

FIGURES OF THE *PRESENT*: URBAN SILHOUETTES

SOFIA, CRYSTAL GARDEN

DANDY AS A *PAINTER OF MODERN LIFE*: USHER, ACTOR, AND FLÂNEUR

(PART II)

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II.

But why *charming abomination*? The road to the Marketplace leads in the *shameful direction* of a *base inclination* (Milchev 2004: 102). The Marketplace is generally seen through a vivid, negatively loaded semantic register – it is a place where dissipation (Milchev 2004: 103), indecorous noise (Milchev 2004: 107), *laughter and squashy apricots* (Milchev 2004: 114) reign, while the inhabitants are carelessly called *rabble*. Like Baudelaire, Dandy also *perceives charm even in damaged and decaying goods* (Benjamin 1997: 59). *To encroach on decay – why this is downright pasteurisation of experience, all kind of prevention and a condom*, Lyubomir Milchev writes, provocatively *encroaching* on Baudelairean aesthetics (Milchev 2004: 103).

The charming abomination – the Marketplace – is threatened by the layering of cultural codes, activating model examples, while the exact repetition of the flâneur’s practice is more than impossible for Lyubomir Milchev. He could be considered relying on Baudelaire’s conceptual and aesthetic apparatus only because of two very important identities through which he presents himself in “The Marketplace” – a dandy and a flâneur. This opens possibilities for different analytical directions – borrowing, distancing, and recodification from Baudelaire’s original formulations to Benjamin’s theoretical considerations of the figure of the flâneur.¹ Dandy uses the props inherited by Baudelaire but situates them in his present moment through the mechanisms of his own aesthetic preferences.

Baudelaire describes the flâneur as follows: *The crowd is his domain, just as the air is the bird’s, and water that of the fish. His passion and his profession is to merge with the crowd. For the perfect idler, for the passionate observer it becomes an immense source of enjoyment to establish his dwelling in the throng, in the ebb and flow, the bustle, the fleeting and the infinite* (Baudelaire 2010). Lyubomir Milchev, however, rejects the model example of the

¹ In his book *История и еманципация (History and Emancipation, 2022)*, which focuses on Walter Benjamin in the context of the “critical history of philosophy”, Dimitar Bozhkov defines Benjamin’s texts on Baudelaire as marking the beginning of literary anthropology, linked to *the investigation of specific ways of using literature and the specific social contexts that influence it* (Bozhkov 2022: 84-85). Overall, Baudelaire’s figure as a flâneur is important to Benjamin, according to Bozhkov: *in relation to the exploration of the arcades, the specific form of life and perception of reality around them* (Bozhkov 2022: 85).

flâneur's practice with a series of gestures throughout his text. He is especially clear when he writes: *One of the stinking advantages of this place [the Marketplace] is getting lost in the throng but this is a story, which is, in its haughtiness, extraneous* (Milchev 2004: 102), as well as, [...] *I, on the other hand, am careful not to turn one charming abomination into vapid Parisian sensuality and can-can* (Milchev 2004: 103). We could assume, more or less within the limits of conjecture, that there are resonances of Baudelaire's conception of the flâneur's nature, *in its haughtiness, extraneous*, only to be immediately discredited, and also – in the *vapid Parisian sensuality* in the key of references to Baudelaire through the lens of *the figure of the flâneur as an established Parisian cultural myth* (Igov 2010).

The choice of the Marketplace as a fictional focus and object of exploration for the flâneur refers, more or less directly, to Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (1927-1940) and his book *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (1937-1939).² This is what we read in the chapter entitled "The Flâneur": *Strolling could hardly have assumed the importance it did without the arcades. [...] It is in this world that the flâneur is at home* (Benjamin 1997: 36-37). Further: *The bazaar is the last hangout of the flâneur*, there he *roam[s] through the labyrinth of merchandise* (Benjamin 1997: 54). In the theatrical situation in "The Marketplace", Dandy strictly follows semantic convention, placing himself among *the labyrinth of street stalls* (Milchev 2004: 117). This is a curious coincidence.

Along with the closeness to Benjamin's arcades that the flâneur charts roaming around the labyrinths of the Marketplace, another obvious circumstance poignantly sets the parodic manner of continuity: the Marketplace is too distant from the model of *industrial luxury* (Benjamin 2000: 161) of Parisian prototypes.³

The Marketplace in Sofia does not correspond to the Parisian architectural models of the nineteenth century. We find a compromising gesture in turning one's gaze towards the surrounding architecture, reminiscent of the call in *The Awakening of the View* (1995) to lift one's eyes to the buildings inspiringly towering over *the layer of plastic cups* (Milchev 1995: 48-49). The use of lexical items, such as stucco, gargoyles, pilasters, loggias, etc., although at first provoking bewilderment because of their figurative overload reminiscent of pompous verbosity, is a purposeful aesthetic play with architecture. And playing with architecture could be thought of as playing with the *set*.

It is curious that Benjamin also makes use of theatrical means of expression to find in Baudelaire's contact what causes him to experience "enjoyment", *the spectacle of the crowd* (my emphasis) (Benjamin 1997: 59).⁴ This circumstance has the potential to open various ideational interpretations and implications of the urban multitude as part of a form of performance aimed at those who can read it as such, to the *flâneur as a painter*. Baudelaire, the conventional flâneur, however, stands at a distance, alienated from the crowd – *the enjoyment of this society is enjoyment to someone who had already half withdrawn from it*

² Walter Benjamin pays great attention to Baudelaire and the figure of the flâneur in the project to which he dedicated the rest of his life: *the exploration of the urban culture in Paris from the middle of the nineteenth century, built around a structural element from the city's architectural landscape [...]. The arcades blooming in the urban architecture of the city during the 1820s and 1830s are pedestrian zones which, compared to most streets, are not used to pass from one place to another, but are mainly used for walking and shopping* (Igov 2010).

³ The phrase is from *An Illustrated Guide to Paris*, quoted in Benjamin.

⁴ Lyubomir Milchev also defines the theatrical situation as a "spectacle" in one of the quoted excerpts from "The Marketplace" (Milchev 2004: 106).

(Benjamin 1997: 59). Lyubomir Milchev uses this potential and develops it as a whimsical theatrical situation in which the dwellers of the Marketplace preserve their status as participants in a spectacle but Dandy's deliberately provocative artistic thought introduces the figures of the audience and the director and presents himself as a flâneur who not only has a predilection for a peculiar self-reflexivity but also participates in the spectacle – the distance is broken.

In Benjamin, this distance, essential for the flâneur, is related to the mechanism of standardisation through the act of observation (Bozhkov 2022: 139). Impervious to being accommodated within fixed models, the flâneur *reads the aura of the surrounding world* (Bozhkov 2022: 137). However, as a flâneur, Dandy draws his conclusions about the characters of the inhabitants of “The Marketplace” while following and breaking the principle of the distanced position of observation.

Another instance of ironic wordplay makes a similar allusion. In his reasoning, in line with market capitalism, Benjamin sees the flâneur in *the situation of the commodity* – a situation predetermined by his anonymity and distance from the crowd (Benjamin 1997: 55).⁵ It should be noted that such a position in Dandy's case is impossible: hypothetically speaking, he could take advantage of his distance and separation from the crowd to deeply experience his detached directorial presence. Dandy, however, stops and talks to the city's characters, and, on the whole, participates more or less actively in their performance. This role is determined by his intervention as an actor. For example, on encountering the salesman of lightbulbs who *carried under his arm a thick volume of The History of Bulgaria (academic reading)*, Dandy muses, *[t]his athletic snob has decided to draw a thin line between himself and the rest of the throng with his thick book. Dude, I would like to tell him, you don't want to learn anything; this is just your petty pose because you can pose here, too, amid the rabble. I will show you some poses as well, some other time. Ha-ha – because I'm of the same stock!* (my emphasis) (Milchev 2004: 118). In his *pose* of self-reflexivity, Dandy activates the dialectical dimension of the mechanisms of continuity and distancing: precluding all possibility to place his image within the framework of market capitalism, he, nevertheless, calls himself **stock**, creating an obvious reference to Benjamin's ideas. What is more, through the lens of market capitalism, Dandy strengthens the use of theatre's theoretical apparatus for the purposes of his theatrical performance as a flâneur. In “The Marketplace”, the flâneur abandons his *economic alibi* and assumes his theatrical role (See Bozhkov 2022: 137).

The excerpt from “The Marketplace” (Milchev 2004: 118), however, opens up a new state of continuity and distancing. What makes an impression is that as a flâneur Dandy does not conform to the basic identity markers of the flâneur established by Baudelaire in yet another major way: i.e. anonymity, since *[t]he observer is a prince enjoying his incognito wherever he goes* (Baudelaire 2010). The flâneur in “The Marketplace” stops and talks to his *actors* (which conditions his participation in the performance). Overall, he observes episodes that are stretched in time. This poses another problem: it is difficult to assess how much Dandy is immersed in momentary scenes that open the horizon of *the fleeting and the infinite* (Baudelaire 2010) during his flânerie in the Marketplace. On the other hand, in his text Lyubomir Milchev makes clear references to Baudelaire's dialectical concept of *ephemeral* and *eternal*, claiming that to grasp the meaning of a *contemplated painting or a read poem*,

⁵ For more on distance in the context of commodity fetishism in Benjamin, see Bozhkov 2022.

the only necessary thing is the power of a moment – the essence will reveal itself to the observer *all of a sudden, in an incomprehensible detail from reality, which, with an even more terrible suddenness, will pass into seemingness* (Milchev 2004: 108). These reflections on the meaning of art resonate with the ability of Baudelaire’s painter *to distil the eternal from the transitory* (Baudelaire 2010).

Using Nadezhda Stoyanova’s metaphor of the “Baudelairean garb” to which Bulgarian literature from the Interwar period turns to awaken the artistic consciousness to break with tradition and look at the fleeting as valuable in aesthetic terms” (Stoyanova 2022: 23-30), Lyubomir Milchev renews this gesture of continuity not as a fictional engagement in the logic of cultural-historical processes but for purely aesthetic reasons. This enables him to put on the Baudelairean garb and throw it away almost immediately as if it were clothes gone out of fashion. If, for Baudelaire, the lovely *should not be revealed in the classical repetition of shapes and images anchored in the past and the formalised concepts of what is ‘beautiful’* (Stoyanova 2022: 27), then in a somewhat paradoxical way, the twenty-first-century flâneur in Sofia might consider the Baudelairean garb as an old-fashioned garment precisely because of its ideological premises in “The Painter of Modern Life”. Following this key understanding of the painter’s role as a spokesman of what is aesthetically valuable in his urban surroundings, Dandy distances himself from Baudelaire’s model of the flâneur since he sees it as incompatible with the demands of the twentieth-first century on the one hand, and his aesthetic preferences, on the other. He uses it to reveal the reference and then recodify its notional value and expression. The vision of Baudelaire’s painter is a *vapid Parisian sensuality and can-can*, which could be thought of *in its haughtiness, extraneous* to the new flâneur who would use the functionality of the cultural repository solely to expose the mechanism of distancing in the course of pre-formulation and ironic exaggeration.

The fragmentary pieces in “The Marketplace” could be ideally summarised in Lyubomir Milchev’s writing in “The city, or how to extract confessions from an old house” regarding the scrutiny and reflections directed at old Sofia’s architectural heritage of the buildings rising above *the layer of plastic cups* (Milchev 1995: 48-49), which he defines as a *seriously-unserious play with the past* (Milchev 1995: 52). If in this episode, part of the book *The Awakening of the View* (1995), we trace the gaze which tries to slip out the lower level of the mundane everyday urban space, aiming upwards with a romantic charge, where it would be met with the architectural aesthetic which hides unexpected possibilities to *awaken the view*, then in “The Marketplace” the gaze is travelling provocatively and imperturbably between low and high, without the superiority of the metaphorically saturated sublime – the play has prevailed, turning the past and the present into something that could be considered a theatrical oddity, in a *slightly old-fashioned theatricality* (Milchev 2004: 105).

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