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The Death of the Cyberflâneur

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THE other day, while I was rummaging through a stack of oldish articles on the future of the Internet, an obscure little essay from 1998 — published, of all places, on a Web site called Ceramics Today — caught my eye. Celebrating the rise of the "cyberflâneur," it painted a bright digital future, brimming with playfulness, intrigue and serendipity, that awaited this mysterious online type. This vision of tomorrow seemed all but inevitable at a time when "what the city and the street were to the Flâneur, the Internet and the Superhighway have become to the Cyberflâneur."

Intrigued, I set out to discover what happened to the cyberflâneur. While I quickly found other contemporaneous commentators who believed that flânerie would flourish online, the sad state of today's Internet suggests that they couldn't have been more wrong. Cyberflâneurs are few and far between, while the very practice of cyberflânerie seems at odds with the world of social media. What went wrong? And should we worry?

Engaging the history of flânerie may be a good way to start answering these questions. Thanks to the French poet Charles Baudelaire and the German critic Walter Benjamin, both of whom viewed the flâneur as an emblem of modernity, his figure (and it was predominantly a "he") is now firmly associated with 19th-century Paris. The flâneur would leisurely stroll through its streets and especially its arcades — those stylish, lively and bustling rows of shops covered by glass roofs — to cultivate what Honoré de Balzac called "the gastronomy of the eye."

While not deliberately concealing his identity, the flâneur preferred to stroll

incognito. "The art that the flâneur masters is that of seeing without being caught looking," the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman once remarked. The flâneur was not asocial — he needed the crowds to thrive — but he did not blend in, preferring to savor his solitude. And he had all the time in the world: there were reports of flâneurs taking turtles for a walk.

The flâneur wandered in the shopping arcades, but he did not give in to the temptations of consumerism; the arcade was primarily a pathway to a rich sensory experience — and only then a temple of consumption. His goal was to observe, to bathe in the crowd, taking in its noises, its chaos, its heterogeneity, its cosmopolitanism. Occasionally, he would narrate what he saw — surveying both his private self and the world at large — in the form of short essays for daily newspapers.

It's easy to see, then, why cyberflânerie seemed such an appealing notion in the early days of the Web. The idea of exploring cyberspace as virgin territory, not yet colonized by governments and corporations, was romantic; that romanticism was even reflected in the names of early browsers ("Internet Explorer," "Netscape Navigator").

Online communities like GeoCities and Tripod were the true digital arcades of that period, trading in the most obscure and the most peculiar, without any sort of hierarchy ranking them by popularity or commercial value. Back then eBay was weirder than most flea markets; strolling through its virtual stands was far more pleasurable than buying any of the items. For a brief moment in the mid-1990s, it did seem that the Internet might trigger an unexpected renaissance of flânerie.

However, anyone entertaining such dreams of the Internet as a refuge for the bohemian, the hedonistic and the idiosyncratic probably didn't know the reasons behind the disappearance of the original flâneur.

In the second half of the 19th century, Paris was experiencing rapid and profound change. The architectural and city planning reforms advanced by Baron Haussmann during the rule of Napoleon III were particularly consequential: the demolition of small medieval streets, the numbering of buildings for administrative purposes, the establishment of wide, open, transparent boulevards (built partly to improve hygiene, partly to hamper revolutionary blockades), the proliferation of gas street lighting and the growing appeal of spending time

outdoors radically transformed the city.

Technology and social change had an effect as well. The advent of street traffic made contemplative strolling dangerous. The arcades were soon replaced by larger, utilitarian department stores. Such rationalization of city life drove flâneurs underground, forcing some of them into a sort of "internal flânerie" that reached its apogee in Marcel Proust's self-imposed exile in his cork-lined room (situated, ironically, on Boulevard Haussmann).

Something similar has happened to the Internet. Transcending its original playful identity, it's no longer a place for strolling — it's a place for getting things done. Hardly anyone "surfs" the Web anymore. The popularity of the "app paradigm," whereby dedicated mobile and tablet applications help us accomplish what we want without ever opening the browser or visiting the rest of the Internet, has made cyberflânerie less likely. That so much of today's online activity revolves around shopping — for virtual presents, for virtual pets, for virtual presents for virtual pets — hasn't helped either. Strolling through Groupon isn't as much fun as strolling through an arcade, online or off.

THE tempo of today's Web is different as well. A decade ago, a concept like the "real-time Web," in which our every tweet and status update is instantaneously indexed, updated and responded to, was unthinkable. Today, it's Silicon Valley's favorite buzzword.

That's no surprise: people like speed and efficiency. But the slowly loading pages of old, accompanied by the funky buzz of the modem, had their own weird poetics, opening new spaces for play and interpretation. Occasionally, this slowness may have even alerted us to the fact that we were sitting in front of a computer. Well, that turtle is no more.

Meanwhile, Google, in its quest to organize all of the world's information, is making it unnecessary to visit individual Web sites in much the same way that the Sears catalog made it unnecessary to visit physical stores several generations earlier. Google's latest grand ambition is to answer our questions — about the weather, currency exchange rates, yesterday's game — all by itself, without having us visit any other sites at all. Just plug in a question to the Google homepage, and your answer comes up at the top of the search results.

Whether such shortcuts harm competition in the search industry (as Google's competitors allege) is beside the point; anyone who imagines information-seeking in such purely instrumental terms, viewing the Internet as little more than a giant Q & A machine, is unlikely to construct digital spaces hospitable to cyberflânerie.

But if today's Internet has a Baron Haussmann, it is Facebook. Everything that makes cyberflânerie possible — solitude and individuality, anonymity and opacity, mystery and ambivalence, curiosity and risk-taking — is under assault by that company. And it's not just any company: with 845 million active users worldwide, where Facebook goes, arguably, so goes the Internet.

It's easy to blame Facebook's business model (e.g., the loss of online anonymity allows it to make more money from advertising), but the problem resides much deeper. Facebook seems to believe that the quirky ingredients that make flânerie possible need to go. "We want everything to be social," Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook's chief operating officer, said on "Charlie Rose" a few months ago.

What this means in practice was explained by her boss, Mark Zuckerberg, on that same show. "Do you want to go to the movies by yourself or do you want to go to the movies with your friends?" he asked, immediately answering his own question: "You want to go with your friends."

The implications are clear: Facebook wants to build an Internet where watching films, listening to music, reading books and even browsing is done not just openly but socially and collaboratively. Through clever partnerships with companies like Spotify and Netflix, Facebook will create powerful (but latent) incentives that would make users eagerly embrace the tyranny of the "social," to the point where pursuing any of those activities on their own would become impossible.

Now, if Mr. Zuckerberg really believes what he said about cinema, there is a long list of films I'd like to run by his friends. Why not take them to see "Satantango," a seven-hour, black-and-white art-house flick by the Hungarian auteur Bela Tarr? Well, because if you took an open poll of his friends, or any large enough group of people, "Satantango" would almost always lose out to something more mainstream, like "War Horse." It might not be everyone's top choice, but it won't offend, either — that's the tyranny of the social for you.

Besides, isn't it obvious that consuming great art alone is qualitatively different

from consuming it socially? And why this fear of solitude in the first place? It's hard to imagine packs of flâneurs roaming the streets of Paris as if auditioning for another sequel to "The Hangover." But for Mr. Zuckerberg, as he acknowledged on "Charlie Rose," "it feels better to be more connected to all these people. You have a richer life."

IT'S this idea that the individual experience is somehow inferior to the collective that underpins Facebook's recent embrace of "frictionless sharing," the idea that, from now on, we have to worry only about things we don't want to share; everything else will be shared automatically. To that end, Facebook is encouraging its partners to build applications that automatically share everything we do: articles we read, music we listen to, videos we watch. It goes without saying that frictionless sharing also makes it easier for Facebook to sell us to advertisers, and for advertisers to sell their wares back to us.

That might even be worth it if frictionless sharing enhanced our online experience; after all, even the 19th-century flâneur eventually confronted advertising posters and murals on his walks around town. Sadly, frictionless sharing has the same drawback as "effortless poetry": its final products are often intolerable. It's one thing to find an interesting article and choose to share it with friends. It's quite another to inundate your friends with everything that passes through your browser or your app, hoping that they will pick something interesting along the way.

Worse, when this frictionless sharing scheme becomes fully operational, we will probably read all our news on Facebook, without ever leaving its confines to visit the rest of the Web; several news outlets, including The Guardian and The Washington Post, already have Facebook applications that allow users to read their articles without even visiting their Web sites.

As the popular technology blogger Robert Scoble explained in a recent post defending frictionless sharing, "The new world is you just open up Facebook and everything you care about will be streaming down the screen."

This is the very stance that is killing cyberflânerie: the whole point of the flâneur's wanderings is that he does not know what he cares about. As the German writer Franz Hessel, an occasional collaborator with Walter Benjamin, put it, "in order to engage in flânerie, one must not have anything too definite in mind."

Compared with Facebook's highly deterministic universe, even Microsoft's unimaginative slogan from the 1990s — "Where do you want to go today?" — sounds excitingly subversive. Who asks that silly question in the age of Facebook?

According to Benjamin, the sad figure of the sandwich board man was the last incarnation of the flâneur. In a way, we have all become such sandwich board men, walking the cyber-streets of Facebook with invisible advertisements hanging off our online selves. The only difference is that the digital nature of information has allowed us to merrily consume songs, films and books even as we advertise them, obliviously.

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