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Walking from the Benjaminian Flâneur to urban walk in the XXI century

Del Flâneur Benjaminiano al paseo callejero del siglo XXI

Do Flâneur Benjaminiano ao passeio de rua do século XXI

Laura Camila Gómez Orjuela*

Abstract

Among tales and poems, between the XIX century and the XXI century, in Europe and Latin America, beings who wander around seek and feel the modern city. Walter Benjamin, introduced in the nineteenth century literature, finds the flâneur as a way of existence in the city. Above all, he discovered the possibility of reading in the streets the material sample of the socioeconomic structure that prevailed and prevails today. This text aims to be part of the emergent proposals to adapt the Benjamin's flâneur into a methodological way to read the city and understand who we are in relation to it. Walking some Colombian and Spanish streets is the excuse here to comprehend these modifications on the flâneur as experiences according to the time – different from Benjamin's time – and according to the space – far from... the Paris of Baudelaire –.

Keywords: Flâneur, urban walking, spatial experience, Colombia, España.

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Resumen

Entre cuentos y poemas, entre el siglo XIX y el siglo XXI, entre Europa y Latinoamérica, van deambulando seres que miran y que sienten la ciudad moderna. Walter Benjamin, sumergido en la literatura europea decimonónica, encuentra en el flâneur una forma de existir en el mundo, en la urbe. Sobre todo, descubre la posibilidad de leer en las calles la muestra material de una estructura socioeconómica que imperó y que impera hoy. El presente texto pretende unirse a las emergentes propuestas de convertir el flâneur benjaminiano en una forma metodológica de leer la ciudad y de entender quiénes somos en función de ella. Pasear algunas calles de Colombia y de España son acá la excusa para comprender estos cambios en las experiencias del flâneur a partir del tiempo – distante al de Benjamin – y del espacio – distante... al París de Baudelaire –.

Resumo

Entre histórias e poemas, entre o século XIX e o século XXI, entre a Europa e a América Latina, vagueiam seres que olham e sentem a cidade moderna. Walter Benjamin, imerso na literatura europeia do século XIX, encontrou no flâneur uma forma de existir no mundo, na cidade. Acima de tudo, descubra a possibilidade de ler nas ruas a amostra material de uma estrutura socioeconómica que prevaleceu e prevalece hoje. Este texto pretende juntar-se às propostas emergentes para converter o flâneur benjaminiano numa forma metodológica de ler a cidade e compreender quem somos a partir dela. Caminhar por algumas ruas da Colômbia e da Espanha é aqui o pretexto para compreender essas mudanças nas experiências do flâneur baseadas no tempo – distante de Benjamin – e no espaço – distante... da Paris de Baudelaire –.

Palabras clave: Flâneur, paseo urbano, experiencia espacial, Colombia, España

Palavras-chave: Flâneur, passeio urbano, experiência espacial, Colômbia, Espanha.



*“It is evident that the that action of wandering through a city
 such as Paris or Buenos Aires during the night,
 that ambulatory state in which, at a given moment,
 we stop belonging to the ordinary world,
 it placed me in regard to the city,
 and places the city in relation to me”*

Julio Cortázar.

The man of the D Coffee-House

“What a wild story – I said to myself – is written within that bosom!” the curious seeker of the D Coffee-House said when he caught sight of the weak, ragged, and decrepit old man who transited in the crowd. “Then came a craving desire to keep the man in view, to know more of him” (p. 392). The intrigue generated by the street and especially the faces of those who pass through it, surviving the exhaustion of the crowd, the chaos, the sun and the rain, life in the city itself, has been recounted and investigated in detail. Edgar Allan Poe (1849), thanks to that man of the crowd, but above all thanks to the observer, a seeker of the trivial and the transitory, who would be on the prowl discovering the city, encapsulated in his works the existence of the walker of the city: of the possible criminal, the pretentious bourgeois, the captivating female, of the lover, of the simple street walker.

“Which one of us, in these moments of ambition, has not dreamed of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical, without rhythm and without rhyme, supple enough and rugged enough to adapt itself to the lyrical impulses of the soul, the undulations of reverie, the jibes of conscience?” (p. x) had written Baudelaire (1869) too. In his melancholic contemplation of Paris, he evidenced the existential fear where, maybe, he could find an answer by watching the beings be in the city.

“The hundreds of thousands of all classes and ranks crowding past each other, are they not all human beings with the same qualities and powers, and with the same interest in being happy? And do they not, in the end, seek happiness in the same way, by the same means? And still they crowd by one another as though they had nothing in common, nothing to do with one another, and their only agreement is the tacit one, that each keep to his own side of the pavement, so as not to delay the opposing streams of the crowd, while it

occurs to no man to honor another with so much as a glance” (p. 44) denounced Engels (1845) on the contrary, when terrified he described an industrial city that revealed the urban waste generated by the capitalist machine.

This flâneur exposed before the eyes of Walter Benjamin, as an intriguing possibility of reading the city, and as a form of existence in it. This allows not only to contemplate the aesthetics of the street described by poets and writers who suffer the city, but also to denounce the favors and havoc left by the consolidation of an economic system, expressed in streets and bodies, tied to each other. This nineteenth-century analysis, written in the twentieth century by Benjamin, demands a re-reading of the contemporary city, which exposes the mutations not only of the urban landscapes of large cities but also of the people who now wander through their streets. Benjamin's work demands that the twenty-first century goes into the city to find the depths of the subject that had been created thanks to the city, and there is no better way to do it than the flâneur.

This research article intends to use the Benjaminian wandering to find in the tumultuous streets of the cities of Bogotá, Valencia and Madrid, the lags of the production of the modern city in the twenty-first century. With the flâneur as a theoretical, experiential and methodological possibility, the aim is to describe the spatial experiences of these three cities based on a comparative exercise that allows analyzing the city and those who are there. In this exercise there is not only a temporal distance that exemplifies the changes in the flâneur. Also, this has had as its object of study the Parisian city, one of the old continent history's pinnacles. For this reason, arises the concern to contrast the experience of the flâneur in a space whose history carries with it the hesitant arrival to modernity, the suffering due to colonization, and the resignation to staying alongside and below world economic powers: Colombia, Bogota. Paris will not be the antipode here. Spain as a counterpart in the game of colonial domination acts as the opposite for this dual analysis of the flâneur as a revealer of the constitution of the man who wanders through the city. The streets of Valencia and Madrid will be his possibility.



The dream of the artist

“The poet enjoys this incomparable privilege, that he can be himself and other people, as he pleases.

Like those wandering souls who search for a body, he enters, when he wished, the character of everyone”

Charles Baudelaire

The Benjaminian attempts to carrying out a materialist literary history, as recognized by Tiedemann (2012), to the surprise of every Marxist or critical thinker, were supported by the analysis of the works written by Poe, Baudelaire, Victor Hugo, Percy Shelley, among others. In these works, he found the description of the modern city both, aesthetically and existentially. Therefore, through literature he revealed the city embodied in the human being that had been produced alongside it. Particularly, Benjamin found in the crowds the essence of the great European city and the *beings* that inhabit it. Between books and poems, Benjamin finds an entire spatial experience performed by certain particular characters. He comes across a way of existence called *flâneur*.

In times of terror, when everyone is something of a conspirator, everybody will be in a situation where they have to play detective. Strolling gives him the best prospects of doing so. Baudelaire wrote: “An observer is a *prince* who is everywhere in possession of his incognito”. If the *flâneur* is thus turned into an unwilling detective, it does him a lot of good socially, for it accredits his idleness. He only seems to be indolent, for behind this indolence there is the watchfulness of an observer who does not take his eyes off a miscreant. Thus, the detective sees rather wide areas opening up to his self-esteem. He develops forms of reaction that are in keeping with the peace of a big city. He catches things in flight; this enables him to dream that he is like an artist (Benjamin, 1997, p. 40).

Benjamin in Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism (1997) reads the consolidation of the Parisian bourgeois class through the walk of the elegant and ostentatious members of the city’s elite through the marble passages and covered skies. Upon observing the daring dandyism that accompanied his steps with turtles,

to account for that surreal tempo of the walk, the great *flâneur* emerged. Thanks to Poe and Baudelaire, Benjamin’s analysis goes further. They move from the gallant but empty, to the mortuary and contemplative; to the “rebellious pathos” (Benjamin, 1997, p. 85) that reveals *another* class and other forms of relationship with the city. Together, they take a close look at *flânrie* and *non-fânrie*. They find in the crowd the gallant lady who shows off her class belonging with the flow of her steps on the street; they discover the asocial isolated in the city; and the anonymous of dubious class who tries to slip away among the river of bodies that parade there to be able to find themselves in the crowd in a coexistence relationship. But above all, they discover a dangerous suspect who is there, the one who sees, but cannot be seen. For Benjamin (1997) “that stranger is the ‘*flâneur*’” (p. 48) and “the crowd is not only the newest asylum of outlaws; it is also the latest narcotic for those abandoned in the crowd. The ‘*flâneur*’ is someone abandoned in the crowd” (Benjamin, 1997, p. 55).

The bustle of the city, how Benjamin could say, that the walkers have to suffer, is also an existential experience, one that through the *flâneur* and the walking observation, the self-awareness is on alert (Benjamin, 1997). This reveals the depths of the capitalist spirit in the common walker, in the streets that are for themselves and in their own experience as an observer and observed at the same time. In the confrontation of walking rhythms, Benjamin finds an experiential contrast that relates the material distinction that constitutes the subjectivity of the looked-at walker and the looking walker. The protest of the slow pace of the *flâneur*, attentive, investigative, curious, subtle and patient, is nothing but a resistance against the chaos of the hectic, mechanical and alienating rhythm of the crowd (Benjamin, 1997). It is nothing more than a clear example of the dichotomies of that spirit of capital, which is embedded in the pulsations of the heart accelerated in the particular way that we walk.

The *flâneur* exists based on a dual relationship: the walker who observes exists thanks to the presence of the other walker who is observed. The *flâneur* presents itself as the



walker/merchandise who walks gallantly looking at the other merchandise exhibited in the passage, or as an anonymous person who immerses himself in the mass and is absorbed by it without encountering resistance. However, the *flâneur* is essentially embodied by a curious detective who searches the crowd for any signs of suspicious existence. It is presented as that omniscient entity that, from the glass, observes, judges, lets itself be carried away by the crowd, opens itself to the mood of the *being* that is in the street. The flâneurist fights with the built city and the city that is built daily on the belly of a great monster that with claws takes the pedestrians like chess pieces and arranges them on that street board, as the *capitalisme* brain that the chimera head houses wants. It bets on unmasking it.

Here is the dream of the artist! Of the pseudo-poet who sees, hears, smells and feels the city, it is the bourgeoisie, the vagabond, the salaryman. It is the great and the nobody; it is the city; it is the water that washes away the filth of the asphalt that is transmuted into the rat that runs through the sewer, the one that gets carried away by the “religious intoxication” (Benjamin, 1997, p. 56) of the big cities. The *flâneur* is the walker and the one who sits. It is the one who sleeps on the street and the one who looks at it from the skyscrapers. It is the spiritualist who changes its shape, who becomes in nothing to becomes everything, who gives itself over the “intoxication to which the *flâneur* surrenders” (Benjamin, 2012, p. 123). All that to let us understand how we are made of the city.

The lost botanist

“Anyone who is capable of being bored in the crowd is a blockhead.

I repeat: a blockhead, and a contemptible one”

Charles Baudelaire quoting Guy.

According to Benjamin, the *flâneur* is above all an attitude of those “who goes botanizing on the asphalt” (Benjamin, 1997, p. 99). It is also a triumphant curiosity that makes

observation a purge of the intentions of the detective who, freed from the clutches of the crowd, is ready to go out on the prowl. And this possibility of discovery, with the passing of time, has been taken advantage of by everyone concerned about what is happening out there in the city. Thus, the *flâneur* has appeared in the twenty-first century as a relevant investigative technique as it reinforces the estrangement to which the curious must be submitted, a feeling of estrangement when wandering through a well-known place through the “art of inhabiting the indeterminate” [translation] (Durán, 2011, p. 141). Also, for the valuable possibility of matching the sensual experiences of the urban being with the morphologies of a city that evidenced the economic structure that has given it its shape and purpose.

The *flâneur*, adopted by ethnography, as an ethnographic attitude, appeals to the gaze and demands from the body an expansion of the sensory experience of those who inspect the place, in order to find great revelations based on everyday life and minute details of the city. Durán (2011) points out that this technique in particular allows us to concentrate attention on the movement, on the flows and on the ephemerality of space, thus,

el espacio público aparece como un mundo por descubrir, que incita a realizar una profunda “botánica del asfalto” (Benjamín 1972), fisiologías de todo tipo que pretenden maravillarse de lo cotidiano y encontrar lo inesperado de la ciudad. Dice Benjamín sobre su función: “reconstruir topográficamente la ciudad, diez, cien veces, a través de los pasajes y de las puertas (...) los rostros más secretos de la ciudad se sitúan en su parte más recóndita (1972:130) (p. 141).

According to the author, the *flâneur* is one of the heuristic resources that allow us to understand the city and urban life “from the everyday life, the subtle, the minuscule and those ‘others’ empirical references that would not be worthy of being presented in any book of official history” [translation] (p. 138). All this, thanks to the invigoration of the “spirit of curiosity, which makes them a keen observer of the manifestations of the urban” [translation] (p. 140), and to the mediation and exploration of the senses, possible while wandering the street, with the tempo and the detective and pseudo-artistic intentions typical of the experience. “She or he walks



through the crowd, driven by their intellectual prowling; They deliberately make the decision to know, choosing paths to apprehend like a 'photographic machine', the small details of everyday life" [translation] (Durán, 2011, p. 140)

As mentioned above, the Benjaminian project allows us to understand the *flâneur* as a critical technique of the aesthetics of capitalism. In this way, the "urban scientist" (Durán, 2011, p. 141), anthropologist, urban planner, sociologist, or others could capture the everyday life in the final product as a sample of the structure that dominates the daily lives of subjects in the city. "Looking, seeing, observing, contemplating what others do not see because it is too common, and what they themselves do not necessarily see every day", assuming the role of "a kind of researcher lost in the crowd, who acquires a deep reflection, rather than a simple voyeurism of those who only look without delving into the image they perceive or the messages of 'others'" [Translation] (Durán, 2011, p. 141), allows us to portray and relate the hidden face of the city and the economic ground on which it was built centuries ago.

For López (2017), this transformation between the *flâneur* experience and the technique can be assumed as one of the methodological possibilities of the urban walk, along with the drift. With focus on the historical evolution of the *flâneur*, López discovers in this a possibility of finding, in the missed city, an urban spectacle that allows the researcher to subtract his own identity to adopt an amorphous essence among the crowd. Likewise, López (2017) quotes the Benjamin (1982) of the *Berlin childhood around 1900*, to remember the importance of getting lost, of wandering aimlessly, as a key piece for the experience of the walk. "Importa poco no saber orientarse en una ciudad. Perderse, en cambio, en una ciudad como quien se pierde en el bosque, requiere aprendizaje" (p. 26).

As described above, this article shares the experiences of that loss in the modern city of the twenty-first century, in the classic European city but also in forgotten South America. Hence, through the *flâneur* as an investigative urban walk, appealing to the deep experience in the place, transformed into a dense description being faithful to its adoption by ethnography. In field notes, the experience of twenty hours of

wandering, non-consecutively, through the pedestrian streets of these two countries will be registered. A decoding matrix of the gaze is carried out, and a systematization of the experience, will be examined here.

A commitment as such requires a new methodological design since the theorization of the *flâneur* is old, but the consolidation of a methodology to read the city based on Benjamin is a recent effort in the field of geography. Thus, the search for Benjamin's physiologies is proposed here as an access route to start the reading of the public space, as an intimate and internal space. When "the street becomes a dwelling [home/house] for the *flâneur*" (Benjamin, 1997, p. 37), we find two parts of the same system: the morphology of the street (the Parisian passages) and the physiology of the subject who remains in it (the pedestrian bourgeois). Based on this structure, the city (face of the prevailing economic system) will be described, thanks to the decoding of the gaze of the botanist/asphalt detective. These walking observations or urban walks were carried out in the three cities for a fragmented period of twenty hours that allowed the space to be observed in its entirety, based on its dual possibility: day/night, regular day/holy day, in the month of December which is different from the rest of the year because of Christmas rituals. The systematization of the field notes was carried out through an analysis matrix in which the three cities were compared based on: the morphologies of the city (side-walks – what is below –, walls – what is at each side –, and heights – what is up there –); and the physiologies of the subjects (consumption, aesthetics and relationships) (Graphic 1).



COMPARATIVE MATRIX

Morphology Physiology		Bogotá	Valencia	Madrid
Space	Sidewalks			
	Walls and buildings			
	Heights			
Subject	Cosumption			
	Asthetics			
	Relationships			

Graphic 1. Morphologies of the city and physiologies of the subjects, comparative matrix.

Source: Designed by the author.

El spleen de la Séptima

The Seventh street currently runs through Bogotá for approximately thirty kilometers, from the Bella Vista neighborhood to the Guacamayas neighborhood and crosses uninterruptedly five divisions of the city (Usaquén, Chapinero, Santa Fe, La Candelaria and San Cristóbal). The transition from one extreme to the other allows any Colombian or foreigner to learn a little about the social and economic structure of the country's capital, also its history, and the life experiences that its inhabitants can have, all thanks to the study of the morphology of the Bogotá's eastern zone.

At the north of the city, from the Seventh street, you can see neighborhoods called invasions, located on the slopes of the hills that lead the observer to think about the settlement of the city based on forced displacement due to the war in Colombia, therefore in segregation dynamics, marginality, and practices of underground economies. A few kilometers further south, but still at the north of the city, it is also possible from that street to appreciate one of the most expensive sectors of the city. The price of land can vary abruptly, causing the rent of an apartment to vary from \$100 to \$2,500 or more (around \$325 is the minimum wage in Colombia). To get to

the city center you must also cross one of the city's financial areas. There you begin to see the center of Bogotá, announced by the presence of the Colpatría Tower, most of the time illuminated with some flags of the country or a special message of the day. The pedestrian-only section of approximately two kilometers begins there, of which 300 meters or so, are part of the semi-private area of the Casa de Nariño, the presidential residence. After that, the street continues bordering the periphery of the city with neighborhoods intended for the working class of the city that still sits in the eastern hills.



Picture 1. December 9th, 2023, Plaza de Bolívar – Bogotá, Colombia. **Source:** Self taken

Why is the pedestrianized Seventh street worthwhile to watch? Like the entire Seventh street, its pedestrianized segment has houses, streets, and buildings with diverse uses, therefore, the people who pass through the street are equally varied depending on the time and day of the week. Large financial and ministerial buildings can be easily seen, the Congress itself and the Palace of Justice, one day taken over by the M-19 guerrilla, are there. During the week (Monday to Friday), around 8:00am, male and female workers begin to circulate there, dressed as required by this sector, but at other times, they disappear from there. As the sun goes down, other faces take precedence on the street. Young university students mingle with the street vendors who have been there since early hours, they arrive at 6:30am or 7:00am to make use of the public space. Blankets are spread on both sides of the sidewalks on which lie objects as different and as questionable as knives, used orthopedic splints, used clothing or chipped glasses. All this within less than fifty



steps walking along the edge of old buildings, graffitied with great works that tell the history of the country.

This scene is somewhat more exotic on Friday afternoons and weekends, especially on Sundays and holidays when the bike-path is open. In addition to street vending, partly regulated by the Mayor's Office, many artistic shows are put on so that the street turns into a cultural exhibition center. Dancers, musicians and human statues rub shoulders and support each other to attract the gaze of the walkers who swarm the place. But likewise, indigenous people appear offering shows of witchcraft, sellers offer rigged games to make you lose money, and others offer views of the Monserrate hill through telescopes on the street. And among all of them and the spectators of all ages, who go as a family, as a couple, among friends or alone, there are homeless people, thieves, and dealers of psychoactive substances.

As the night passes the strong smells of the street, of fried foods and urine, the noise of the speakers that stun the walkers, the voices of hundreds of people gathered in the same place, the lights of the balloons and Christmas accessories for sale are disappearing. The deafening noise that characterizes the Seventh street in the center is disappearing. It is there when silence takes over the streets, but above all, a part of the population that has a class condition that allows them to overcome the fear that comes with walking a Latin American city late at night. Homeless population and drug addicts take over the place. In some street corners the lights of the basuco pipes (similar to crack) twinkle when some people light up. The carnival noise of a social manifestation, or the strike of the clock that times the chess moves of those from different classes who face each other at the tables that are set up there... disappears. It is replaced by the laughter of homeless people who go out for a walk, by the engines of police cars, or by the walk of other intrepid young people who dare to challenge the city: "They don't ask, hey see you; they wait for you, they follow you, then, they stabbed you in the back and that's it" (Aguilar, personal communication, 2023) the policeman warned about the criminal gang that controls the place: El Tren de Aragua. With the Venezuelan migration the power of this gang spread throughout Latin America. With this criminal practices in some cities changed murders,

kidnappings, tortures, mutilations, drug trafficking control, robbery increased and showed new modus operandi.

An open sky passageway in La Plaza del Ayuntamiento

Pedestrianization in the city of Valencia is somewhat different from Bogotá. One could thus speak of a semi-pedestrianization of the historic center or the Ciutat Vella. The pedestrians of the area walk slowly through the streets when suddenly a car may appear behind them requesting for a space to move. Even narrow alleys are surprisingly used by cars or motorcycles. The fully pedestrianized areas coincide with the main squares in the center, Plaza de la Virgen, Plaza de la Reina, areas near Lonja de la Seda, but the main one, the largest, is undoubtedly Plaza del Ayuntamiento. Likewise, the occupation of the sidewalks by Spanish-style bars and restaurants, that is, with tables on the street arranged to serve tapas and beers, influences the spatial practices of passers-by who thus manage to take up a good proportion of sidewalk so that, with the reduction of road space for cars, the interests of idle pedestrians, tourists, merchants and drivers manage to converge on the same street. There is a type of reduced pedestrianization that pedestrianizes non-pedestrianized areas. The occupation of public space in this place is noticeably different from its use in Bogotá.

The location of buildings of heritage value, added to the presence of several luxury hotels, make the landscape change substantially. The commercial offer of the Plaza del Ayuntamiento connects with other sectors such as Avenida Colón where it will be easy to find people shopping in stores like Guess, who will then parade through the Plaza displaying their bags without any fear of them being stolen violently as would happen in the capital of Colombia. The clothes and aesthetics of many of the people who pass through the Plaza show a class belonging that is opposite to the dynamics of Bogotá. Day and night, tourist traffic is abundant although crowds do not form as overwhelming as those in Bogotá.

Thinking about Benjamin's physiologies in the center of Valencia makes difficult the readings of the subjects who walk the street, even more when it is done by a stranger to the



Spanish culture. The clothes are similar, the bodies are similar, the ways of walking and speaking are difficult to distinguish except when they are tourists, which is easy to identify. At night the women wear their best clothes and makeup. Those who go out at this time seem willing to spend money in other relevant stores in the area or in an elegant restaurant. Even though it maintains good prices in the area, it is offered to a consumer who has specific economic conditions.



Picture 2. December 15th, 2023, Plaza del Ayuntamiento – Valencia, España.

Source: Self taken

At first glance, poverty in the center of Valencia is localized. Maybe every five blocks you can find a beggar asking for change. In Bogotá it would be possible to find five beggars every block. Likewise, in the Plaza del Ayuntamiento, especially at night, a consumer offer emerges that contrasts with the one that occurs inside the private places. Above all, the black population, the derogatorily called Moors, offer balloons with LED lights and light butterflies for children. They dress somewhat differently, but in the average walker it is not easy to identify a class distinction. This reading was denied by a professor at the University of Valencia. He stated that

in the Plaza “there is everything”, there are people with money and without money. This implies then that not having money in Valencia is very different from not having money in Bogotá. The conditions of poverty and marginality in these two cities are indeed different, they configure different urban landscapes and organize people in the city in different ways.

In some other squares, it is possible to see street artists offering their works. They are minimal compared to the ones that appear in the Seventh street. On the other hand, only a fraction of the informal labor made from necessity appears here, and it is not easy to contrast them. Developing survival mechanisms in urban centers is also different in these two spaces. The example of this is the presence of those subjects who collect money when they offer photographs with them because they wear flashy and well-made outfits: in Bogotá it is easy to find Doctor Chapatín or El Chavo del 8; In Valencia they wear big costumes, made of animated figures like Minions. In Bogotá there are about three or four per block; In Valencia there are three or four every ten blocks, approximately. Not only the amount varies, but also the aesthetics of the performer and those who pay for the photo with them.

La Gran Vía, le Grand Écran

It is not easy to compare one of the most important streets in the world with the Seventh street in Bogotá. Its nature is simply different. Despite the great pedestrianization plan for the central area, Madrid's Gran Vía is divided by the street still arranged for vehicle traffic, which means that the crowd is constant there, particularly on one side, this having the greatest resemblance to Bogota. Designer shops can be found there, you can access a Rolex if you go to the end of the street, you can also dine in elegant restaurants and stay in luxury hotels. The buildings, as in Valencia, are of high value due to their traditional design, well-lit at night, which contrasts with the advertising displayed on large high-definition screens, which seem to bombard the walkers. Gran Vía has been called the Times Square of Europe.

The cultural offer in the area is very wide but similar. The importance of theaters as centers of socialization is recovered over time, and large posters announce the shows,



especially musicals or similar, that are available. Art does not go out to the streets with great magnitude. However, some nights and on a few blocks, you can find some musicians playing for the walkers.

Since that Madrid is one of the most important cities on the old continent, the people who travel along Gran Vía are all diverse. There is not a socially apprehended and enforced dress code. People walk in different ways, talk in different ways and in different languages or much more varied accents. People of different races and origins walk, and it becomes a little more difficult to assert that a particular social class dominates the street. Although poverty is ultimately not similar to what can be observed in Colombia, it is not possible to say that all passersby look similar.

Without a doubt, the most surprising thing about the big city is the extension of the street to the entire central area, which seems to be multiple, which has been pedestrianized. The Gran Vía, with different branches, becomes a Gran area. In these lines that emerge from it, on very few occasions, a small distribution of crafts for sale in the streets appears, but in a truly minuscule proportion compared to Bogotá. The pace of walking in these adjacent streets slows down a little more.



Picture 3. January 4th, 2024, Gran Vía – Madrid, España.

Source: Self taken

The slight similarity that can be found between Gran Vía and the Seventh street lies in the appearance, a scarcity of a certain type of begging there. It is a little more common to find homeless people begging for change using signs demanding help. This phenomenon is also associated with the presence of drug users who occasionally appear sitting on the sidewalks of the main street in Madrid and who peacefully coexist with the crowd that comes to the place for leisure and consumption. Not in the same proportion though. Not increasing criminal activity.

In conclusion, Madrid's Gran Vía can be seen as the evolution of the Parisian passageway studied by Benjamin. It is its adaptation to twenty-first century capitalism. The masses that pass through the place, who no longer walk at a slow pace, but rather embody in themselves the hustle and bustle of the contemporary chaotic city, make use of the space to delight in the landscape that offers goods that for some are available, but not for others. On this street, nationality, class, gender,



ways of dressing or speaking do not seem to matter. Everyone seems to be welcome in this stunning bazaar.

A crystal of reflection: the city as a mirror of capitalism

The flâneur could appear before the eyes of many as the stylization of a weak idleness for an investigation, however, in times where walking has been relegated, making use of the experience of wandering through the streets as an immersion in a city that was designed with certain purposes in mind and under certain economic, political and, above all, ethical principles, it was considered a possibility in expanding the view towards the contemporary city. This was based on a reading of the modern city of the nineteenth century that recounts the consolidation of a machine revolution that changed the ways of living in space, especially in the old continent.

The flâneur as an experience of the walker, but also of the researcher who pursues a pedestrian, has a clear inclination towards the sensory sensitization that the street made possible when it is looked at and walked. Thus, it is possible to make a reading of the existence of the being that walk, and of the aesthetics that are constructed in the act of walking. Walking with the eye of the flâneur implies taking in the street almost as a work of art and the study of the city becomes a study of the art history of the city. In other words, a history of the “unconscious society” in which the distance between aesthetic objects and pragmatic acts makes the essence of society transparent (Tiedemann, 2012). In short, this journey finds in the work of art that is the city, the face of the superstructure of the mutant capitalism.

This aesthetic-spatial experience read by Benjamin as a “materialist literary history”, thanks to the readings of Baudelaire and Hegel (Tiedemann, 2012), understand the consolidation of capitalism as a process that is both aesthetic and structural dialectical duality. It opposed the art to the lack, the ideal to the reality, the opulent to the asocial, the bourgeois to the rebellious. In this comparative exercise in which two societies with opposite historical positions of power are contrasted, it is possible to find these dichotomies in the streets, and in the people who walk through them. Even when establishing an experiential distance of such magnitude, it sometimes seemed so abrupt that the comparison seemed to lose meaning.

For Baudelaire, Parisian experiences are a spleen: they are charged with melancholy and are crossed by the sensation of eternal existential anguish, the result of these oscillations between the samples of infernal and celestial scenes that can converge there. The Seventh street in Bogotá, the old Calle Real, the main artery of the historic center of Bogotá, seems to relate and portray that spleen as an existential-spatial condition, but with dynamics of social and spatial degradation not seen by the poet. Even when there is a distance of more than 8,000km between Baudelaire's Paris and Bogotá, and the difference in time period is great, today the Seventh street is far away from the Gran Vía and the Plaza del Ayuntamiento due to the economies that mobilize the place and the social classes that use the street, as producers or consumers. The underground economies that Bourgois (2010) spoke about, energize population flows but also exercise control over them. Although the flâneur sharpens the observation, it requires moments of interaction with the space, that is, with the people who remain there, to reveal those illegal networks that function while they are invisible.

In addition to what has been said above, the visible existence of survival economies, informal jobs that must be tinged with the force of spectacle is sometimes surreal. The distinctions that are woven between Colombia and Spain are very telling. The Seventh street tells the story of a country and a region that in the twenty-first century must seek and search for survival mechanisms that allow it to obtain money to cover basic needs on the verge of marginality. Likewise, begging has different proportions in both countries. The center of Bogotá is a showcase for the exhibition of lives that do not even manage to reach a margin of protection of human dignity, mediated by drug consumption also understood as the example not only of a personal decision, but of an economic and public mental health services unable to reduce the homeless population.

Thus, the people with the shape of a crowd, who appropriate the streets studied are diverse, without a doubt, but certain generalities are impossible to ignore. Mainly in Valencia, the ostentation of capital or at least economic possibilities that guarantee consumption for the middle class are there. Pedestrianization is a space that lends itself to slow traffic, like that of the bourgeois class of the nineteenth century, who calmly enjoys the city, while styles of clothing and objects purchased in high-value stores are displayed. In Madrid, on the other hand, Benjamin would find the evolution of the Parisian



passageway that exhibits merchandise and turns walkers into merchandise, now, through the high-definition screens that encourage consumption, and the wide range of clothing and article stores that have been established, configured in the common imagination as key to accessing happiness and class belonging that can be deceived depending on what is consumed and what is not. Given that the Gran Vía is open to the entire world, neither class nor race seem to be access filters. Consumption and the street are no longer available only to the pedestrian bourgeois, it is within the reach of the businessman, the high or low category tourist, the documented migrant as well as the undocumented, the Spanish, the Latino, the Asian, the Arab, and of the wrong-called Moor too. The democratization of consumption appropriates this open-air passageway. In Bogotá, despite the lack of Rolex, Lacoste or Guess stores, the majority of the popular or working classes go out to take over the street, to demand the offer of low-cost stores that democratize consumption that others would not want to take advantage of: The one that offers some cheap hand-made desserts exposed to the dirtiness of the street, the one that offers sugar cane juice, or the fried intestines with old oil with a terrible smell. Not similar to the Valencian paella with fancy glasses of sangria, or Spanish tapas with high-quality beers.

This investigative commitment invites the Benjaminian flâneur to continue finding in the streets of Bogotá and Latin America botanical samples of the aesthetics of the city, in those works of art and works of capital. The evolution of the flâneur as the spatial-existential experience of the walker, into the spatial-existential experience of a researcher, will allow the social science and geography to access a city rarely seen from the most emotional and organic part of the body that looks, and listens to the street and feels it when walking. Above all, making the flâneur a lens of reflection that allows the city to be read as a reflection of the capitalist mode of production, will allow us to denounce the ways in which capital has become embedded in ways of dressing, walking, speaking and consuming that express the relationships of inequality and marginality that must be eliminated from the urban landscape in a not-so-distant future. With the help of Poe and his multitude, Baudelaire and his spleen, we can walk from the Benjaminian flâneur to the urban walking in the twenty-first century, it will be possible to understand a city that deserves to change because of its people.

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