The 'hat' and the mechanical-flâneuse in Ernst Lubitsch's Ninotchka (1939)

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Abstract

This article addresses the ‘hat’ scene in Ninotchka (1939), a feature film directed and produced by Ernst Lubitsch for MGM in Hollywood. Central to discussion is the main character, Ninotchka, a Soviet female ‘envoy extraordinary’ played by Greta Garbo. In the film, Ninotchka embodies the ‘new’ woman, but one enacting in a revised form of flânerie that is restructured and disciplined to accommodate Taylorism and Fordism. To help describe this persona, the article constructs a term, the ‘mechanical-flâneuse’ (Cockburn 1999), that refers to the 1930s ‘new’ woman as exemplified by Ninotchka, who combined flânerie with efficiency. The article concludes with questions to assist further development of the term ‘mechanical-flâneuse’.

The ‘hat’ and the mechanical-flâneuse

In 1911, Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856–1915), an industrial engineer, when setting out the most efficient manner to organise and deploy labour to increase the productivity of American industry, argued that “every single act of every workman can be reduced to a science” (Taylor
Twenty-four years later, in Paris and in exile from Nazi Germany, Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) working on his study ‘Baudelaire, or the Streets of Paris’ noted that: “In the flâneur the intelligentsia pays a visit to the marketplace, ostensibly to look around, yet in reality to find a buyer” (Benjamin c.1935: 156). Each of these two short quotations captures claims that, when combined, form the conceptual basis to the negotiation of the social self in technological society, as one who is both functionally efficient and mobile. Taylor (1911), whose studies launched ‘scientific management’ and the ‘efficiency movement’, reduces the quotidian to measured and calculated precision. Benjamin (c.1935), writing on the 19th century flâneur, recognises the impact made by late-19th century expansions of consumerist enterprise on acts of flânerie, especially when the most intelligent of metropolitan citizens follows the movement of consumerism as spectacle from the arcade into the department store.

The late-19th century shift in space, place and organisation of goods from the arcade as an enclosed street of shops to the department store as quasi exhibition and labyrinthine city of merchandise and services enables the staging of an inescapable and predominantly sensual need. This need is to be relevant and to be desired through the innocuous act of shopping that involves consumption as an act of looking, as much as calculating and purchasing. Taking this lead, the article references scientific management and the representation of flânerie, as consumer alertness, to define a particular late-1930s characterisation of the modern woman as ‘mechanical-flâneuse’. This term combines the adjective mechanical, as a Taylorist/Fordist signifier, with the noun flâneuse, as a gender inversion of the masculine flâneur.

Early debate on the existence of the flâneuse, let alone her identity, informs Janet Wolff’s ‘The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity’ (1985). Wolff maintains that writings on 19th century modernity, particularly in France, are marked by a gendered division in social place and space. In this division, Wolff asserts, public space is masculine, while the
feminine is limited to the private or domestic sphere. Wolff also argues that histories of modernity have, as a result, privileged various masculinist configurations and conjunctions that only recognise the *flâneur*, while ignoring the possibility of the *flâneuse*. The consequence is that recordings, representations and writings on modernist values and experiences are informed by the lived experiences of the *flâneur*. However, in proposing the concept of the invisible *flâneuse*, Wolff seeks to stimulate “a feminist sociology of modernity” (1985: 37).

Wolff goes on to propose that a framework for the study of the invisible *flâneuse* is by implication restricted to modernity, vaguely defined within the chronological and social terrain of France during the mid-to-later 19th century. The flaw or at best naivety to Wolff’s (1985) proposition, of a limited chronological and social terrain, is that Wolff builds a description of the private marked by obvious and reactive estimations. This is especially so when Wolff summarily dismisses the possibility of there being 19th century public and visible members of the female gender other than “the prostitute, the widow, the old lady, the lesbian, the murder victim and the passing unknown woman” (1985: 41–42). Wolff’s restriction of the feminine sphere and visibility to the private and familiar is uncomfortably essentialist and hints at an orthodox middle-class position. Toward the end of her essay Wolff does nod at the impact that development of ‘department stores’ had on the public lives of mid-to-late 19th century women, but unfortunately quickly dismisses this highly relevant social phenomenon.

Finally, Wolff (1985) adds that the study of the lives of mid-to-late 19th century women under the impact of modernity might demonstrate the ultimate invisibility of the *flâneuse*, wherein she is a not-being or as Wolff proposes: “There is no question of inventing the *flâneuse*: the essential point is that such a character was rendered impossible by the sexual divisions of the nineteenth century” (1985: 45). This observation, if anything, compounds Wolff’s refusal to acknowledge the urban experience of any of the categories of women she had earlier dismissed, let alone those
Wolff’s (1985) discussion centres on the public visibility of women in 19th century Paris. Conversely, the concept of the mechanical-\textit{flâneuse}, as descriptive of an attribute of the character Ninotchka (Greta Garbo) in Ernst Lubitsch’s 1939 film \textit{Ninotchka}, pursues a 1930s consideration of urbane female identity. In doing so the gendered term \textit{flâneuse} is redeployed, rather than directly and critically engaged to contest the 19th century content addressed by Wolff. Consequently, establishing a more complete and visible profile for the \textit{flâneuse}, compared to Wolff, requires defining the alternative term of mechanical-\textit{flâneuse} and turning to concepts articulated in Walter Benjamin’s writings on the profile of the \textit{flâneur} in Charles Baudelaire’s essay ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ (1859–1863), as well as Benjamin’s writings on the \textit{flâneur} in 19th century Paris (c.1935). Studies by David Frisby (1988) and Susan Buck-Morss (1997) of Walter Benjamin’s interest in the identity of the \textit{flâneur} and \textit{flânerie} can also assist.

The ‘mechanical’ in the term mechanical-\textit{flâneuse} refers to systems of management efficiency taken up by industrial society, including the Soviet Union, in the wake of Frederick Winslow Taylor’s ‘The Principles of Scientific Management’ (1911). The efficiency movement, after 1911, also included research by Americans Frank B. Gilbreth (1868–1924) and his partner Lillian M. Gilbreth (1878–1972) incorporating time-and-motion studies. By the time \textit{Ninotchka} was released in 1939, Taylorist principles as they had been applied in the United States of America were synonymous with Henry Ford’s automobile manufacturing monolith. Consequently, the industrial application of Taylorism is commonly referred to as Fordism. There are innumerable writings dating from the 1990s that initiated a re-consideration and examination of Taylorism and Fordism and applications as well as impact on society and culture between the First World War (1914–1918) and Second World War (1939–1945). Two of particular interest are Terry Smith (1993) and Peter Wollen (1993). It should also be noted that the Italian
politician Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), writing much earlier and concurrent with the initial impact of the efficiency movement in Europe, referred to Taylorism and Fordism as Americanism (Gramsci 1929–35 rpt. 1971: 277–318). However, this article avoids using the term ‘Americanism’ as it had a popular connotation, before and after Gramsci, in European culture between 1918 and 1939, often associated with fictional genres of the ‘Western’, the ‘Gangster’ and the ‘Private Detective’, none of which are directly relevant to this discussion.

By comparison to the widespread interest in Europe and the USSR in Taylorism, Fordism and the efficiency movement between 1918 and 1939, interest in the concept, act and descriptions of flânerie and the flâneur, let alone the flâneuse, is largely limited to the output of Walter Benjamin. David Frisby (1988: 187–265) has argued, on his reading of Benjamin, that flânerie may not have survived into the twentieth century in a form that either of the mid-19th century French writers on the topic, Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867) or Victor Fournel (1829–1894), could interpret. Nevertheless, in the 1920s and 1930s, the concept of the flâneur had survived sufficiently for Benjamin to address it in his writings. This is exactly the point that the following investigation pursues, that the characterisation of Ninotchka in the film Ninotchka is a new 20th century representational model of female flânerie.

Ninotchka was directed by the German-American Ernst Lubitsch (1892–1947) and is for the most part set in Paris. The screenwriters for Ninotchka were Americans Billy Wilder (1906–2002), Charles Brackett (1892–1969) and Walter Reisch (1903–1983). The principal roles in Ninotchka were played by Greta Garbo (1905–1990) and Melvyn Douglas (1901–1981). Collectively, this ensemble gave profile and played upon the identities of the flâneur, largely as the unreconstructed 19th century dandy Count Leon d’Algout, played by Douglas, living in an early-to-mid 20th century Paris apartment equipped with the latest in hifi. Leon romantically pursues the company of a decidedly reconstructed 20th century flâneuse, albeit a Soviet version,
the envoy extraordinary Nina Ivanovna ‘Ninotchka’ Yakushova played by Garbo. In the
significant support roles are three ineffective Soviet trade envoys, played by Sig Ruman (1884–
1967) as Iranoff, Felix Bressart (1892–1949) as Buljanoff and Alexander Granach (1890–1945)
as Kopalski. At the beginning of the film we see envoys Iranoff, Buljanoff and Kopalski arrive in
Paris on a mission to sell jewellery confiscated by the Soviets from the family possessions of a
pre-Revolutionary aristocrat. The aristocrat in question is the Grand Duchess Swana, played by
Ina Claire (1893–1985), now living in exile in Paris. The Grand Duchess Swana successfully has
negotiations for the sale of the jewellery stalled in the French courts and Ninotchka is sent by the
Soviet authorities to replace her ineffectual comrades.

In the film, Ninotchka as flâneuse is not obviously one regionally restricted to Paris. She is
Soviet, allowing her to be given strident purpose by Garbo to exhibit a distinct but not inflexible
mechanical persona. Significantly, when first encountered by her comrades and then Leon in the
film, as well as by the audience watching, this new configuration of flânerie is one that is
decidedly ‘efficient’. The mechanical-flâneuse in the form of Ninotchka has replaced the 19th
century flâneur’s idling, in the form of Leon, with the 20th century flâneuse’s striding, both
physically and metaphorically. The contest of these two contrasting forms, 20th century
mechanical-flâneuse, Ninotchka, as against 19th century flâneur, Leon, supplies motivation and
contest to the film’s diegesis.

Yet before examining the receptive possibilities within Ninotchka, for a reading of the
mechanical-flâneuse, it is necessary to reflect on the original identity of the flâneur as type and
as an act. What does to flâne entail? This requires a return to the 19th century model of flânerie, as
a Parisian phenomenon, taking the 1858 description of flânerie by the French essayist Victor
Fournel as the point of entry. The conventional and agreed interpretation of the French term
flâneur is that it means an ‘idler’ or ‘stroller’, which implies someone who wastes time
perambulating about the townscape. However, Fournel’s (1858: 492) description of ‘the art of flânerie’ sets the flâneur apart, as not everyone but a particular type of someone when he stipulates that:

... it is not given to everyone to flâner naively yet knowingly... This life is, on the contrary, for those able to understand and practice it, the most active of lives, the most fertile and productive; an intelligent and conscientious idler, who scrupulously performs his duties – that is, observes and remembers everything – can play a leading role in the republic of art. Such a man is an impassioned, peripatetic daguerreotype upon whom the least trace registers; in him are reproduced, with every reflection that they cast, the process of things, the movement of the city, the multifarious physiognomy of the public mind, the beliefs, antipathies and adorations of the mass.

Fournel’s flâneur is masculine, indicated by the gender determinant in the French language. In 1858, this masculine type was also a technological trope, a ‘peripatetic daguerreotype’, a 19th century walking camera or image capture machine within which are reproduced the ‘trace registers’ of the ‘movement of the city’. Yet Fournel’s flâneur, as a machine wanderer, is a distinctly modern apparatus for seeing and recording. This is especially the case if we use the term apparatus as understood in film theory. For instance, Susan Hayward (1996: 7–8) defines ‘apparatus’ as comprised of three considerations with respect to film as discursive text and each of these considerations of the cinematic apparatus and their function is pertinent to the identity of Fournel’s flâneur.

Firstly, like the flâneur, a cinema spectator is paradoxically “positioned as all-knowing subject” (Baudry 1970 ctd. Hayward 1996: 7) and this cinema spectator by seeing all does so via a predetermined and structured ideological construct which is the moving film. Likewise, film itself is informed by the very process of seeing, reproducing and re-presenting that doubles back
on the film’s text as text received. The flâneur’s acts of looking are described by Fournel in similar terms. Secondly, like Fournel’s flâneur, later in Hayward’s description of apparatus the spectator is paradoxically described as “an active producer of meaning”, yet one who remains “positioned as subject” while also being positioned “as agent to the filmic text” meaning that “she or he becomes the one viewing, the one deriving pleasure (or fear, which is another form of pleasure) from what she or he is looking at” (Hayward 1996: 8). This latter observation also implies that the cinema spectator engages in a form of collusive participatory and contingent immersion, as does the flâneur, but does so while remaining unobserved as cinema spectator. Finally, Hayward’s definition recognises the conceptualisation of the ‘apparatus’ that links its cinematic form to the world of capital and commodity exchange on the one hand and on the other a certain possibility that the ‘agent’ of the apparatus may not be a single ‘fixed’ voyeur, but rather a more judgmental, mobile and critical one.

In 1859, the year after Fournel’s description was published, Charles Baudelaire also published a description of the flâneur. However, Baudelaire’s flâneur appears somewhat less the photographic apparatus and somewhat more a particular spectator, when he states that:

The crowd is his element... His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world – such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito. (Baudelaire 1859–1863: 9)
Baudelaire’s *flâneur* is engaged in the act of detached gazing, but gazing nevertheless and gazing on the move. This seeking out by the *flâneur* of the “fugitive and the infinite” (Baudelaire 1859–1863: 9) is, David Frisby’s argues, because at “the heart of Baudelaire’s ‘phenomenology of modernity’ there lies the newness of the present” (1988: 16). Both Fournel’s *flâneur* (1858) as recording apparatus and Baudelaire’s *flâneur* (1859) as driven by spectatorial need, for what can be termed the ‘perpetual presentness’ (Cockburn 1999) found within the contingency of urbane modernity, offer useful possibilities when describing the characterisation of Ninotchka in 1939.

In an engaging and poetic meditation, the film theorist Leon Charney (1998: 6–7) also describes this need to be present in the moment of modernity:

> If the philosophy and criticism of modernity were preoccupied with the loss of presence, where can we go conceptually after acknowledging that presence irrevocably becomes absence? Once we have recognised that presence cannot coincide with itself, that sensation and cognition are always already alienated, that the body lives in self-segregation, are we left with no epistemological alternatives other than to repeat these premises again and again like a mantra? Is this all there is to say about the presence of presence as an experiential condition of modernity? As each present moment is remorselessly evacuated and deferred into the future, it opens up an empty space, an interval, that takes the place of a stable present. This potentially wasted space provides an opening to drift, to put the empty present to work not as a self-present identity or a self-present body but as a drift, an ungovernable, mercurial activity that takes empty presence for granted while manoeuvring within and around it.

In the above quote, Charney (1998) appears to be describing those brief moments of contemplative alertness that segment the relentless movement of modernity, especially when governed by the conditioning of effective efficiency, whether self-interested in motivation or
directed by external force. We witness these characteristics of alert ‘perpetual presentness’ and ‘drift’ in Ninotchka, as in her determination early in the film to walk rather than ride by taxi or public transport, with walking being a direct encounter and riding an encounter once removed, as well as in her observation and comment on the ‘hat’, her request for maps and plans of Paris, her interrogation of the timing of traffic flow and the engineering of the Eiffel Tower. Ninotchka’s desire to encounter Paris on her own terms at her own pace is a characteristic essential to successful flânerie, yet her request for maps of city infrastructure and her inquiry on the regulation of traffic and the technical achievement of the Eiffel Tower are scientific management characteristics. The qualities Ninotchka displays in her quest for knowledge of Paris are also pronounced examples of moving efficiently and calculating when in ‘drift’ that function to support her characterisation as ‘mechanical-flâneuse’. Aligning Ninotchka’s characterisation of flânerie with Fournel’s flâneur as apparatus and Baudelaire’s flâneur as a spectatorial need for perpetual presentness implies that the body of the flâneur is a functioning system orientated toward a detached exterior, although not in the strict sense of the ‘blasé’ cosmopolitan described by Georg Simmel (1903). What distinguishes the quality of Greta Garbo’s characterisation of Ninotchka, when first encountered by the viewer, is her exercise of flânerie as an efficiently functioning internal system presented by an assured, purposeful yet inquisitive detached exterior.

Significantly, the lead-up to the scene that involves Ninotchka’s first encounter with the hat, shortly after her arrival in Paris, continues a play on hats as metaphorical devices that had become and remained a significant thematic link or motif in the film’s spoken and unspoken visual narrative. In an early scene, shortly after the three Soviet envoys had first arrived in Paris and booked into their hotel, a quick jump-cut shot shows their hats on a hat stand in their hotel room transform from working class Soviet cloth and fur caps into top hats and bowlers. Commencing 17 minutes into the film and running for approximately three to four minutes in all, the scenes that follow see the three wayward Soviet envoys, Iranoff, Buljanoff and Kopalski,
discover a telegram from Moscow. The telegram informs them that their authority has been
cancelled and to expect the arrival of an ‘envoy extraordinary’ to act in their place. They
hurriedly make arrangement to have their accommodation moved from the Royal Suite to the
“smallest room you have got”. In making these arrangements the presumption that the arriving
‘envoy extraordinary’ is masculine is explicitly presented for the benefit of the audience. Iranoff,
Buljanoff and Kopalski then race to the railway station and we pick up the narrative at this point
19 minutes into the film, the train having arrived. By now there is no-one left on the platform
except rail attendants and porters, plus on her own a single tall slim woman wearing a plain and
coarse cloth suit and matching hat. She stares resolutely down the platform towards the late and
flustered envoys – Iranoff, Buljanoff and Kopalski, who mutter amongst themselves as to the
possibility that she might be their man. The woman is carrying two large and heavy looking
suitcases; she advances with purpose toward Iranoff, Buljanoff and Kopalski. Upon joining them
she states:

NINOTCHKA (to Iranoff): I am looking for Michael Simonovitch Iranoff.
IRANOFF: [replies] I am Michael Simonovitch Iranoff.
NINOTCHKA: I am Nina Ivanovna Yakushova, Envoy Extraordinary, acting under direct
orders of comrade Commissar Razinin. Present me to your colleagues.
They shake hands. NINOTCHKA’s grip is strong as a man’s.
[Iranoff, Buljanoff and Kopalski take their hats off, there are introductions and
handshakes all round.]
IRANOFF: Comrade Buljanoff …
NINOTCHKA: Comrade.
IRANOFF: Comrade Kopalski …
NINOTCHKA: Comrade.
IRANOFF [Trying to lighten the moment]: What a charming idea for Moscow to surprise
us with a lady comrade.

KOPALSKI [chimes in]: If we had known we would have greeted you with flowers.

NINOTCHKA (sternly): Don’t make an issue of my womanhood. We are here for work … all of us. Let’s not waste any time. Shall we go? (Brackett, Wilder and Reisch 1939 rpt. 1972: 22–24)

The Envoy Extraordinary is obviously a she! In 1939, the screenwriters and the director, irrespective of satirical renderings or intention, have thrown open for reception and/or consideration issues of gendered authority in their representation of the Soviet system. In Ninotchka, as the viewer sees her, the ‘New Soviet Woman’ is profiled as an austere, efficient, emotionally repressed albeit ethical automaton, but not eventually one beyond a certain sensual flexibility. The question set at this point in the film is obvious: how will Paris and the lure of prêt-à-porter and haute couture compromise Ninotchka’s persona? Beyond the immediacy of the filmic text, yet another question can be asked: how much of this initial characterisation of Ninotchka, how much of these observations, were based on popular conceptions of the ‘new Soviet’ experiment and how much was drawn from the Fordist reconfiguration of gender in America? Questions that hover rhetorically are addressed accumulatively as the figure of the ‘mechanical-flâneuse’ takes shape. We return to the script:

IRANOFF [calls]: Porter!

A PORTER steps up to them.

PORTER: Here Please …

NINOTCHKA: What do you want?

PORTER: May I have your bags Madam?

NINOTCHKA: Why?

KOPALSKI [explaining]: He is a porter. He wants to carry them.
NINOTCHKA (to PORTER): “Why? … Why should you carry other people’s bags?

PORTER: Well … that’s my business madame.

NINOTCHKA: That’s no business … that’s a social injustice.

PORTER: That depends on the tip.

KOPALSKI (trying to take NINOTCHKA’s bags): Allow me, Comrade.

NINOTCHKA: No, thank you.

NINOTCHKA takes both suitcases and walks away with the THREE RUSSIANS, whose nervousness has increased with every word from the Envoy Extraordinary.

[Ninotchka, along with Iranoff, Buljanoff and Kopalski, passes through the ticket collection point on the platform and continues out of the station... Iranoff, Buljanoff and Kopalski try to break the ice with small talk]

BULJANOFF: How are things in Moscow?

NINOTCHKA: Very good. The last mass trials were a great success. There are going to be fewer but better Russians. (Brackett, Wilder and Reisch 1939 rpt. 1972: 22)

Ninotchka’s reply is a rather dark piece of humour and a direct reference to the Stalinist show trials of the late 1930s. The line itself registers as the screenwriters’ and director’s cynical realist aside. In a biography on Ernst Lubitsch, the film’s director, William Paul (1983) credits the line to one of the screenwriters in particular, Walter Reisch. Paul (1983: 230) also asserts that despite the basis of the joke being mass murder and being delivered at that moment in the film shortly after the audience is introduced to Ninotchka (Greta Garbo), the characterisation of Ninotchka for the audience did not suffer. However, in 1939, at least one reviewer, Frank S. Nugent of The New York Times (November 10: 27), reported displeasure at the joke’s cruel humour making it reasonable to speculate that for the audience of the day, particularly Soviet sympathisers, it may well have been the joke at which they dare not laugh. What is of interest to the profile of the ‘mechanical-flâneuse’ is the perfunctory manner in which a joke based on mass murder is
delivered, as if a commendable and necessary observation on the course of ideology in efficient pursuit of achievements for the good of the committed. In the film, Garbo playing Ninotchka strides through this line with purpose. There is no apprehended movement, but a carrying onto the next goal within the narrative, the Clarence Hotel, via the ‘hat’ scene, approximately 20 minutes into the film. A dissolve edit shows us Ninotchka, Iranoff, Buljanoff and Kopalski as they pass by a millinery shop on their way to the Clarence Hotel. Ninotchka’s attention is drawn by ‘the hat’ on display. Whether the hat display is in a street, arcade or hotel shop window is not clear, although the latter is indicated in the script staging directions. At the sight of the hat Ninotchka abruptly stops opposite to look, asking her comrades:

NINOTCHKA: What’s that?
KOPALSKI [replies]: It’s a hat, Comrade, a woman’s hat.
NINOTCHKA [retorts]: Tsk, tsk, tsk, how can such a civilisation survive that permits women to put things like that on their heads. It won’t be long now, Comrades. (Brackett, Wilder and Reisch 1939 rpt. 1972: 24–25)

In the two earlier interpretive models of the 19th century flâneur previously outlined, Fournel’s flâneur as apparatus and Baudelaire’s flâneur as a spectatorial need for perpetual presentness, the implication is that the body of the flâneur acts as a functioning system orientated toward a detached exterior. Yet how can these profiles be brought to bear on the character of Ninotchka? She is alien to Paris, being a Soviet Trade Commissar, and she is a she, where flânerie was a gender specific masculine activity for both Fournel and Baudelaire. What is more, Ninotchka is of 1939 not 1859: eighty years separate these two dates as do two different narrative media – literature in paper and ink as against sound and vision recorded on improved black and white film stock. An initial response to these problems of the profile of Ninotchka’s characterisation is not to see the phenomenon of the flâneur or flânerie as geo-chronologically bound to a particular
place, space and time within mid-19\textsuperscript{th} century Parisian modernity nor, for that matter, media of describing, documenting, recording or representing \textit{flânerie}. Over the eighty years between Fournel’s and Baudelaire’s writing and Garbo’s characterisation of Ninotchka, the \textit{flâneur} has shifted genders and arenas of operation, while also never being totally hidden, never completely invisible. The operation of \textit{flânerie} at the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century was under pressure from a world of changing capital and consumer activity that is worth reviewing.

In examining Walter Benjamin’s unfinished \textit{Passagen-Werk} (Arcades Project), Susan Buck-Morss (1997: 85) draws attention to the role of arcades and streets of mid-19\textsuperscript{th} century Paris as the free space of the \textit{flâneur}, where locomotion was set by the unplanned pace of distraction. This pace of distraction matched the \textit{flâneur}’s necessary distinction of being a ‘set-aside someone’, as in Fournel’s description of the \textit{flâneur}. At the same time the \textit{flâneur}’s pace was the optimum perambulating speed required of this 19\textsuperscript{th} century imaging machine, if it was to detect and register the present presentness of modernity sought by Baudelaire’s \textit{flâneur}. Similarly, David Frisby (1988: 250) holds that in Benjamin’s essays the Baudelarian \textit{flâneur} is interpreted as someone set apart from the mass:

\begin{quote}
The \textit{flâneur} could wander... so long as the crowd did not take on a definite shape – as a social class, for instance – and as long as the street could still be conceived as an \textit{intérieur} (as it was most obviously in the arcades).
\end{quote}

Yet from the mid-19\textsuperscript{th} century, and particularly toward the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, the streets and arcades of Paris had a new and commanding addition. In writings by Walter Benjamin on the \textit{flâneur}, Frisby (1988: 187–265) notes Benjamin’s opinion that \textit{flânerie} was about to be swamped and extinguished or at the very least redefined just at the moment it was defined, by the momentum of organised and concentrated mass consumption: the department store. The relocation of the perpetual mass spectacle away from the streets and arcades of the \textit{flâneur} and
into the interior of the department store was assisted by the increasing popularity of ‘Expositions Universelles’ (France), ‘International Exhibitions’ (UK) and ‘World’s Fairs’ (US), as examined by Paul Greenhalgh (1988). The Expositions are also often discussed for their impact on the development of the department store and the contribution of department stores to Exposition attractions (Lancaster 1995; Richards 1991; Williams 1982).

The Exposition structures and events, not only in their organisation and architecture but also in their constantly shifting international cosmopolitan demographic, redefined the mass as beyond the exclusively regional or in the case under discussion, Parisian. The world came to the ‘World’s Fairs’ to engage with fact and simulation and all gazed on all in a mass act of flânerie. However, Ninotchka comes to Paris to sell the Crown Jewels of the Duchess Swana, or to paraphrase Benjamin, Ninotchka represents a moment in time wherein “intelligentsia pays a visit to the marketplace, ostensibly to look around, yet in reality to find a buyer” (c.1935: 156). Yet Benjamin’s line equally describes the aims and goals of most industrial and commercial exhibitors at the World’s Fairs as well as the relationship of wholesalers to department store retailers.

The department store’s expanded and compartmentalised interior also offered a spectacle that took the form of a new and compelling urban topography of material possibilities. As Frisby (1988: 252) reminds us, the department store is an enclosed territory in which the flâneur’s “abandonment and ultimate submersion in the crowd suggested that he had already succumbed to the world of commodities, either as a commodity himself or as a consumer”. Likewise, the department store, as enclosed purpose-built interior space where new strategies of departmentalised mass retailing repositioned the spectacle of the city, was a place where unplanned if not unrestrained social encounter may occur. In his history of Bon Marché, the world’s first department store or grand magasin that opened in Paris in 1852, Michael Miller
(1981) uses research and notes compiled by the author Emile Zola (1840–1902) to estimate the volume of people attracted to the store at any one time. Miller (1981: 53) claims that on sale days at Bon Marché, in the 1880s, as many as 70,000 customers may have entered the store.

In effect, the department store as social space and place had redefined the consumption of dry goods and associated products as a new unifying mass purpose. In the department store finished items, such as ready to wear clothing and mass-produced household commodities, in turn defined a new social phenomenon of being: shopping. The department store restructured the process of shopping by inviting the consumer to browse without the obligation to buy and, in doing so, immediately usurped a defining characteristic of the flâneur, a point described in greater detail by Michael Miller (1981) and Rosalind Williams (1982). In the space of the department store, place and time jockeyed against one another amongst the surge of avarice on mass, a surge that propelled the individual flâneur beyond differentiated control. Subsequently, in Frisby’s (1988: 252) estimation, the flâneur’s ability to act the recording apparatus of present presentness in the context of the department store was eroded. The flâneur was now indistinguishable from the mass of shoppers, or as Frisby (1988: 252) puts it: “As a consumer, the flâneur negates his own existence; he becomes one of the crowd – of consumers” or as Benjamin (1938 rpt. 1997: 54) far more poetically phrased it: “If in the beginning the street had become an interior to him, now this interior turned into a street, and he roamed through the labyrinth of merchandise as he had once roamed through the labyrinth of the city.” However, shortly after the first decade of the 20th century this mass marketplace for an emerging mass society would be reinvigorated by the ‘new efficiency’ of Taylor’s scientific management. Flânerie would take on a renewed definition and intent in its encounter with the efficiency required of 20th century modernity.

In short, flânerie was not lost. Window shopping had long been equated with a type of flânerie, a
type defined by a spectatorial drive to want but not to have, or in other words to desire the vision of the material object that was unobtainable (Fiske 1989; Mouton 2001). Like the flâneur, the window shopper is set apart from the mass, for when the mass enters the interior event of the department store in search of a bargain the window shopper remains on the exterior in search of a vision. The hat’s capture of Ninotchka in her stride at 0.20.09 into the diegesis of the film is in part flânerie transitioning into the act of window shopping. In her critical response, upon engaging in ‘window shopping’, Ninotchka defines a key attribute of the flâneur-flâneuse when acting as recording apparatus of present presentness: she is observant rather than simply distracted.

Ninotchka is also under the directives of 20th century time-motion management efficiency reshaped and informed by Soviet ideology, making her doubly ideological. Ninotchka is one who is governed by Taylorist and Marxist-Leninist conditioning, while managing the capitalist and consumerist impulse presented in the paradoxical form of the commodity as product of alienated labour (Marx 1867: 444–451), destined for the purpose of conspicuous waste (Veblen 1899: 68–102). Mike Featherstone (1991: 172), writing on the body in consumer culture, has noted the link between late 19th century department stores and the development of scientific management early in the 20th century:

Mass consumption has been referred to as the necessary ‘other’ of mass production (Alt 1976: 71). While mass-produced consumer durables (cheap manufactured clothes, household goods etc.) had been displayed in the newly-created department stores (Miller 1981) of the second half of the nineteenth century, the development of scientific management, with its new techniques of work organisation and assembly line production, in the early decades of the twentieth century, dramatically increased productive capacity.
Featherstone (1991: 172) also outlines the relationship of mass production to mass consumption in terms of a shift in social values, away from ‘thrift’ to the aspirational desiring of a ‘hedonist life style’:

> Improvements in real wages, and not least the creation of consumer credit and instalment buying, stimulated demand. Workers who had become used to the rhetoric of thrift, hard work and sobriety, had to become ‘educated’ to appreciate a new discourse centred around the hedonistic lifestyle entailing new needs and desires. In the 1920s the foundations of a consumer culture became established with the new media of motion pictures, tabloid press, mass circulation magazines and radio extolling the leisure lifestyle, and publicising new norms and standards of behaviour.

The hat’s apprehension of Ninotchka ‘as window shopper’ resonates with an unintended ideological trace in its comedic purpose, that is ironically reinforced if it is remembered that Karl Marx’s wife wrote of her love of window shopping (Payne 1971: 130 ctd. Lancaster 1995: 175). However, an investigation of this doubling ideology cannot be simply limited to interpretations contemporary with the film’s production and release, exemplified by reviewers such as Frank S. Nugent who, in The New York Times mentioned earlier, cast the ‘hat’ as symbolic object in the breaking down of the communist east before the lure of the capitalist west, when he wrote:

> Paris in the Spring being what it is and Melvyn Douglas, as an insidious capitalistic meddler, being what he is, Comrade Ninotchka so far forgot Marx, in Mr. Lubitsch’s fable, as to buy a completely frivolous hat. (1939: 27)

Likewise, in an American review by Franz Hoellering in The Nation on 25 November 1939, the east-west, capitalist-communist divide is again stated as the film’s fixed interpretive polemic:
“Instead of being efficient, the commissars fall for the charm of Paris and the pleasures the capitalist world offers to its wealthy children” (1939: 587). This interpretation of the film narrative, fixated as it was with the east-west ideological divide, remained the predominant interpretation until at least 1983, when it was re-employed, although on a more sophisticated level, in a description of the film by Lubitsch’s biographer William Paul (1983: 208), who asserted:

It is Ninotchka herself who establishes an ideological meaning for the hat when she remarks on first seeing it, “How can such a civilisation survive which permits their women to put things like that on their head?” As an afterthought she adds, with great certainty, “It won’t be long now, comrades,” as if the hat were a key item in the battle between capitalism and communism.

This interpretation of the film as a simplistic ideological text limits its reading to familiar perceptions of the adversarial contest between capitalist west and communist east. The reason for reinforcing such a convenient polemical west versus east interpretation may well be that it hides or ignores Soviet efforts to adopt US scientific management and efficiency principles (Lenin 1918; Kuleshov 1922; Hindus 1927; Dalrymple 1964; Traub 1978; Merkle 1980; Rogger 1981; Hughes 1989) personified in the characterisation of Ninotchka. Admittedly, the polemic reading of the film, within its limited ideological interpretation, carried a certain popular appeal in 1939 and on re-release of the film post-1945. Nevertheless, as a form of myth it fails to take into account the subtle qualities of representational agency to be found in conventional Hollywood narrative cinema, especially that of the ensemble put together by Lubitsch for the production of Ninotchka (1939). In other words, as earlier indicated, the representation of the character Ninotchka undoubtedly tells us of popular knowledge and impressions of the east by the west, but it also opens up the possibility of exploring closer to hand sub-textual values located in the
society of the film’s audience, director and writers. Sub-texts hint at a complex intersection of the diachronic and synchronic histories that animate the mechanical-flâneuse and Ninotchka as an example of the mechanical-flâneuse.

However, we must now leave with questions that remain for later consideration: What is at play in the identity of the flâneuse against the backdrop of mass production and mass consumption, both before and after Taylorism and the impact of Henry Ford’s use of efficiency principles, known as Fordism? What connections exist between the department stores of the late 19th century and scientific management in the first decades of the 20th century? Can the interrelationship between the spectacle of consumerism, urbane awareness and the need to adjust to the expectations of industrial efficiency be employed in a re-evaluation and re-reading of the re-presentations of late-modern society, such as those in the film Ninotchka? Does the late-1930s woman, including her paradoxical Fordist-Communist other, in the social and political context of trans-Atlantic consumer and/or collectivised culture, self-present in a similar manner? Finally, how does the mechanical-flâneuse transition into and out of the war effort between 1939 and 1945?

References


