

# WALKING AS A SELFREFERENTIAL PROCESS IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE PERFORMATIVE TURN

Boris Minkov

The presence of the *flâneur* as a public phenomenon in modern culture is a problem which, with its broadness and complexity, attracts a multitude of researchers from various fields. Among the particularly significant impulses both to study the *flâneur* as a social type, and to see him as a key figure in the culture of modernity, two works merit a special mention: Georg Simmel's essay *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903) – a seminal text of sociological science, which Simmel wrote directly drawing on the formulations of his major work *The Philosophy of Money*; and Walter Benjamin's project about the Parisian arcades, in which the *flâneur* is observed as the prototype of modern man. Both works are characterized by the pulsation, typical of urban perception, between the whole and the fragment, between consistent analysis and the experience of sudden profane enlightenment.

This text owes much of its rationale to the *flâneur's* nature and their aesthetic platform for such self-staging in the public medium, which simultaneously turns them into a creative subject and object. At the same time, the thematic scope of this article is no longer focused on *flânerie* as an aesthetic platform or a school of alternative behaviour. Here we will observe how the aimless or monotonous



*Walking Man I* by Alberto Giacometti, 1960

movement, where the idea of a purpose has long been discarded, has now surrendered the halo of dandyism, too, the power of its engaging eyes, in order to return to its mechanical and biological dimensions. Man's footsteps cease to insist on high metaphors and meanings that refer the recipient necessarily and solely to

transcendent messages. His movement begins to also express an immediate physical necessity, personal characteristic, identity-print or simply a physical presence. I will try to demonstrate how moving by walking was returned to its own process, how and why the *flânerie* of old was desacralized. Given these intentions, the text shall use the most general and neutral word available, 'walking.' This phenomenon can be historically placed – it is linked to the performative turn in the arts in the 1960s, but it also touches upon the shift in the entire aesthetic paradigm when the idea of fine arts suffered a major crisis and it became apparent that the 'work of art' concept needed to be expanded – once by overcoming the creative product fetish, and a then again by searching for the work's dimensions in its effect, in the resulting changes to the mind's structures.

### ***Literary and Cinematic Background***

Literature developed intuitions for the independent significance of human movement not just long before the golden era of *flânerie* and dandyism in the classic Modernism period (the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), but also before the Modern Age established its publicity structures (the last decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century). First literature excluded purposeful travelling from its high values in favour of movement for its own sake, in works such as *Gargantua and Pantagruel* or *Don Quixote*, and then gradually developed the notion that walking on the road – as self-sufficient as art itself – represents a school of autopoiesis. The autopoietic nature of movement is

developed with particular clarity in the projects of Romanticism, especially in Novalis's unfinished novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802). The case of the artist's programmatic Romantic movement "on the road" is even more remarkable as it was developed and established in the context of already existing "greenhouses" for the cultivation of *flânerie* – those salons, clubs, coffeehouses which Habermas defined as a testing ground for the 'public reasoning'<sup>1</sup>. In his consciously chosen asceticism, the Romantic artist opposes the dandy, weary of the endlessly repetitive theatre of gazes and narrowed by the pragmatism of his environment.

The *flâneur* is a figure of migration not only in spatial terms (the Parisian arcades simultaneously enclose the stroller like a home, and open up like a street), but also with their temporal positioning at Modernism's door.<sup>2</sup> In Walter Benjamin's notions, in the Parisian arcades project [Passagenwerk], the subject of Baudelaire's poetry moves about in a seemingly submarine city that simultaneously marks both the bloom and the decline – a 'death-fraught idyll'.<sup>3</sup> In his versatile attempts – to write short journalistic prose along with poetry; to smoke hashish along with the intoxication from spatial transference; to

<sup>1</sup> Habermas, Jürgen. *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, 1995 [Хабермас, Юрген. Структурни изменения на публичността. София: Унив. изд. Св. Климент Охридски, 1995.]

<sup>2</sup> "The flâneur still stands on the threshold – of the metropolis as of the middle class. Neither has him in its power yet. In neither is he at home. He seeks refuge in the crowd." (Benjamin, Walter. *Paris, Capital of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*. In: *The Arcades Project*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 10)

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. 896.

perceive loneliness along with the magic of omnipresence – Baudelaire pushed the *flâneur's* experience to the limits of possible existence: the ecstasy of the second condition leads to the allegoric of death. With Baudelaire's presence in the historical perspective of the Parisian 19<sup>th</sup> century, the long goodbye to the *flâneur* turns into one of the fundamental rituals of Modernism.

In the course of Modernism's development it was not only the profile of adventure and the intensity of communication that faded away, but also the halo of the locale. Since walking through urban spaces ceased to afford completeness to communication, its function as local anaesthesia, as intoxication in loneliness also came into question. Death is that doppelgänger the *flâneur* keeps glancing at; death is the other who does not let the *flâneur* out of its sight. For Rilke's diary subject in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (*Die Aufzeichnungen des Malte Laurids Brigge*, 1910), Paris itself – the incubator of the *flâneur* as a social type – is not just a place of death, but also a place of such indifference towards death which produces a failure to recognize life. If the *flâneur* in his classic dandy variety follows with his eyes the flesh blossoming under the influence of public omnipresence, utilizing a detective's mask and 'the crowd as veil'<sup>4</sup>, Rilke's first-person character observes the hospital omnibuses with "windows of frosted glass, behind which you can picture the most glorious agonies"<sup>5</sup>

Rilke's novel is particularly important for the perspective of this text, because, firstly, it defines the very movement in the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 895.

<sup>5</sup> Rilke, Rainer Maria. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

city as the last refuge of human identity, and secondly, it makes walking an auto-poietic territory – independent in its creation and functioning. Footsteps remember even in destruction, when man has either long forgotten or ceased to gaze into the traces of physiognomy. "He [an anonymous man holding a crutch amidst the crowd – B.M.] walked as shyly as a child, but unusually light of step, brimful of memories of walking in younger days"<sup>6</sup>

However, even the briefest of reviews of aimless strolling in an urban environment would be highly inadequate if it failed to mention the contribution of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) – a work of literature where walking the city streets is the entire program for achieving narrative completeness and dialogics, a key, approach and mechanism of the epic development. Through the mutual *en passant* encounter of people, sounds, intentions, streams of consciousness, time niches, *Ulysses* develops a new, fundamentally different notion of simultaneity, which knows no exception in embracing different segments of modernity. When the beginning of episode *Proteus* tackles the modalities of the visible, the text's synopes pass by two key words from Lessing's *Laocoon* (*nacheinander – nebeneinander*) and prepare to relativate the distinction they set. This is the moment when the protagonist Stephen Daedalus leaves, hesitating whether to visit his aunt Sarah, but lost in the stream of his thoughts, he finally fails to take the right turn. However, the real focus of this moment is the absorption into one's own steps and the temporal dimensions of walking: *Stephen closed his eyes to hear his boots crush crackling wrack and shells. You are walking through it how-*

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<sup>6</sup> Ibidem.



*Three Men Walking II* by Alberto Giacometti, 1949

somever. I am, a stride at a time. A very short space of time through very short times of space. Five, six: the nacheinander. Exactly: and that is the ineluctable modality of the audible.<sup>7</sup>

The texture of *Ulysses* accepts and seals in itself the dimensions of the new simultaneity where all traces are present not just 'next to each other,' but also in each other, and the temporal layers are distinguishable only in personal, subjective, even emphatically intimate plan. Under Joyce's concept, walking takes on not only a connecting role, but one organizing the whole as well. It becomes a procedure (and a process) of mixing, a situation-churning machine – situations both available and obvious, on the one hand, and latent and unmanifested, on the other. Thus the mod-

<sup>7</sup> Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 37.

ern novel begins to incorporate in its entirety also the unavailable, what is only potentially possible, making it dialogue with what is available or already transpired.

It is curious to see how this literary experience, together with its underlying intuitions for the new forms of publicness, has played an important role in the history of cinema. As a result of the effect around the idea of the aimless walker, cinematography took an important step towards overcoming its innate sense of inadequacy as a separate art form. Whereas until the First World War cinema was focused almost exclusively on entertainment, borrowing ready-made genre and narrative matrices (from the sketch through variety intermedia to melodrama), in

the 1920s it was emancipated as an art form thanks to movies such as *The Street* (directed by Karl Grune, 1923), *Berlin: Symphony of a Metropolis* (directed by Walter Ruttmann, 1927), and *Man with a Movie Camera* (directed by Dziga Vertov, 1929). These cinematic works introduce their discovery that the man with a movie camera has the optics and the phenomenological rationale of the *flâneur* at his disposal – both in the ecstatic and the morbid, in the shocking perceptions of urban claustrophobia, but most of all, in situating the subject amongst the very plastic tissue of everyday life, in enduring.

This is typical especially for Ruttmann's and Vertov's movies, in which the very pace of the movie sequence turns into the basis of the movie story, into its object and theme. The movie camera is a freely moving eye, which in its course follows and

responds to the visual stimuli of the urban environment. It appears as if these films were created in the combination of walking and watching. The 'cinema eye' jerks from object to object, finding no objects unworthy of its notice. The succession of associations arising from the montage (like the blink of an eye) has its own temporal graphics, and it is precisely this graphic that occupies the place where the plot once stood.

So, in this seminal development in the culture of the 1920s, there are two changes relevant to the current topic. First, film was established as an autopoietic structure based in movement and montage. Thus cinema began to see itself as the art of metonymic simultaneity. Second, Ruttmann's and Vertov's conceptions of the camera's ever-moving eye effectively equated the filmmaker's experience with that of the viewer.

### ***Walking and the experience of the performative***

Going on the literary background and the movie examples of the 1920s, we can arrive at the following conclusion: from the 1960s onwards, walking in performative art has been significant not only for its immediate presence, but also as a model of a complete program. This is a program that prepares and establishes the dominance of the procedural and the situational in art, exposes the autopoietic structures and insists on an expanded concept of 'work of art.'

In February 1968, Valie Export (born Waltraud Lehner) went out for a walk on the streets of downtown Vienna with her partner Peter Weibel (also a visual artist, a

future art expert and media theoretician), leading him on a leash, while he moved on all fours. In the context of the performances staged by the group of Viennese performance artists, in some of which Weibel<sup>8</sup> also participated, this action seems uneventful and harmless. Valie Export's entire walk was completed without words, without escalation or further public provocations, like an open-air improvisation session or a scene in the tradition of students' pranks.

In the performers' notes, the performance is called *From the Portfolio of Doggedness* – a retort to the title of the wall-newspaper *From the Portfolio of Humanity* distributed free of charge at the time, used by a humanitarian organization to promote its activities (by the way, Brecht would have added this newspaper and its 'free' distribution to the beggar's props from the Peachums' shop).

What turns a walk into a work of art? To answer this question, we must first make a correction: here we have a flirtation with the very idea of a work of art, which does not insist on occupying art territory at all costs, but it does not completely surrender its possible place there, either. This dual play would likely be embraced by the dandy's creative nature (if we could imagine the dandy's presence a century after the golden age of his decline) – because a significant clue in the genesis of the intertwining of art and non-art in Valie Export's walk points us to the brilliant paradoxical vortices in which the subject of decadent art self-stylizes herself as the 'artist of her life.'

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<sup>8</sup> For instance, during the Art and Revolution performance on 7 June of the same year at Vienna University, Peter Weibel gave a "rude screed" with a hand in a burning glove.

The double play of presence/absence in art is based in the performance being present in two lines of tradition simultaneously. One line involves binding the work of art with a number of interpretative procedures. The prolonged sections with the *flâneur* from the times of decadent Modernism are adopted in the reception background of the February 1968 walk – to what extent these examples from literary prehistory are replicated in their book versions and to what extent the walk builds on them is a matter not only of interpretation, but also of the situational singularity of the performance. Historical, sociocultural and anthropological contexts are then added to all this, including, for example, the issue of the metamorphosis in culture or potential feminist connotations, as well as traces of the history of fashion<sup>9</sup>, the tradition of street theatre, in particular its Viennese variety (the so-called *Posse*). While in a work of art fixed in its textual materiality these contexts are in principle recoverable and exhaustible, here they are elusive and practically border on the infinite.

Against the infinite number of latent connotative connections and perceptual attitudes stands the physical literalness of the action. Despite the diverse choice of interpretative procedures for understanding performative art, the action in it denotes first and foremost itself, i.e. it is self-referential.<sup>10</sup> Often, the action has im-

<sup>9</sup> In his notes to the Arcades Project Walter Benjamin mentions several times the 1839 fashion to take a tortoise out walking. These creatures give a good idea of the tempo a flâneur keeps, he points out. (Benjamin. Op. cit., p. 422).

<sup>10</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte observes the self-referential and the constitutive as fundamental

mediate dimensions in everyday life and the kind of indistinguishable derivatives in perceptible reality that have a purely practical significance, causes and effects, and thus are beyond the scope of the intrinsically artistic.

Valie Export's performance *Tap and Touch Cinema* from the same year is to a large extent connected to the walk in February, shedding light on its receptive and aesthetic grounds. Even though the author herself elucidates the *Cinema* in a markedly feminist aspect (as the first fully female movie), what is important for the reception of the performance as a whole is the interconnectedness between walking and starting a conversation. Export "dressed" her upper body in a construction reminiscent of a miniature stage with its adjacent salon, and the space the construction formed in front of her chest was closed off by curtains. Dressed in this installation, the author showed up in public places, and Peter Weibel, accompanying her, invited passers-by through a megaphone to put their hands in this miniature cinema and to touch the breasts of the performance artist for 20 seconds. Here the subtle placement of the passer-by between a spectator, an interpreter and an actor is especially clear. On the one hand, the people who accepted the invitation abandoned their passivity, emerged from the indistinguishable mass of the street crowd to act with their hands behind the curtains, to play the active role, to do the action; on the other hand, those involved in the *Cinema* followed the appeals of the

characteristics of performance arts [in the original: *selbstreferenziell* and *wirklichkeitskonstituierend*] (Fischer-Lichte, Erika. *Ästhetik des Performativen*. Fr./M.: Suhrkamp, 2004, pp. 37–38.)

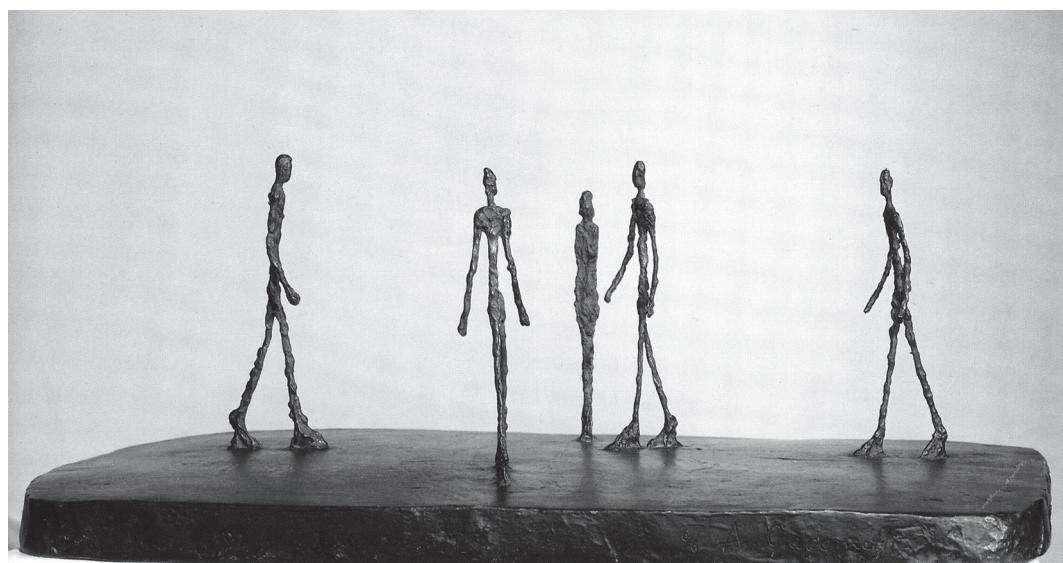
actors faithfully, accepting the spectator role built in the title and in the framework convention, and in doing so risked, like with any venture into a dark and unfamiliar space, being frustrated or shocked.

Phenomenologically, this seemingly simple performance piece at first glance utilizes the fundament of the stable opposition between seeing and touching. On another occasion and with other examples Erika Fischer-Lichte observed how, based on this opposition, performance art developed a number of other oppositions: publicity – intimacy, distance – closeness, fiction – reality.

If in these two complementary examples the walking / engaging performances work mainly with public space and its engagement as an active environment, then there are cases in which, conversely, walking aims to stylize and shape first and foremost the image of the artist, to be designed as an introverted romantic gesture, reminiscent of the long road to the self that the artist must travel alone. This is the case

with Marina Abramović and Ulay's performance *The Great Wall Walk* (1988), in which they walk towards each other, starting from opposite ends of the Great Wall of China (she started from the Yellow Sea, he, from the Gobi Desert, and they split the total distance of 5000 km). The conceptual intention was that at the end of the performance, the two would separate forever.

Unlike most performance art pieces, Abramović and Ulay's walk on the Great Wall of China had pre-set space and time parameters, there was clarity on when the performance would end, there was a clear goal, and largely expected at that. By design, it was irrelevant to the potential presence of an audience, which is also rare for performance art. Regardless of the ways of tracking and documenting the performance, here walking is realized as a topic referring to the plasticity of the Self. There is also an added paratextual biographical thread, which insists that the movement of the two performers towards each other be perceived as a decline, as a kind of a



*The City Square* by Alberto Giacometti, 1948/1949

requiem for the dialogical relationship between 'I' and 'you,' and that the exhaustion of the common creative and personal path be presented as a story about the end.

We must also keep in mind that along with its 'thematic' immediate processing, walking has its central place in performance arts also as a connecting action (action between the actions). This intermediate positioning of walking is all the more necessary with a view to emphasizing the procedural nature of actions, putting the essence of the performance piece in the execution, not the result.

Joseph Beuys' performance piece *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* in the *Schmela* Gallery (Düsseldorf, 26 November 1965) is an example of the connecting role of walking. Beuys, with a dead hare on his shoulder and a head covered in a golden dust and honey mixture, walked around the gallery from object to object for three hours; meanwhile the audience could observe the performance only from outside, through the windows. In this case walking takes on a significant share of the performance's dialogical weight: along with the possible ecological, didactical and mystical aspects of this work of Beuys, it is the chaotic, silent, searching walking from piece to piece itself that is the visible derivative of thinking and reflection; walking is a laboratory of understanding, a vital tempo and rhythm of the artistic subject.

It is no coincidence that it was the transient, the flux, the unsustainable that gave the name to one of the 1960s leading artistic associations, which developed performance art in their practice – Fluxus. Even in the material traces left by visual artists after their performances, one can see the constant creative self-staging on

the go. Curiously, in his attempt to retrospectively see Fluxus as a leading institution in contemporary art, Ken Friedman chose the metaphor of worn-out shoes. His object installation *The History of Fluxus* consists of old winter shoes full of snow.

Two late Samuel Beckett plays show the mutual influence between theatre and performance art precisely based on the temporal, spatial, and self-referential characteristics of walking: *Come and Go* (1965) and *Footfalls* (1975). In an extreme minimalism of 127 words, *Come and Go* manages to tie a symmetrical in its entirety, triple knot between almost identical-looking female figures. Childhood girlfriends meet (without so much as a mention of the circumstances) on a bench. In each of the three parts, the woman standing in the centre suddenly stands up and exits the stage without any narrative motivation. Then the other two change the seating configuration at the bench, and the one who has moved to the middle asks the other one how their now absent friend seemed to her. She replies, "I see little change," but after the secret whispered the centrally seated woman whispers to her, she only manages to exclaim, shocked, "Oh!" The friend who left the stage returns, takes the empty place at the end of the bench and the action from the previous sequence is repeated, with the woman in the centre leaving every time, and the other two sharing a secret about her. It is obvious that the gesture of leaving (of departure) is associated with crossing some existential threshold – without warning and without motivation, without preparation, it triggers sharing, the intimate 'I-you' conversation, which in extreme minimalism seems to be the only possible counterbalance to the extreme of existence.



Beckett himself says about *Footfalls* that the centre of the play is the sound of walking – it organizes the rhythm and the musical structure of the work: “these life-long stretches of walking. That is the centre of the play, everything else is secondary”.<sup>11</sup> In this play, walking is even more directly commensurate with existence: closed in the narrow corridors of the domestic space, not only deprived of purpose, direction and immediate meaning, but also mindless, the “to and fro” movement seems to be the last biological reflex of life. Only the voice partially takes on the role of an

alternative to the footsteps (the voice of the very old and weak mother), and in the course of the play the repetitive structures create a feeling of an alloy from the sound of the footsteps roaming the labyrinth of existence and the voice heading towards its own end.

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*Translated by*  
**Yoana Stefanova**

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<sup>11</sup> Asmus, W. D. *Practical aspects of theatre, radio and television, Rehearsal notes for the German premiere of Beckett's That Time and Footfalls at the Schiller-Theater Werkstatt*, Berlin (1.9.76), – *Journal of Beckett Studies*, No 2, Summer 1977 – [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Footfalls#cite\\_note-english.fsu.edu-2](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Footfalls#cite_note-english.fsu.edu-2).