwalker, caught in the game of monetary and visual exchange.

Baudelaire suggested that his flâneur was the equivalent of the prostitute, because like the prostitute the poet also sells his own soul to make money. As Murray sells himself so that others can sell Suntory, he is forced to reconcile the conflict between freedom and prostitution (Figure 10). Like Baudelaire’s flâneur, Murray’s character is not as free as he might seem, and is constricted by his image much as a nineteenth-century urban woman might be constricted by the gaze of others. As Elizabeth Wilson suggests of such contemporary male protagonists, “gone is the hero who metaphorically carved his name on the city; now men are petulant, temperamental and uncertain; they have become the ‘Other’ to female subjectivity . . .”.18

Home: Away

The paradox of being isolated within a field of total vision touches all four of the two films’ main characters to varying degrees. No one, male or female, has a place from which to escape the scrutiny of a completely visual and mobile society. Instead, they escape like the nineteenth-century flâneur by hiding in the crowd. In both films, none of the characters are at home; instead, each is either on “holiday” or “lost.” In the fifty-year span between these two films, we can see the emergence of a new recurring crisis of urban life, that in a global world no one is ever allowed to really be at “home” either literally or figuratively.

According to Sennett, for the contemporary urban dweller “each person’s self has become his principle burden; to know oneself has become an end, instead of a means through which one knows the world. And precisely because we are so self-absorbed, it is extremely difficult for us to arrive at a private principle, to give any clear account to ourselves . . .”.15 In both films discussed here, no character has his or her own kitchen, no one sleeps in his or her own bed, or spends time with his or her own family/spouses. And through these absences, they are left only with themselves.

In David Harvey’s terms, this crisis could stem primarily from the single fact that “industrial capitalism, through the reorganization of the work process and the advent of the factory system, forced the separation between place of work and place of reproduction and consumption.”16 And it is not just the female characters who suffer from this rupture, for at one point Bill Murray’s character bemoans how his wife, now separated from his work and consumed by her own domestic responsibilities, “doesn’t need me anymore.”

At the end of Roman Holiday, the Princess offers to cook something for Gregory Peck’s character, yet there is no kitchen. Peck then jokes that he will have to move and get a new apartment with a kitchen. We see through her change of expression that the Princess realizes she can only choose between two domestic realms rather than escape from either of them. With her obligations to the throne outweighing all other responsibilities, she returns to the palace. The viewer’s only solace emerges in one of the final scenes, when the Princess finally sets clear boundaries for herself by no longer allowing her servants to intrude into her own private world.

Jane Jacobs, as well as Sennett, has suggested that any social body without a clear sense of a private

10. Murray’s image across the billboards of Tokyo. (Courtesy of Focus Features.)
self will never coalesce into a healthy public persona. As Sennett observes, “human beings need to have some distance from intimate observation by others in order to feel sociable.” In a world where everyone is exposed, personal control is fragile. At the onset of each film, the female protagonist shows signs of becoming unglued, as a female body in a global world with no place to regain composure (Figures 11 and 12). This too can be linked to issues surrounding the crisis of gender that arose in the nineteenth century—particularly the common problem of female hysteria. Sennett writes:

The common and mild forms of hysteria were the various “complaints,” the physical betrayal of tension, which people, especially bourgeois women, could not succeed in suppressing. Something more than Victorian sexual prudery explains the existence of these nervous disorders; we have seen their cultural setting to be one of great pressure to maintain stable appearances within the family, so that the family itself could be a principle of order in a chaotic society. Set against this regulation of appearances was the belief in and fear of involuntary disclosure of emotion. Hysterical disorders were, in sum, the symptoms of a crisis—and the word is not too strong—in the distinctions between, and stability of, public and private life.

For our two female protagonists as well as the nineteenth-century woman, this condition is made more intense because they are under surveillance by a patriarchal eye (either father or husband), a gaze through which each is defined.

**Sex: Romance**

When Hepburn’s and Johansson’s characters attempt to escape this condition and enter the city alone, they must then dodge the suspicions and innuendos of being a disruptive sexual body. Through adopting the characteristics of the flâneur and being accompanied by males other than those who legally define them, they see and experience a type of freedom that is not typically available to women. In both films, female and male protagonists are transformed through their shared exploration of a foreign city.

This transformation occurs because all four characters, regardless of gender, transcend the narrow figuration of gender typical of the nineteenth-century city in their actions and in their final conceptions of each other. Ultimately, neither character is limited by the cultural ideology of the free heterosexual male dictating the social definition of the female. This transcendence arises from the shift in their relationships from sexual to romantic.

This romantic element is profoundly transformational and should not be seen as something flabby or commercial. It is through romance rather than sexual hierarchy that we are allowed to see people experience the positive potential of global urban life. Both stories are about unrequited love—love that is acknowledged but not fully attained (Figure 13). Here, the directors seem to aptly recognize and suggest that, while collectively we might not be fully beyond the classifications of

---

11. Hepburn's character becoming unglued in *Roman Holiday*. (Courtesy of Paramount Pictures.)
12. Johansson's character losing composure in *Lost in Translation*. (Courtesy of Focus Features.)
the nineteenth-century city, we can still seek and find personal transcendence. They suggest in these films that, as Western culture grapples with its inherited definitions of gender and space, we (like these characters) can be transformed by the urban experience and our lives made more profound by its liberating humanity.

These two films are somewhat unique among other films of their respective eras. Typically, to quote Wilson, “in the absence of any clear moral outlook contemporary post-modern films... tend to fall back on very traditional attitudes.” These two films, however, are not Taxi Driver (1976) or Pretty Woman (1990), or any other film where the city is still really only about sex and saving the female from its moral perils. Instead, both films embrace the poetic potential of urban life as something beyond the limits of the binary conditions of free versus confined, male versus female, transgressive versus tame, with women being either some version of the belle publique (woman of the streets) or belle honnête (honest or married female). Ultimately, in each film, the city is rendered a site for freedom found through human connection rather than through sexual encounter. These connections allow the two males to recover their souls from capitalist exchange — Bill Murray’s character is now more than a paid face for advertising alcohol and Gregory Peck’s character is now more personally enriched rather than simply out of debt. And for the two female characters, the “self” is defined as separate from one’s gender — Audrey Hepburn’s character is now more than a protected princess and Scarlett Johansson’s character is now more than someone else’s wife.

Though the nomenclature of the word “city” suggests something singular, a real city is of course nothing if not a heterotopic collection of many simultaneous things—a physical entity, an economic system, and a set of social relations to name a few. These narratives suggest that, through such complex diversity that favors chance over destiny, the city is a place where we can defy the very structures that define both the city and ourselves. The media’s continued interest in the flâneur is, I believe, rooted in the fact that we understand this “character” as someone who emerged within the narrative of history and found a way to revel in the modern city while all others were made its subject. For filmmakers such as Wyler and Coppola, the flâneur and the flâneuse with their inherent contradictions remain potent models for resistance in our collective consciousness. There is a sanguine quality to both films discussed here that makes them more compelling than those that oversimplify or idealize the flâneur. None of the protagonists in the two films fully escapes the conditions that control them, but they do find within the structure of urban life a type of human connection that can operate despite such constraints—beyond the economic constraints of capitalist exchange and beyond the gender constraints of marriage and family. These films suggest that cities like individuals can potentially be more than the forces that try to define them.

Acknowledgments
I would like to thank Diane Ghirardo for her generous support as well as Alice Kimm for her insightful comments during earlier drafts. I am also very appreciative of the assistance given by my USC graduate research scholar, Megan Nelson, in helping collect some of the images.
Filmography:


Notes

5. Rendell, Gender and Architecture, p. 143.
6. For a discussion of several 1960s comedic films such as Alfie, The Apartment and Darlin, that deal with the influx of women into corporate male culture, see Katherine Shonfield, Wells Have Feelings: Architecture, Film and the City (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 75.
8. Ibid.
10. Ibid., p. 19.
11. It is interesting to note that Johansson’s husband often wears sunglasses even when they are in their hotel room together, further conveying the sense that he is not really “seeing” Johansson even in their more intimate moments.
12. Friedberg, Window Shopping, p. 29.
19. Ibid., p. 323.
20. In Roman Holiday, there are two scenes related to the implication that unescorted Audrey might be a prostitute. The first is when Gregory Peck’s character first meets Audrey’s character asleep on the bench in the Forum—he, Gregory carefully and discretely moves his cash from one pocket to another to ensure Audrey does not take it from him. The second scene takes place the next morning, after she innocently spends the night at his apartment. Outside in the courtyard, Gregory’s character gives Audrey money so that she can get home, while Gregory’s landlord misinterprets this as paying her for the prior evening’s companionship.
21. As a minor note, in the late twentieth century, the alternative choice between sex and romance in the city can be readily illustrated by the dueling advertising billboard campaigns of Calvin Klein (a.k.a. sex) versus Ralph Lauren (a.k.a. romance).
22. Elizabeth Wilson, The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder and Women, p. 139.