



Flâneur, Phantasmagoria and Existence in Modern Cities: An Analysis of Benjamin and Sartre

Modern Şehirde Flâneur, Fantazmagori ve Varoluş: Benjamin ve Sartre Üzerine Bir İnceleme

Tuba Kancı*

Umutcan Tarcan²

* Sorumlu yazar

Corresponding author

¹ Assoc. Prof. Dr., Kocaeli University, Turkey

Doç. Dr., Kocaeli Üniversitesi, Türkiye

tubakanci@gmail.com

ORCID ID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1834-5440>

² Ph.D. Student, Kocaeli University, Turkey,

Doktora Öğrencisi, Kocaeli Üniversitesi, Türkiye

umutcantarcan@gmail.com

ORCID ID <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6295-2005>

Makale geliş tarihi / First received : 01.10.2022

Makale kabul tarihi / Accepted : 18.12.2022

Bilgilendirme / Acknowledgement:

Yazarlar aşağıdaki bilgilendirmeleri yapmaktadırlar:

- 1- Araştırmacıların çalışmadaki katkı oranları eşittir.
- 2- Makalenin yazarları arasında çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.
- 3- Makalede etik kurulu izni ve/veya yasal/özel izin alınmasını gerektiren bir durum yoktur.
- 4- Bu makalede araştırma ve yayın etiğine uyulmuştur.

This article was checked by *iThenticate*. Similarity Index 04%

Atıf bilgisi / Citation:

Kancı, T., & Tarcan, U. (2022). Flâneur, phantasmagoria and existence in modern cities: An analysis of Benjamin and Sartre. *IBAD Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, (13), 525-537.

ÖZ

Modern şehir ethosu, 19. yüzyıl şair ve yazarı Charles Baudelaire'den bu yana sosyal ve edebi kuramlarda önemli bir tartışma konusu olagelmıştır. Baudelaire'in şehir imgeleri ve modernlik arasındaki ilişkiye duyduğu ilgi, siyaset, kültür, toplumsal cinsiyet, fenomenoloji ve ontoloji üzerine çalışan ardıllarının pek çoğuna ilham vermiştir. Böylece çağdaş felsefe, modern şehri kesişimsellikler ile bezeli bir varoluş alanı olarak ele almıştır. Yirminci yüzyılın önde gelen iki düşünürü olan Walter Benjamin ve Jean-Paul Sartre da Baudelaire'in çalışmalarından modern şehir ethosuna ilişkin kuramlarını temellendirmek için faydalanmışlardır. Benjamin, modernlik deneyimini açıklamak için Baudelaire'in erken dönem modern kentlerdeki aylak, sıra dışı ve yalnız bireyleri simgeleyen flâneur kavramını kullanmıştır. Sartre ise varoluşçuluk düşüncesini ortaya koymak için romanlarında ve denemelerinde flâneur esintileri taşıyan şehir karakterlerine yer vermiştir. Her ikisi de modernite ile şehir ethosu arasındaki gerilimi, yabancılaşma, sömürü ve dışlama üreten bir muamma olarak görmüştür. Bu makalede Benjamin ve Sartre'in modern kentlerdeki varoluş probleminin ilişkin düşünceleri incelenmiştir. Önce modernitenin bir öznesi olarak flâneur kavramına bakılmış, daha sonra ise Benjamin ve Sartre'in konuya temas eden eserleri sırasıyla incelenerek bu eserler arasındaki farklılıklar açıklanmıştır. Makale ile Benjamin'in modern şehir deneyimine sosyokültürel bir bağlam atfettiği, Sartre'in ise probleme daha fenomenolojik bir perspektiften yaklaştığı sonucuna varılmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler

Flâneur, Fantasmagori, Modern Şehir, Walter Benjamin, Jean-Paul Sartre.

ABSTRACT

The modern city ethos has been a significant subject in social and literary theories since Charles Baudelaire, the 19th-century poet and author. Baudelaire's interest in the relationship between city imageries and modernity has inspired many of his successors that look at politics, culture, gender, phenomenology, and ontology. Thus, contemporary philosophy has approached the modern city as an intersectional sphere of existence. The two prominent 20th-century thinkers, Walter Benjamin and Jean-Paul Sartre endeavor to use Baudelaire's work as a theoretical structure to ground their understanding of the modern city ethos. Benjamin uses Baudelaire's concept of flâneur, which initially symbolizes the idle, extraordinary, and lonely individuals in early modern cities, to interpret the experience of modernity. Sartre includes city characters that resemble flâneur in his novels and essays to disclose his existentialist thought. Both see the tension between modernity and the city ethos as an enigma that produces alienation, exploitation, and exclusion. This article analyzes the thoughts of Benjamin and Sartre regarding the problem of existence in modern cities. First, it looks at the concept of flâneur as a subject of modernity. Then it respectively explains the thinkers' works, thus emphasizing their differences. It is argued that Benjamin ascribes a relatively sociocultural context to the modern city experience, while Sartre mainly looks at the problem from a phenomenological perspective.

Keywords

Flâneur, Phantasmagoria, Modern City, Walter Benjamin, Jean-Paul Sartre.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of modernity has transformed the city ethos in a way that illustrates contradictions, distractions, and melancholia (Geis, & Ross, 1998). Thus, the modern city has become a massive producer of curiosity and cognitive engagement, hosting infinite imageries, enigmas, and cultures (Beaumont, 2021). However, the question still lies under these mystical attempts of interpretation: In which ways do the people in these cities exist?

The 19th century French author and poet, Charles Baudelaire (1970, 1995) tried to answer this question from his unique perspective as a lifelong observer of Paris, which can be described as the “capital” of early modern cities. He poetically metaphorized and classified people in the city, and affiliated them with stereotypes, each of which would represent a different aspect of modernity (Enjuto-Rangel, 2007). The most remarkable one of these stereotypes was the flâneur, which portrayed an idle, observing, and lonely individual that would debonairly wander around the city (Murail, 2017). With the flâneur, Baudelaire portrayed the “city experience” from an observing point of view, as he measured the existential limits of a wandering subject throughout the streets, markets, and boulevards. The author’s attempts of embodying idleness implicitly evolved into a demonstration of modernity, as the flâneur brought contradictions, ruptures, tensions of sexuality, and a momentary creation of history with himself.

As Aimée Boutin (2012, p. 124) argues, Baudelaire's flâneur was the “multifarious and elusive” figure of the modern city. While the concept reflected the complexity and ontological composition that the cities produce, it also signified a specific individual who is the observing subject of modernity. Thus, its use has inspired many contemporary thinkers that attempted to understand how modernity infiltrates into cities' cultures, aesthetics, means of production and gender (Jenks, & Neves, 2000). The most prominent instances in the 20th century were Walter Benjamin and Jean-Paul Sartre.

Benjamin (1997, 2006, 2006a) used the concept of phantasmagoria to emphasize the modern city ethos through the actions of flâneur. For him, flâneur was a subject that dwelled into the illusions of enduring vitality and festivity in the modern city. Thus, his critical approach towards the commodity fetishism of modernity was shaped by the interactions between city phantasmagorias and the sociocultural vagueness of flâneur. On the other hand, Sartre (1978, 1992, 2013) gave flâneur a deliberate spot in his theoretical and literary works and described nausea and observation in the modern city ethos as existential requirements for freedom and self-realization.

This qualitative article aims to make a descriptive analysis of the forms of existence and alienation in modern cities through the instances of Benjamin and Sartre. It makes an analysis of the thinkers’ approaches, arguing that the two thinkers have theoretical and methodological differences regarding the existential enigma of modern cities. Thus, the first part of the article looks at the concept of flâneur from a theoretical perspective and analyzes its relationship with modernity, cities, and existential experiences. The second part explains Benjamin's approach towards flâneur with the help of the concept of phantasmagoria and discusses the thinker's anti-fetishism. Finally, the third part describes flâneur with the help of Sartre's existentialist phenomenology and looks for its traces in the thinker's works. As the article analyzes the thoughts of Benjamin and Sartre, it also shows that the two thinkers have theoretical and methodological differences regarding the existential enigma of modern cities. The article

concludes by arguing that while Benjamin's works have a pessimistic and sociocultural perspective for understanding the modern city ethos, Sartre's works disclose a relatively expectant opinion on the issue, in harmony with his synthesis between freedom and self-realization.

FLÂNEUR: THE SUBJECTIVE PREDECESSOR OF MODERNITY

Flâneur, a concept first signified by Baudelaire and widely used and discussed since then, is a key figure in the literature of modernity. While the *flâneur* is the subjective predecessor of modernity; it is also a prominent figure that signifies the landscape of the modern city. As brought into being by the advent of modernity, this figure defines a new type of person; the modernity's quasi-subject. An embodied, strolling, 19th-century subject, the *flâneur*, has the time and the space to figure itself through visualizing and internalizing the modern city and its urban spectacles. The *flâneur* is not the modern subject *per se*, but a prelude to it, signifying its coordinates. As Steve Pile (1996, p. 229) insightfully states, it "stands at the intersection not only of class, gender and race relations, and also of art, mass production and commodification, but also of the masses, the city, and the experience of modernity." The *flâneur* is the modernity's would-be subject seeking its identity, unconsciously, as the child seeks its own.

Flâneur can be defined as the one who is involved in a particular practice, *flaneurie*, which is related to the simultaneous practices of looking and walking in a particular style. Streetwalking is constitutive of the *flâneur*; as in the famous quote of Benjamin (1997, p. 36), the *flâneur* has the style of the one "who goes on botanizing on the asphalt." Taking turtles for a walk sets the pace of this figure because of its slow-motion notion of wandering around (Benjamin, 1997, p. 48).¹ The *flâneur* strolls through the space and among the people, walking at will, freely and without purpose; "an inquisitive boulevardier that is always at home with the urban" (Jenks, 1998, p. 146). Unlike the pedestrian joining into the crowd, the *flâneur* was distanced; he "demanded elbow room and was unwilling to forge the life of a gentleman of leisure" (Benjamin, 1997, p. 54). Nevertheless, these practices were historically, socially, and geographically embedded, as he just disclosed himself in an implicit way.

Paris was *the* place for the *flâneur* along the 19th century (Wilson, 1992). Elizabeth Wilson (1992, pp. 94-95) notes an anonymous pamphlet dating back to 1806, which describes a day in life of a man called M. Bonhomme, "a typical *flâneur* of the Bonaparte era." This was a man who goes around strolling and looking at the urban spectacle, a significant part of this spectacle being the behavior of the crowd, especially the lower classes, a man who spends some of his time in cafes and restaurants, a man interested in dress, a gentleman who can be regarded as *déclassé* since he is outside of production, nevertheless a man with petty-bourgeois or bourgeois background since he depends on his retaining private wealth for his living. In fact, the text sets out the characteristics found in the Baudelairean *flâneur* of half a century later. Though written around the same times with Baudelaire, Edgar Allan Poe's *Man of the Crowd* was no *flâneur*, because what Georges Eugène Haussmann, the famous city planner, was trying to do in Paris in the 19th century was already concluded by John Nash, the neoclassical architect, in London at the beginning of the century.² The time was still right for Paris as Baudelaire was writing about the

¹ Note that Benjamin declares this to be a favorite practice then.

² Note that the development of public architecture in these significant cities also signified the emergence of the public sphere in its contemporary context. As Jürgen Habermas (1991) argues, the aesthetical connections between cities'

flâneur, but not for London, the city was already tackling with further changes. Thus, Poe's figure exemplified, as Benjamin (1992, p. 168) states, "what had to become of the *flâneur*, once he was deprived of the milieu he belonged:" Not a gentleman of leisure, but an isolated individual in the crowd who goes around on specific occasions to walk and look, and defined its end.

Still, this is not the whole story. To state explicitly what has been implied up to this part of the analysis, the *flâneur* is indeed a white bourgeois Judeo-Christian imperial male³. This sets the scene for another level of analysis, one that will be pursued here along the lines of gender-power-subjectivity. As Griselda Pollock (1994, pp. 66-79) argues, the *flâneur* is a hegemonic male figure, with unlimited mobility, cutting across public and private sphere, which were yet formalizing, and solidifying this spatial dichotomy⁴. As the *flâneur* moved between public and private sphere, and he was everywhere at home, women were confined to private places, and they were at no place at home. There was no place for women in public sphere; the "public woman" was the "fallen woman," prostitutes mainly, but also the working-class women⁵ (Duncan, 1996).

This analysis can be furthered by mapping the *flâneur* as the intersection between sovereign-hegemonic male power, masculinity, and voyeurism (Pollock, 1994; Pile, 1996). It is "the activity of the sovereign spectator going about the city in order to find the things which will occupy his gaze and thus complete his otherwise incomplete identity" (Pile, 1996, p. 230). Walkowitz also specifies the *flâneur* as "a specifically masculine explorer," and signifies the notion of voyeuristic pleasure, eroticism and identity seeking in the figure of the *flâneur* (Jenks, 1998, p. 150). Furthermore, Pollock (1994, pp. 67, 71) regards this sovereign-hegemonic-voyeuristic-erotic-male gaze as "the gaze of the modernity;" the women meanwhile, underpowered to look, were positioned as the object of the *flâneur's* gaze.

Although these analyses are incisive, there are some perplexities. The first one is about the location of the *flâneur*, and the second is about his relation to vision. With respect to the first argument, as Pile (1996, p. 231) also states, the *flâneur* is not an "all-powerful, all-seeing, all-encompassing" figure. The location of the *flâneur* is marginal, though he is not from the margins. This marginality can be partially attributed to the *flâneur* being outside of production. Also, about his, though free, but nevertheless limited spatial practices; as Benjamin (1997, p. 36) has stated, "even in those days it was not possible to stroll about everywhere in the city." Furthermore, the *flâneur* has a specific distance and location with respect to the objects he envisioned. This is an embodied figure, with embodied eyes, not the disembodied eye/I of the modernity, not yet. His knowledge is yet situated and related to images. His vision is not a god-like vision; it is not a specific kind of vision emanating from one observing eye as a precise, all-

thoroughfares were essential in forming interactions between crowds, thus leading to the revival of local *habitué*.

³ White masculinity was a significant element of the imperial culture, which was publicly mainstream during the emergence of modern cities. Many studies argue that the superiority of white bourgeois Judeo-Christian imperial male was commonly privileged in that era, as it determined the "social identity" that institutionally subordinated women. For instances, see Kennedy (1995), Windholz (1999), Kaiksow (2008).

⁴ Benjamin (1997, p. 55) portrays the "unlimited mobility" of the *flâneur* with these words: "For him alone, all is open; if certain places seem closed to him, it is because in his view they are not worth inspecting."

⁵ Note that the existential position of white bourgeoisie women were only partially exceptional, as they had the oblique "possibility of messianic redemption in the making of history" (Clio Kao 2013, p. 125). As explained in the Note 3, the dominance of bourgeois masculinity transformed public sphere into a patriarchal medium of existence that only allowed women to wander with their male companions. This position of women was broadly extended under the conception of *flâneuse* in the feminist literature. See Wolff (1985).

seeing but unseen, empowered vision. The *flâneur* moves around idly with feelings of curiosity, fear, ambivalence, astonishment, having not yet fully internalized surveillance and discipline. Therefore, he interiorizes a contradictory reflection of sexuality, which inevitably strangles his alleged femininity with the material representation of masculine existence.

With respect to the *flâneur's* relation to vision the issue is much more complicated than it has been presented. The gaze of the *flâneur*, though not disembodied and god-like, is nevertheless an objectifying male gaze. The *flâneur* moves around as the observer; and Baudelaire (1995, p. 9) in his *Painter of Modern Life* defines the observer as “a prince who is everywhere in possession of his incognito.” The quote reminds a passage from Jean-Paul Sartre’s (1978) *Being and Nothingness*, where the observer, who looks and sees but cannot be seen, is defined as the Subject. Yet the story continues, and this person becomes the Other by encountering the presence and gaze of someone else (Melville, 1996, pp. 103-104). However, interpreting the quote and the *flâneur* in a Sartrean way is problematic because the very existence of the *flâneur* as a subject depends on the look of others in the street (Sennett, 1986, pp. 125, 213). Thus, a Lacanian understanding of gaze is more useful at this point: as the *flâneur* looks at the objects, the objects look back from all perspectives⁶. This reciprocity defines his subjective position as an observer throughout the modern city.

We would also like to argue for further utilization of the Lacanian approach with respect to the *flâneur's* relation to vision and modernity. The *flâneur's* identity-construction process conducted through walking and looking can be compared to the imaginary stage of the child’s patriarchal identity-construction process (Beaumont, 2021). As the arcades and streets became hall of mirrors, the *flâneur* was “trapped in the spectacle of the urban modern as the child in the mirror”⁷ (Buck-Morss, 1986). In fact, he was searching for his image in the streets, as the child does in the mirror. As Benjamin (1997, p. 55) noted, the *flâneur* enjoys privilege of “being someone else as he sees fit.” The *flâneur* was indeed searching for a self-recognition in terms of an ideal image, which would have the coherence that the subject itself lacked⁸, through identifying himself as other. As a child is trapped in a state of ambivalences at the imaginary stage, both loving and hating the image he envisions, the *flâneur* also had his ambivalences, as already mentioned, towards the streets and what he sees in the streets. His distanced stance towards the crowd is exemplary of this. The crowd astonishes him, but he keeps his distance because he is at the same time terrified of getting lost in the masses.

If modernity is taken as an *ethos*, as Michel Foucault has argued, it is exemplified in the Baudelaire the *dandy*, yet not in the Baudelaire the *flâneur*. As modernity is “the ephemeral, the

⁶ Despite not offering a significant practical outcome, the psychoanalytic approaches of Jacques Lacan (2004, 2007) led contemporary philosophy to a theoretical point where observation and linguistic interaction become analytical tools for interpreting the society. Lacan identified the structure of unconsciousness with language, making it possible to describe experience throughout the action of utterance. This article’s use of his theory relies on this identification, as it looks at observation as a reflection of the *flâneur's* unconsciousness.

⁷ Note that this metaphor is apparently inspired by the Lacanian conception of “the mirror stage.” Lacan (2007) argues that the exploration of mirrors in early childhood is essential in the self-identification of consciousness and existence. While the child “observes” itself through the mirror, it implicitly becomes an imitation of “the self.” This process is similar to what the *flâneur* experiences throughout the modern city, as his exploration of self-subjectivity is simultaneous with his tendency of observation.

⁸ Note that Benjamin (1997, p. 48) indeed talks of such a lack at the center of the subject; yet argues it to be created in people by “isolation of each in his private interest” and *flâneur* was “filling this space with the borrowed, and fictitious isolation of strangers.”

fleeting, the contingent," being modern lies in "adopting a certain attitude with respect to this movement" (Foucault, 1997, p. 106). This attitude "consists in *recapturing something eternal*, that is not beyond the present instant, nor behind it, but within it" (Foucault, 1997, p. 106). Though these may seem somewhat similar to the coordinates of the *flâneur*, the man of modernity indeed differs from the *flâneur* as he goes away hurrying and searching with "an aim loftier than that of the mere *flâneur*" (Foucault, 1997, p. 107). To be modern is to take *care of the self* through complex and difficult elaboration.

UNDER PHANTASMAGORIA: BENJAMIN ON THE ALIENATION OF FLÂNEUR

In the first part of the article, the contradictions that encircle the concept of *flâneur* were explained. It was argued that the concept reflected a subjective prelude to the modern ethos. In this second part, the article looks at how Benjamin deals with the emergence of these contradictions under the shadow of modernity. For this, it discusses the concept of *phantasmagoria*, which determines the thinker's key approach towards the modern city.

The *flâneur* is a figure from the industrial capitalism of the 19th century Paris. In fact, before William Harvey's works on the movement of blood in the body in the early 1600s, and its coupling with the modern capitalism leading to individualism, such a practice of individual moving bodies was not possible. Harvey's revolution changed the notion of city, and brought a series of city reforms with it. This was then coupled with the notion of freedom in the times of the French Revolution; yet counter to this, there was also a fear from it. As the fear from the masses was added to this ambivalence towards freedom, the modern city again changed shape as to include planned and ordered spaces, areas that are open and free but within limits, stratified into zones in terms of classes (Sennett, 1996). Yet still the scene was not set for the *flâneur*. For the street to become a dwelling for him, Napoleon III and his city planner Baron Haussmann were to enter the stage. Their plan to reconstruct Paris in 1850s-60s, made it possible to stroll about in the city. Haussmann's wide pavements offering protection from the vehicles, and the arcades, as halls of mirrors with their shop windows were necessary (Benjamin, 1997, p. 36). As Margaret Cohen (1989, p. 88) argues, the first traces of Benjamin's interest in modern city alienation can be seen in his article, *Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, published in 1935. In the article, Benjamin (2006, p. 37) talks about "distractions" that systematically encircle early modern cities such as the 1860's Paris, which are also the early impressions of the capitalist production of culture. These distractions are so enigmatically obvious that they record a form of "cultural history" that is strictly attached to regulating the social life (Benjamin, 2006: 41). Marketplaces, newspaper stands, florists and cafés are adorned with pastel lights, *alacrité*, and acoustic vigour, which lead to the inevitable joy of ogling. However, the festivity is already beyond the space of reality: It forms a fetishized state of *pratico-inert* and hypnotizes the consciousness. This state, observed by Benjamin, is the *phantasmagoria* itself.

Seeing philosophy as the "continuous confrontation of the question of representation," Benjamin (1998, p. 27) approaches towards existence as a synthesis between metaphors and historical imageries. His skeptic definition of the "subject" leads to a point where dialectic progression is full of interruptions and illusions. Therefore, he deals with subjectivity as a contradictory context whose "object is significant while reflections are detached" (Benjamin, 1998, p. 29). This context is the core of *phantasmagoria* as it is also the key for interpreting the "city experience:" Existing in the city is both delicately apparent and tragically depletive, thus accumulating around the predicaments of the *flâneur*. Apparently, Michael Jennings (2003, p. 96) felicitously argues that

Benjamin's use of the concept is almost a replacement for "commodity." Apparently, Benjamin sees *phantasmagoria* as a "producer of commodity" that "determines creations and forms of life" (Jennings, 2006, p. 8). The fetishism of vitality in the city makes contemplative observation the sole possible practice, as it trivializes labour, freedom, and critical consciousness. Therefore, the *flâneur* comes into prominence as the primary object of phantasmagoria with his never-ending desire of observation.

According to Benjamin (2006, p. 42), *flâneur's* position against phantasmagoria is similar to "addiction:" He "devotes" himself to daydreaming inside distractions and sustaining his idleness. Thus, he suddenly becomes immanent to the experience of modernity by both becoming and observing the commodity. He is neither the producer nor the product, or neither the fetishist nor the desired: From now on, he is just a representative of the "irrationality of capitalist ratio" (Benjamin, 2006a, p. 62).

The phantasmagoric isolation that the *flâneur* dwells into brings alienation within itself. Therefore, Benjamin becomes deliberately pessimistic about him as soon as he gets betrayed by the deception. "The *flâneur*," the thinker says, "is someone abandoned in the crowd as he is thus in the same situation as the commodity" (Benjamin, 2006, p. 85). His aesthetic uniqueness and exclusion from the modern experience have now disappeared. In the words of Theodor W. Adorno (1980, p. 113), phantasmagoria has now successfully diverted the *flâneur's* attention from true objectivity and its correlate, alienated subjectivity to the boundaries of commodity production by modernity. Moreover, the next step is his indulgence to the norms of the modern experience, which is hidden under the festivities of the city ethos.

EXISTING AND OBSERVING IN THE CITY: SARTRE'S EXISTENTIALIST APPROACH

532

Sartre's contemporary novelism acts as an aesthetical disclosure of his existentialist thought. With his plays, novellas, and imaginary diaries, he makes his characters speak in the form of a manifest that represents his intellectual position. Therefore, as Andrew Leak (2011, p. 121) implies, Sartre's novelistic and theoretical works are strictly interwoven, similar to his approaches towards literature and philosophy.

Being inspired by the phenomenological thought of Edmund Husserl (1999), Sartre defines interactions between subjects with the concept of *observation* in his major philosophical work, *Being and Nothingness*. He argues that we, humans, have the eccentric awareness of observing and being observed, thus differentiating from the other beings in the universe. This awareness is the base of engagement in which we complete our self-realization: By the time we tend to accept the material being of the *other*, we manage to replace nothingness with our humanistic existence (Sartre, 1978, p. 24). Inevitably, this episteme of the *other* is pure selfishness, as it is the sole pre-condition of existing consciously.

Sartre borrows the Cartesian conception of *cogito* to make a distinction between the observer and the observed. According to him, humans exist with the consciousness that endorses observing the *other* while we also have the ability to reach self-realization with *reason*. Therefore, a human is a *being-for-itself (pour-soi)*: It tends to transcend both its own and the *other*. On the contrary, the observed, or the object is stuck in its material existence, thus is a *being-in-itself (en-soi)*: It is nothing more or less than how we decide, or in Sartre's words, *observe* (1978). This distinction takes the thinker to the first traces of his existentialist thought.

Sartre (2007, p. 20) defines existentialism with his remarkable quote, “*Existence precedes essence.*” With the quote, he emphasizes our actions that build on our desolation: As distinct from a “manufactured object,” we exist first, and then we search for the reason for our existence (Sartre, 2007, pp. 20-21). Being infinite, the search equals the context of freedom, to whom we are *condemned* (Sartre, 1978).

Although Sartre never used the concept directly, or at least philosophically, his literary work often portrayed *flâneur* as being-for-itself. With his characters, the thinker discussed the modern city ethos around the enigma of idleness and observation. As Frederic Will (1961, p. 459) argues, he told stories of ordinary people who are stuck in an “insubstantial state,” wandering around the city to look for or run away from the meaning of their existence. For instance, *Antoine Roquentin*, the main character in *Nausea* (2013), was a voyager that would often distract his consciousness by metaphorizing the city, as he both observed and experienced the ethos he was thrown into. His *nausea* was so dominant that he attempted to banalize what the city means to him, as he looked for an abstraction from his material existence:

Will I gain anything by the change? It is still a city: this one happens to be cut in two by a river, the other one is by the sea, yet they look alike. One takes a piece of bare sterile earth and one rolls big hollow stones on to it. Odours are held captive in these stones, odours heavier than air. Sometimes people throw them out of the windows into the streets and they stay there until the wind breaks them apart. In clear weather, noises come in one end of the city and go out the other, after going through all the walls; at other times, the noises whirl around inside these sun-baked, ice-split stones (Sartre, 2013, p. 78).

Roquentin was a remarkable instance of *flâneur*, as he felt the deficiency of immobility. For him, the city was always ordinary but never *his*. Despite he was thrown into a contradiction that made it impossible to realize himself through the city ethos, he was still there, feeling the perpetual need for observation. He was both the omniscient storyteller and the urban adventurer, yet being aware of the importance of his reason.

Another *flâneur* character of Sartre was *Mathieu*, in his *The Age of Reason* (1992). With Mathieu, Sartre discussed the action of “wandering the city” in terms of existential relief. In the plot, Mathieu often found himself at the peak of self-realization by the time he was alone on the streets. A significant part of his past was about “strolling about the city and haunted bars in any sort of company, with anyone who cared to ask him,” as he had to find the money for his girlfriend, *Marcelle's* abortion (Sartre, 1992, p. 8). As a *flâneur*, Mathieu was often devoted to the effort of undertaking his responsibilities, although he never thrived.

With Roquentin and Mathieu, Sartre brought phenomenological criticism to the modern city ethos. Both characters were indulgent to be marginalized, as they *looked down* on *ordinary people*. However, at the same time, they tried to realize their subjectivity by observing, analyzing and producing the norms of existing in a city. Therefore, in contrast to Benjamin, Sartre was neutral towards the intellectual position of the *flâneur*. As Matthew C. Ally (2003) argues, the concept of *flâneur* in the thinker's work depended on self-fetishization rather than being fetishized, as he was often optimistic about self-realizing action against the material sphere of existence.

Sartre is more optimistic about the problem of existence than Benjamin in harmony with his theory of observation. In his novels, he attempts to emphasize the realness of existence by portraying exceptional characters who constantly search for freedom in cities. This inherent search makes these characters reach an ontological level of subjectivity that implicitly reconciles

with modernity: Despite their consistent expressions of *nausea*, pain, and abandonment, they insist to stay in the city for self-realization. Therefore, Sartre deals with subjectivity as a reluctant conflict with the modern ethos, thus espousing it as the sole method of free existence.

CONCLUSION

The aesthetical emergence of modern cities is a philosophical enigma for both Benjamin and Sartre. In their works, they disclose the appearance, depression, and consciousness that led to the existence of modern ethos while they search for the boundaries of humanistic subjectivity. Their common question, which is under the apparent inspiration of Baudelaire, remains delicately complex: Did modernity sacrifice the subject for its production of existential norms? Throughout this article, their responses to this question were unfolded and discussed.

The primary theoretical difference between Benjamin and Sartre emerges from their approaches towards the aesthetical means of production in modern cities. Benjamin argues that the imagery of modern cities constantly produces stereotypical subjects encircled around *flâneur*. For him, the concept of *flâneur* is the embodiment of contradictions that shapes modernity: It metaphorizes an individual that both yields to and challenges modern normativity with its looks, idleness, and eccentricity. However, despite its explicit individuality, its existence is ultimately at the hands of the infiltration of modernity into cities. Therefore, it exists as a form of commodity under the shadow of its marginalized form.

The thoughts of Benjamin and Sartre encircle around the concept of consciousness. According to Benjamin, consciousness is subject to a sociocultural question that would refer to the means of culture and production. By politicizing the concept, Benjamin portrays the *flâneur* as an oppressed imagery that acquiesces the historical domination of modern ethos in cities. Therefore, the pseudo-political existence of *flâneur* is nothing but a form of *phantasmagoria*, which only offers alienation and illusion. However, Sartre defines consciousness with the help of phenomenology rather than politics. In his primary philosophical work, *Being and Nothingness*, he uses the concept as a metaphor of separation between *en-soi* and *pour-soi*, which respectively portray the existences of non-human and human. This approach carries the correlation between consciousness and free action to the level of an interaction between the *observer* and the *observed*. Thus, Sartre does not dispute with *pour-soi*'s sphere of free action throughout the modern ethos, as he believes in the pure realization of a humanistic consciousness.

The study shows that Benjamin and Sartre saw an ontological connection between the state of idleness and the depletive sphere of modern cities. They tried to place the wandering quasi-subjects around the streets as philosophical metaphors for embodying the "existential crisis." However, while Benjamin was deliberately skeptical about the commodification and illusion that this crisis forms, Sartre saw it as a way to construct a cognitive awareness, which is the key for prioritizing the essence. Therefore, their works included both ruptures and resemblances, as they figured out that modernity was never limited to a rational festivity of historical progression.

As discussed in this article, modernity has a practical conflict with subjectivity. The cases of Benjamin and Sartre make this conflict observable through the imageries of individuals in modern cities. Both thinkers have their traces on the remaining stages of social and literary theories as the city ethos remains to be a remarkable concourse of the modern experience. Therefore, further theoretical approaches that include the contemporary intellectuals that were inspired by these thinkers can be beneficial for understanding how the "city idleness" evolves

throughout the journey of modernity.

REFERENCES

- Adorno, T. W. (1980). Letters to Walter Benjamin. E. Bloch, G. Lukács, B. Brecht, W. Benjamin, & T. W. Adorno (Eds.). *Aesthetics and politics*. (pp. 110-133). Translation: Ronald Taylor. Verso.
- Ally, M. C. (2003). Sartre's wagers: Humanism, solidarity, liberation. *Sartre Studies International*, 9(2), 68-76.
- Baudelaire, C. (1970). *Paris spleen*. Translation: Louise Varèse. New Directions.
- Baudelaire, C. (1995). *The painter of modern life and other essays (arts & letters)*. Translation: Thom Mayne. Phaidon.
- Beaumont, M. (2021). "Fevers of curiosity": Charles Baudelaire and the convalescent flâneur. *The Public Domain Review*. <https://publicdomainreview.org/essay/charles-baudelaire-and-the-convalescent-flaneur>
- Benjamin, W. (1992). *Illuminations*. Fontana.
- Benjamin, W. (1997). *Charles Baudelaire*. Verso.
- Benjamin, W. (1998). *The origin of German tragic drama*. Translation: John Osborne. Verso.
- Benjamin, W. (2006). Paris, the capital of the nineteenth century. H. Eiland (Ed.). *Selected writings, III(1935-1938)*. (pp. 32-49). Harvard University Press.
- Benjamin, W. (2006a). Exchange with Theodor W. Adorno on the essay "Paris, the capital of the nineteenth century". H. Eiland (Ed.). *Selected writings, III(1935-1938)*. (pp. 50-67). Harvard University Press.
- Boutin, A. (2012). Rethinking the flâneur: flânerie and the senses. *Dix-Neuf*, 16(2), 124-132.
- Buck-Morss, S. (1986). The flâneur, the sandwichman and the whore. *New German Critique*, 39, 99-140.
- Clio-Kao, P. W. (2013). The flâneur/flâneuse and the Benjaminian law of "Dialectic at a Standstill" in Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*. *Conradiana*, 45(2), 125-144.
- Cohen, M. (1989). Walter Benjamin's phantasmagoria. *New German Critique*, 48, 87-107.
- Duncan, N. (1996). Renegotiating gender and sexuality in public and private spheres. N. Duncan (Ed.). *BodySpace: Destabilising geographies of gender and sexuality*. (pp. 145-154). Routledge.
- Enjuto-Rangel, C. (2007). Broken presents: the modern city in ruins in Baudelaire, Cernuda, and Paz. *Comparative Literature*, 59(2), 140-157.
- Foucault, M. (1997). *The politics of truth*. Semiotext.

- Geis K. J., & Ross, C. E. (1998). A new look at urban alienation: the effect of neighborhood disorder on perceived powerlessness. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 61(3), 232-246.
- Habermas, J. (1991). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. Translation: Thomas Burger. The MIT Press.
- Husserl, E. (1999). *The idea of phenomenology*. Translation: Lee Hardy. Kluwer.
- Jenks, C. (1998). Watching your step: the history and practice of the flâneur. C. Jenks (Ed.). *Visual culture*. (pp. 142-160). Routledge.
- Jenks, C., & Neves, T. (2000). A walk on the wild side: urban ethnography meets the flâneur. *Cultural Values*, 4(1), 1-17.
- Jennings, M. (2003). On the banks of a new lethe: commodification and experience in Benjamin's Baudelaire book. *Boundary*, 30(1), 89-104.
- Jennings, M. (2006). Introduction. W. Benjamin, *The writer of modern life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*. (pp. 1-26). Harvard University Press.
- Kaiksow, S. A. (2008). Subjectivity and imperial masculinity: A British soldier in Dhofar (1968–1970). *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 4(2), 60-80.
- Kennedy, L. (1996). Alien nation: White male paranoia and imperial culture in the United States. *Journal of American Studies*, 30(1), 87-100.
- Lacan, J. (2004). *The four fundamental concepts of psycho-analysis*. Translation: Jacques Alain Miller. Routledge.
- Lacan, J. (2007). *Écrits*. Translation: Bruce Fink. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Leak, A. (2011). The significance of context in illustrative examples. J. Webber (Ed.). *Reading Sartre: On phenomenology and existentialism*. (pp. 118-129). Routledge.
- Melville, S. (1996). Division of the gaze. T. Brennan & M. Jay (Eds.). *Vision in context: Historical and contemporary perspectives on sight*. (pp. 101-116). Routledge.
- Murail, E. (2017). A body passes by: the flâneur and the senses in nineteenth-century London and Paris. *The Senses and Society*, 12(2), 162-176.
- Pile, S. (1996). *The body and the city*. Routledge.
- Pollock, G. (1994). *Vision & difference: femininity, feminism and the histories of art*. Routledge.
- Sartre, J. P. (1978). *Being and nothingness: a phenomenological essay on ontology*. Translation: Hazel E. Barnes. Pocket Books.
- Sartre, J. P. (1992). *The age of reason*. Vintage Books.
- Sartre, J. P. (2007). *Existentialism is a humanism*. Translation: Carol Macomber. Yale University Press.
- Sartre, J. P. (2013). *Nausea*. Translation: Lloyd Alexander. New Directions.
- Sennett, R. (1986). *The fall of public man*. Faber and Faber.
- Sennett, R. (1996). *Flesh and stone: the body and the city in western civilization*. W. W. Norton & Company.

- Will, F. (1961). Sartre and the question of character in literature. *PMLA*, 76(4), 455-460.
- Wilson, E. (1992). The invisible flâneur. *New Left Review*, 191.
- Windholz, A. M. (1999). An emigrant and a gentleman: imperial masculinity, British magazines, and the colony that got away. *Victorian Studies*, 42(4), 631-658.
- Wolff, J. (1985). The invisible flâneuse: women and the literature of modernity. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2(3), 37-46.