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**Article:**
Aroles, Jeremy and Küpers, Wendelin (2022) Flânerie as a methodological practice for explorative re-search in digital worlds. Culture and Organization. pp. 398-411. ISSN: 1475-9551

https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2022.2042538

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ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gsco20

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**To cite this article:** Jeremy Aroles & Wendelin Küpers (2022): Flânerie as a methodological practice for explorative re-search in digital worlds, Culture and Organization, DOI: 10.1080/14759551.2022.2042538

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2022.2042538

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Published online: 22 Feb 2022.

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CULTURE AND ORGANIZATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2022.2042538

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# Flânerie as a methodological practice for explorative re-search in digital worlds

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper focuses on the figure of the flâneur and sets out to explore how the practice of flânerie might offer social researchers a different way of engaging with digital worlds. It is articulated around two main interests: the relationship of the flâneur to digital worlds and the theoretical and methodological implications of envisioning the practice of flânerie as a way of engaging with digital worlds. This paper contends that flânerie could inform and creatively enrich our practices as social researchers in two ways: enabling us to approach differently the exploration of digital worlds and leading us to investigate phenomena that might have remained concealed through more conventional methodologies. Flânerie, we argue, offers the possibility of a more open and explorative approach to digital research. Our paper outlines implications of positioning flânerie as a methodological practice and reflects on potential of flânerie in the exploration of digital worlds.

**ARTICLE HISTORY**
Received 21 April 2020
Accepted 8 February 2022

**KEYWORDS**
Flâneur; flânerie; digital worlds; time; place; methodology

> To stroll is to vegetate, to flâner is to live. (Balzac 1950, 619)

> 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—impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. (Baudelaire 1972, 399)

## Introduction

Manifesting an emblem of modernity, the flâneur has typically been portrayed as the quintessential figure of the Parisian life of the first half of the nineteenth century (Burton 1994), with Baudelaire conceiving the flâneur as the visionary artist-poet of the modern metropolis (Gluck 2003). Contrasting ideas and images have proliferated around the flâneur over time (Shields 1994; Tester 1994). This is particularly noticeable through the variety of writings connected to the figure of the flâneur, ranging from mid nineteenth-century *Physiologies* (Huart 1841) to the depiction of the flâneur as an artist in more literary works (Balzac 1976–1981), who interpreted *flânerie* as 'the gastronomy of the eye'. In turn, this has led to a marked confusion with respect to the contours of the figure of the flâneur (Tester 1994).

The flâneur is more than a mere literary figure thriving in the work of Baudelaire, Poe or even Balzac. Rather, the flâneur embodies an aesthetics of life, a form of positionality with respect to the maelstrom

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of modern, urban lives and a particular disposition to the world (Simmel 1950). While at a certain level, the flâneur might be seen as 'that aimless stroller who loses himself in the crowd, who has no destination and goes wherever caprice or curiosity directs his or her steps' (White 2001, 16), there is clearly more to the image of the flâneur than that of idleness, haphazardness and deviance. Jenks and Neves (2000) plead for the liberation of the flâneur from these negative images, as they purport that insightful connection can be drawn between the flâneur and contemporary social research.

The flâneur, as a 'conceptual persona', has been mobilised in different ways in various streams of academic research, in particular within the ethnographic literature. An important distinction is made by Coates (2017, 30), who differentiates between the flâneur as a *social category* 'applied to what those we study do' and the flâneur as a *methodological figure*. Aligning onto the latter, many authors have highlighted the potential of flânerie for urban anthropology (Jenks and Neves 2000; Kramer and Short 2011; Nuvolati 2014), with the flâneur being depicted as an 'embryonic urban sociologist' (Bairner 2006, 126), who offers an insightful reflective gaze on urban realities (Soukup 2013). Additionally, the flâneur has been assimilated to a performative ethnographer (Köpping 2005), to a social researcher (Bairner 2006), and even to the 'primordial ethnographer' (McLaren 1997, 144).

It is widely acknowledged that Walter Benjamin (1997) has played a key role in establishing and reviving the image of the flâneur in social research (Coates 2017; Frisby 1994; Gluck 2003; Tester 1994). Though, for Benjamin (1997), the flâneur is a bygone figure in as much as capitalism has completely changed the metropolis, thus dissolving the mystery and the intricacy of urban realities. In other words, the mutations of urban spaces in the face of the rise of capitalism have propelled the disappearance of the authentic flâneur, for that there is no space left for him or her to explore, no uncanny dreamlike contacts with otherness to expose to. Contemporary discussions on the ways in which cities are set to develop may cast doubt on the possibility for the flâneur to 're-conquer' urban spaces someday. This does not mean that the image of the flâneur cannot be mobilised meaningfully as a research endeavour in the study of urban spaces (see Jenks and Neves 2000; Kramer and Short 2011), but rather that the transfiguration of urban spaces may propel the flâneur towards the exploration of other and new kind of spaces. Accordingly, the question that ensues revolves around the position or relevance of the figure of the flâneur in an increasingly digitalised world. Featherstone (1998, 911) expressed a similar concern regarding the relationship between the flâneur and digital worlds:

> What is the significance if we replace the windscreen with the television or computer screen, so that the viewer is not in a vehicle moving through a landscape, but sits in front of the screen which is used to transport images and information to the recipient?

Correspondingly, this paper is articulated around two principal concerns: the relationship of the flâneur to digital worlds and the theoretical and methodological implications of envisioning flânerie as a way of engaging with digital (and technologically mediated) worlds. The two main research questions underlying this paper are: Could digital worlds represent an alternative to the 'urban reality' for the flâneur? What insight can be gained through the positioning of flânerie as a methodological endeavour in the study of digital worlds? While it may be argued that Baudelaire's flâneur belongs to one specific temporal and spatial Parisian context, the ways in which this figure has been conjured up in some other contexts, calls into question this historical boundarisation. Even more, it opens up new discussions relating to the 'identity' of the present-day flâneur and to the possibilities brought by this new figure in relation to the exploration of digital worlds.

This paper suggests that the complex relationship between strolling and conducting an investigation, which constitutes the predicaments of flânerie, can act as a creative and inspiring practice in the study of contemporary digital worlds, understood here as highly immersive virtual environments developed and accessible through information and communication technologies. As the flâneur is situated at the interface of contrasting forces (absence/presence, object/subject, ephemeral/universal, etc.), such constant oscillation can yield productive ruptures or fractions that may assist us in the exploration of digital realities. Digital worlds are not one-dimensional and univocal (Boellstorff 2008;

Hine 2015), and the practice of flânerie may thus enable revealing creatively different velocities, textures and intensities that underlie the making and assembling of digital worlds. Furthermore, features of digital spheres may be related to key characteristics of the flâneur: voyeuristic tendencies, taste for anonymity, disdain towards the commodification of time and concern with being *in* the crowd, rather than *with* the crowd (Tester 1994). Enacting a kind of dialectics of being an observer–participant, the flâneur's active participation in urban and alike in digital life-worlds is simultaneously connected to expressing a critical attitude towards the uniformity, speed, and anonymity of modern life in the city and digital realms. Importantly, the reading of the flâneur developed here is just a sensibility to a reinterpretation of the figure of the flâneur, linked to our digital age, and by no means constitutes an exhaustive discussion of the same and its practice.

If we recall that the domain of the flâneur is 'the ebb and flow, the bustle, the fleeting and the infinite' (Baudelaire 1972, 399), in the context of a transforming space and time of city-scapes, we may argue that there is an analogical potential for flânerie in cyber-spaces. Furthermore, adopting the practices of the flâneur may allow us to engage in a less reductive and regimented form compared to conventional empirical research that might be more akin to reveal alternative access, possibilities, images/imageries or findings, when exploring digital realities. As such, flânerie might in some ways enrich or complement ethnographic investigations by offering different pathways through digital labyrinths. By examining the relevance of the figure of the flâneur to social research to study of digital world, this paper sets to contribute to on-going debates around the rejuvenation of (digital) research methodologies (Back and Puwar 2012; Hine 2015; Law 2004; Pink 2009).

The paper is structured as follows. The next section provides a brief introduction to the figure of the flâneur. This is followed by a concise review of the methodological literature, in particular ethnographic, that has engaged with the study of digital worlds. This allows us to highlight ways in which the practice of flânerie could complement ethnographic inquiries. The fourth section develops a reflection on how flânerie can be mobilised in the exploration of digital worlds. The fifth section formalises the previous one by providing both methodological and theoretical implications of positioning flânerie as a methodological practice. Finally, a brief conclusion summarises the potential of flânerie in the exploration of digital worlds.

## The figure of the flâneur

Attached to the Parisian life of the second half of the nineteenth century (Gluck 2003), the flâneur is most notably expressed in the literary work of Charles Baudelaire (Tester 1994). As noted earlier, a sense of elusiveness and mystery surrounds the character of the flâneur, leading to a wide array of sometimes contradictory images and connotations (Coates 2017). For instance, Gluck (2003) distinguishes between two central images of the flâneur encountered in literary works: the popular flâneur, who epitomises the ideals of a dynamic urban culture and sensibility, and the *avant-garde* flâneur, who embodies the aesthetics vision of innovative artists and poets. Given this ambiguity, it might be more adequate to interrogate flânerie as a disposition or as a practice rather than attempting to list features, traits or the actual contours of the flâneur.

Ferguson (1994) notes that the practice of flânerie presupposes an urban epistemology, with the flâneur setting 'to tap eagerly into urban energies, to absorb readily unforeseen novelties, and to engage playfully and ruefully with the mingling of old and new typical of modern cities' (Kramer and Short 2011, 323). The flâneur conjures up, or represents, a poetic vision of the celebrated Parisian Arcades around which (s)he would endlessly gravitate (Benjamin 1997, 1999). Importantly, the flâneur was not only the image of a particular Parisian way of life, but also that of 'modernity' (Ferguson 1994; Mazlish 1994). In Baudelaire's writing, there is no ambiguity regarding the gender of the flâneur (Tester 1994). The flâneur embodies a masculine gaze on the public spaces of Paris (Jenks and Neves 2000), while the term 'flâneuse' only seldom appears in the academic literature (see D'Souza and McDonough 2006; Wolff 1985). Importantly, the flâneuse was always implicitly present on the streets of Paris, but inexorably amalgamated with women walking the streets.

The flâneur has no interest in the private spheres of life (Gluck 2003); these are devoid of any form of excitement or pleasure. It is in the public spheres that flâneurs can experiment with the metropolitan landscapes of art and existence and indulge themselves in the maelstrom of urban living (Benjamin 1997). In Baudelaire's words, 'the man who loves to lose himself in a crowd enjoys feverish delights that the egoist locked up in himself as in a box, and the slothful man like a mollusc in his shell, will be eternally deprived of' (Baudelaire 1970, 20). As mentioned before, the flâneur is 'the man *of* the crowd as opposed to the man *in* the crowd' (Tester 1994, 3). This distinction is crucial to appreciate the relation of the flâneur to his/her environment and surroundings as the flâneur is *different* to the crowd in which (s)he bathes. In other words, while the flâneur can, without any difficulty, immerse into the masses, (s)he retains his/her own identity, individuality and distinctiveness, and enjoys full anonymity (Ferguson 1994); Accordingly, 'the art the flâneur masters is that of seeing without being caught looking' (Bauman 1994, 141).

The figure of the flâneur is critically positioned at the interface of several dialectics and ambivalences; the flâneur can be seen as oscillating between elitism and identification with the poor and the marginalised (Jenks and Neves 2000), between the position of a mere stroller and that of a true detective (Featherstone 1998; Frisby 1994), between the 'here' and 'there', between the 'now' and 'then' (Bauman 1994), etc. In that sense, we can recognise how the flâneur appears as a figure of alienation (Coates 2017) in as much as (s)he can neither form close and durable associations with the crowd, nor content himself/herself with the identical repetition of modern life experiences. This is precisely the essence of the flâneur; 'to be away from home and yet to feel at home anywhere, to be at the very centre of the world, and yet to be unseen of the world' (Baudelaire 1972, 400).

As previously noted, Benjamin (1997, 1999) contends that capitalism has changed urban spaces in such a way that there seems to be any space left for the sort of exploration that underlies the activities of the flâneur. Thus, the flâneur is a kind of 'victim' of the disillusionment of modernity. Despite this prediction, various authors have argued that flânerie is not 'extinguished' (Kramer and Short 2011). This is demonstrated through the burgeoning of academic research around the promises of flânerie in the re-thinking of the practices of urban ethnography (Bairner 2006; Laviolette 2014; Lucas 2008; Shortell and Brown 2014). Moreover, the movement of the flâneur into digital spheres manifests another timely perspective (Simon 2006; Skees 2010). On that regard, Featherstone (1998, 921) notes that 'in contrast to the slow loitering of the *flâneur*, who has to wait to reach the street-corner to change direction, the electronic *flâneur* can, so to speak, jump out of the street into another street at any time'. This image of the 'electronic' flaneur, prompts us to examine the literature on digital research methods and in particular on ethnographic-inspired explorations of digital worlds in order to reflect on how the flâneur might complement existing practices and open up new avenues in the study of digital worlds.

## Exploring digital worlds – ethnographically

The development of a wide array of information communication technologies (ICTs) along with the rise of digital spaces have triggered the blossoming of new areas of inquiry for social scientists (Miller and Slater 2000; Shaviro 2003). The exploration of virtual worlds has spawned a wide array of topics, such as identity construction (Turkle 1995), gender (Kendall 2002), ethnicity and race (Nakamura 2013), embodiment (Taylor 2002), online romance (Ben-Ze'ev 2004), to name but a few. Alongside these different issues, concerns and areas of inquiry, the emergence of digital spaces has called forth a rethinking of existing research methodologies (Gatson and Zweerink 2004; Hallett and Barber 2014; Hine 2000; Jones 1998; Robinson and Schulz 2009). This does not only concern the wide array of ethical considerations pertaining to the study of online spaces (Driscoll and Gregg 2010; Wilson and Peterson 2002), but also the very methods that can be deployed to explore these new 'realities'. Within that context, a particularly fruitful line of inquiry has revolved around the use of transposition of ethnographic inquiry to the study of digital worlds.

The study of digital worlds has occasionally suffered from a lack of terminological clarity (Aroles 2018; Driscoll and Gregg 2010). This is evidenced by the wealth of terms used to refer to ethnographic approaches to the study of digital worlds: online ethnography, netnography (Kozinets 1998), multisited cyberethnography (Pearce and Artemesia 2009), virtual anthropology (Boellstorff 2008), ethnography of online/digital/virtual communities. Furthermore, the recourse to ethnography in the study of digital spaces has nurtured numerous debates (Beaulieu 2004; Hakken 1999; Jacobson 1999; Miller and Slater 2000), with some researchers claiming that there is a strong incompatibility between digital spaces and ethnographic practices (Aycock and Buchignani 1995; Castronova 2006). Adopting an obverse stance, others have asserted that the study of digital worlds neatly falls within the remit of ethnographic research (Murthy 2008; Nardi 2010; Pearce and Artemesia 2009; Taylor 2009), with Boellstorff et al. (2012, 4) arguing that 'ethnographic methodology translates elegantly and fluidly to virtual worlds'.

Robinson and Schulz (2009) outline three phases in the evolution of the relationship between ethnographic inquiry and the internet, namely pioneering, legitimising and multi-modal. The first phase focused on the study of online identities as clearly distinctive from offline identities, thus emphasising the difference between online and offline spaces (Rheingold 1993; Turkle 1995). The second phase revolved around the exploration of the translation of 'offline' ethnographic methods into digital spaces; this movement was concerned with justifying the relevance of ethnography in the study of digital worlds (Kendall 2002; Markham 1998). Finally, the third phase consists in multimodal forms of ethnographic research that rely on both face-to-face and mediated interactions (Boellstorff 2008; Humphreys 2007).

The profusion of discussions around methodologies for digital research (Dicks et al. 2005) echoes a wider call, within social sciences, for the rejuvenation of research methodologies (Back and Puwar 2012; Lury and Wakeford 2012; Pink 2009; Rabinow et al. 2008). Our contribution here is inscribed in and responds to this call to revitalise research methodologies through the articulation of alternative empirical sensibilities, which can open up different avenues of thought in the study of digital worlds. As noted by Toulouse (1998, 6), the way in which digital spaces operate 'defies conventional research methodologies' and this is where the suggestion to explore the potential of flânerie in the study of digital worlds is located. As such, the question here is how the practice of flânerie can contribute to ethnographic research in the exploration of digital worlds. Accordingly, the following section explores the 'methodological' potential connected to the adoption of the flâneur in the study of digital spheres, when put in dialogue with ethnographic inquiries.

## Flânerie in the exploration of digital worlds

### *Flânerie as disposition for and interpretation of being in the (digital) world*

Flânerie is more than a mere literary fantasy or the incarnation of hedonistic aesthetics or elitist aesthetisation; it constitutes a particular disposition and thus genuine mode of being in and towards the world. It is precisely this dispositional status and mode of being-in-the world that provides a base for our suggestion to mobilise the flâneur in the exploration of digital worlds. The practice of flânerie offers a distinctive reading and interpretation of modernity for that the flâneur is always 'out of sync' with the conventions of their time, thus developing some sort of an *avant-garde* glimpse on society. Being 'out of sync' is an important characteristic of flânerie as a way of approaching and engaging with digital worlds. For instance, while digital worlds require a deep immersion from their users, the flâneur can see things differently as they do not become attached to these worlds. The flâneur moves from one space to another, guided by their instinct, implicit knowing and curiosity, while remaining reflectively apart. This intricate tension between being 'in' and 'out' may enable not only different forms of questioning, but also alternative quests and ways of exploring various phenomena.

This detachment and in-betweenness, albeit problematic in other approaches (e.g. conventional ethnographic research), is key to the success of the flâneur in the exploration of digital worlds. By taking some distance from the object of concern or inquiry, the flâneur may be able to suspend and circumvent established power relations and venture onto new sociological imageries. From a more 'methodological' standpoint, this implies that what might be erased or silenced under the imperatives of scholarship, rigour and clarity, could potentially re-emerge through an engagement with the predicaments of flânerie in studying digital worlds. For instance, as we research digital spaces, we might wander off and explore other online spaces and platforms (Twitter, various online accounts, papers, forums, etc.). This detouring may disrupt the flow of our work, but can also lead to more or different connections, associations and ideas. In that sense, this paper calls for the mobilisation of the 'transgressive potentialities of the flâneur' (Coates 2017, 37) in the study of digital worlds in order to develop more creative lines or spiralling moves of inquiries.

Besides, one may argue that there are some key differences between the flâneurs of the mid nineteenth-century and those exploring digital worlds: for the flâneur exploring digital spaces, physical distances have become irrelevant, and perhaps more importantly, while the historical flâneur was faced with the finitude of the city, the digital flâneur embraces the limitless possibilities of digital spaces (Featherstone 1998). Another important element to consider is the fact that flânerie as a practice is a sensuous way of being in the world, marked by the sights, sounds, smells and general maelstrom of the city. In essence, the flâneur was a walker and thus constantly roaming through the streets. Analogically, as the digital flâneur roams online, they are bombarded with visual and auditory stimuli which, while not amounting to the sensuous richness of the city, does re-create a form of digitally mediated embodied immersion.

Furthermore, both figures appear to be caught in complex issues of power, race and gender. Simon (2006, 62–63) notes that '21st-century flânerie is no less gendered, raced, and classed than the urban Victorian precedent mythologized by Baudelaire'. The question then arises concerning the status of the flâneuse, as being a female equivalent to the flâneur or a different figure altogether (Elkin 2017; Wolff 1985). The methodological question this issue of gendered, classed and raced interpretation raises is whether it is possible to interpret the flâneur as a 'position' or 'role' that, in principle, can be occupied by anyone – male or female, (urban or provincial, black or white) – in a way that would position the flâneur as a personification of moral cosmopolitanism based on universal respect and equality (van Leeuwen 2019). Online communities often enact a divisive and polarise discourse that provides a fertile ground for misogynistic views, potentially re-gendering the digital flâneuse. The question then is how does the flaneuse respond to the online discursive construction of gendered identities (see Cook and Hasmath 2014)?

## *Flânerie, temporality and interactions*

The flâneur presents a particular relation to time: they can be seen to transcend time (Benjamin 1997; Dodd and Wajcman 2017) for that they are not affected by the commodification of time and are carried by their own rhythm. In that sense, the flâneur 'has a privileged perspective, and is able to see textures and details in the cityscape that the modern type is too harried to notice' (Dodd and Wajcman 2017, 20). By adopting a different rhythm, which is out of phase with the increased velocity of digital worlds and connectivity, the 'cyber-flâneur' is in the position of seeing through the surface of commodification, acceleration and standardisation. Accordingly, the distinctiveness of the flâneur lies in that they can afford to take the time in a society where time has arguably become one of the most precious commodities. In that sense, the practice of flânerie strongly resonates with Berg and Seeber's (2016) manifesto for the slow professor that suggests challenging the culture of speed that dominates present-day academia in order to fundamentally rethink the predicaments of research and scholarship. As researchers, but also as dwellers of digital worlds, we are constantly pressed for time. Furthermore, the flâneur allows for a different form of interaction with and reflection on being embodied in digital worlds. Exploring online spaces through the gaze of the flâneur

redefines objectives and priorities as the focus will revolve around being in the crowd and silently observing, rather than attempting to differentiate oneself ostensibly. Experimenting with various velocities and rhythms, coupled with the flâneur's relative detachment from the society of their time, can unveil different aspects of digital worlds, that is aspects that might otherwise remain unnoticed or fail to attract attention and be registered as worthy of interest.

As a consequence, the flâneur does not follow a pre-established grid of action when they set to explore a particular space. As noted by Bauman (1994, 138), 'the aim of the present move is yet to come, and the aim of the aimless move is to prompt it or lure it or force it to come'. In that sense, the flâneur follows signs and intensities as they go along and do not restrict themselves in the exploration of spaces. This iterative engagement with digital worlds testifies to the importance of the notion of instinct and intuition in the practice of flânerie; the flâneur is primarily an instinctive and intuitive explorer, who rejoices in the discovery of new landscapes or the same with new eyes. While ethnography entails a deep and lasting engagement and proximity with the 'community' studied, flânerie involves 'jumping' from one world to the other or dancing between them, allowing the researcher to follow traces, trails and signs, regardless of where these might lead them. A corollary of this point is that while ethnography may revolve around the ideal of going or 'becoming native', there is a diametrically opposite movement with the flâneur. They rather tend to become a foreigner (Shields 1994) and keep a distance to the crowd, where they never belong and never will.

The flâneur's engagement with digital worlds is distinctive and reflects their reluctance to satisfy themselves with the identical repetition of the same. Furthermore, the flâneur might unexpectedly leave the digital realm for the so-called 'real' world. This means or implies that the flâneur 'challenges the very feasibility of such a boundary since both of these spaces appear to be interwoven and subjects of mutual penetration' (Berg 2012, 182). By challenging sequential and linear endeavours in the study of digital worlds, the flâneur can engage in the smoothing of research practices, instead of remaining trapped within the striated grid of methodological practices (see Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

As previously mentioned, the figure of the flâneur is typically portrayed through a tension between the mere act of strolling and that of conducting a proper investigation. On that matter, Benjamin (1989, 458) noted that 'the figure of the flâneur prefigures that of the detective'. Similar to a detective, the flâneur is constantly looking for clues in the crowd and explores various paths and tracks. In a sense, flânerie then presents some affiliations not only with abductive reasoning as a methodology of discovery, but also with the relational semiotics e.g. as further developed through the actor-network theory. However, the difference is that flânerie appears less 'regimented' and systematic than approaches inspired by these relational approaches. As mentioned before, the flâneur demiurgically creates his/her own temporality and sketches his/her own path. On that regard, Köpping (2005) notes that the flâneur is particularly open to the unfamiliar and mysterious of encounters. Following that line of thought, we posit the flâneur as 'an intrepid explorer of the modern and its consequences' (Mazlish 1994, 57). The productive tension between strolling and investigating, that underlies the activities of the flâneur, can be seen to amount to a nomadic form of investigation (Aroles and McLean 2017). In such undertaking, different aspects of digital worlds and realities can become exposed and unveiled, with the flâneur emerging as 'a figure of excess, who appears to have escaped, at least temporarily, social norms' (Shields 1994, 78). Put differently, the ways in which flâneurs ignore temporal contingencies allow them to explore digital worlds through differential rhythms, velocities and textures. As flâneurs navigate the labyrinthine trails of digital worlds, they are more akin to engage in subversive practices and flirt with the enigmatic, unexpected and unknown.

### *Observing in anonymity: a critical, metic stance*

Furthermore, the flâneur is always in the position of looking without being seen, watching without being watched or noticed (Gluck 2003); 'the observer is a prince enjoying his incognito wherever he goes' (Baudelaire 1972, 400). In that sense, the flâneur might be akin to the voyeur for that (s)he

rejoices in the spectacle of the crowd applied to the cyberspace the crowd would be for instance players in a server or members of an online community. Such positioning shows possibilities for translating this figure to digital worlds that can, to some extent, grant a high level of anonymity to both researchers and digital world dwellers. This is for instance the case with digital worlds connected to online games: the flâneur can quietly observe the crowd (that is engaging in the practice of 'lurking') and act as if they were away from the keyboard. This can potentially create serious ethical issues, notably around consent and privacy. However, it is worth recalling that the flâneur has no interest in the individualities underlying the 'crowd' and in that sense, their writing cannot readily be associated to any individual. Put differently, what interests the flaneur is not so much individual tasks, ideas or endeavours, but rather the atmosphere that emanates from a given collective; as such, from a methodological standpoint, the practice of flânerie does not represent an ethical threat. For the flâneur, this atmosphere emanates from 'the use of performative digitally produced visualization of the kinesthetic and synesthetic qualities of an imagined organizational space' (Jørgensen and Holt 2019, 674). Atmospheres influence, or perhaps condition, bodily affects and interactions between flaneurs and fellow digital dwellers. Importantly though, the flâneur is always prone to distance themselves from fellow digital dwellers. Therefore, the flâneur appears to be well-suited to the intricacies of digital spaces, for that these allow researchers to uphold that distant relation to the crowd.

While flânerie has occasionally been dismissed as lacking rigour or seriousness (White 2001) and equated to nothing more than idle strolling, it actually entails a proper reflexivity and learnable cultivation and as such is not simply an inherited skill (Featherstone 1998; Frisby 1994). In other words, one *is* not simply a flâneur, but can *become* one through proper engagements with the 'craft of flânerie'. Accordingly, the practice of flânerie is inscribed in a complex apprenticeship.

Stavrides (2010) makes a similar point with regards to the concept of *metis*. Metis refers to 'a way of knowing' that implies a complex but very coherent body of mental attitudes and intellectual behaviour which combine flair, wisdom, forethought, subtlety of mind, deception, resourcefulness, vigilance, opportunism, various skills, and experience acquired over the years' (Vernant, Detienne, and Loyd 1978, 3–4). Metis refers to a form of knowing that remains in the space between 'light and dark', thus oscillating between *logos* and *chaos*, and thriving on the complexities, ambiguities and paradoxes that come with simplified abstractions. Engaging with the wisdom of metis may help us unlearn our dependence on light, clarity and conceptual grasp and, perhaps, allow for a re-evaluation of the importance of oblique forms of action.

Metis thus appears as a responsive cunningness and 'situated resourcefulness', as its enactment is wholly circumstantial, and spontaneously processing intuitive, creative responses to circumstances (Mackay, Zundel, and Alkirwi 2014, 6). It is a fluid form of knowing that 'works *between*, or rather underneath, the formal order of concepts' (Mackay, Zundel, and Alkirwi 2014, 6) exploiting (or manipulating) the complexities, ambiguities and paradoxes that come with simplified abstractions (in order to discord with practical understanding of the world). As metis occupies a space in-between (Mackay, Zundel, and Alkirwi 2014), it suffices for metic actors to remain in-between conceptual, situational and skilful kinds of knowledge, able to trade their differences off against each other and benefit from the arbitrage (Mackay, Zundel, and Alkirwi 2014, 15). Flânerie can be conceptualised as embodied *metic in-betweening* that is intersecting with diverse temporalities, paces and places in a city-scape (Edensor 2010) and thus cyberscapes of digital worlds ('digi-scapes'). In a metic spirit, performative realizations allow the foreseeable and unforeseeable to occur, an exchange between repetition and deviation.

## Theoretical and methodological implications

### *The notions of data and time*

Flânerie-inspired research takes empirical material not as 'data' (i.e. as distinct fragments of information), but as a terrain where certain things can be found that are capable of yielding meaning,

insights and even pleasure (Gabriel 2015). Thus, data are not seen as facts or representations of facts but records of particular types of social encounter (Gabriel 2015, 3) in and through action, involving active and inquiring imagination that persistently asks three related questions 'Why?' 'What if?' and 'So what?' (Gabriel 2015). In this sense, working through empirical material, is more like walking perceptively, observantly and astutely in a spirit/ethos of flânerie. The practice of walking thus takes its rightful place among a range of (largely non-cognitive) techniques designed to encourage us to be aware of phenomenological processes of coming-into-being (Solnit 2001) and learning from and in relation to them. Flânerie thus entails an immersive form of experimentation into the making of social interactions and encounters. From that angle, flâneuristic research seems particularly suited to the exploration of the creation (or dissolution) of online communities.

Furthermore, by ignoring the commodification of time, flâneurs materialise the possibility to explore spaces through different rhythms (Dodd and Wajcman 2017). Rhythms actually provide a way to engage with the interrelation of space, time and identity through the practice of walking (see Middleton 2009). This conceptualisation of time is connected to the flâneur's relation to space as cyper-space: the digital flâneur embraces the seemingly limitless possibilities of digital worlds, as they literally move from one world to the other, without attaching to the crowd, seemingly effortlessly and 'innocently receptive' (Bauman 1994, 139). While integrating the convergence of time, space and new technologies, the flâneur and flânerie in digital worlds allow reflecting on and modifying research practices and thus contribute to meaningful research in the twenty-first century.

## *Flânerie as creative research practice*

Through flânerie, researchers can learn to value again instinct, intuition and playfulness as the researcher as flâneur does not follow clearly established or linear patterns of actions or movements. Likewise social researchers, engaging with flânerie, set to de-territorialize the striating forces of methodological frameworks. In that sense, flânerie would consist in an approach to empirical research characterised by a different orientation and a particular inclination for exploration. These modes may destabilise practices of social researchers and perhaps draw into exploring objects and pathways of inquiry into the digital that might be inaccessible or concealed through more conventional methodologies. Here again, the value of flânerie might reside in its ability to uncover what is hidden and also to take, as object of inquiry, topics that are, otherwise, left aside.

A flâneuristic research practice can bring researchers in closer touch with dynamic interactions and processes, as they occur in digital worlds, while ascertaining the heterogeneous and multifaceted dimensionalities involved. In much the same way that flâneurs do, researchers would relate to and experiment with uncertainty, ambiguity, novelty and complexity in various ways to open up and reveal alter-native possibilities of knowing. Such orientation serves as a helpful antidote to reductionist, reifying approaches or one-sided analytical-rational methods and helps to develop a reflexive reworking of subject-object distinctions with its knowledge problematics (Cunliffe 2011). Overall, a flâneuristic 'inter-practice' (Küpers 2011) of research enacts the literal meaning of method as 'following along a way' i.e. 'meta ton hodon', including a-causal, non-reductionistic and non-reifying approaches towards a post-Cartesian understanding of the phenomenon explored.

To further approach and interpret phenomena in an integral way, flâneuristic research needs to become a more multi-, inter- and trans-disciplinary endeavour. As such, it is called to open up to using approaches and findings from or collaborating with other disciplines, such as social and organisational sciences and humanities, as well as natural sciences. Taking research itself as a form of flâneuristic organising and relational practice, and as part of a methodological pluralism – first-, second- and third-person perspectives in singular or plural forms – and cross-disciplinary bridging helps show the significance of affection and various embodied issues, sensual processes and sensed realities as entangled.

Following an integral methodological pluralism and epistemology, a flâneuristic research not only provides a shared language for addressing basic patterns and problems, but is also careful not to oversimplify, isolate or fragment the aspired understanding and interpretations. Offering multidimensional perspectives and developmental orientations, such integral flânerie is capable of illuminating blind spots, reductionistic pictures of reality and mistaken or only partially true assumptions. Integral modelling that follows flâneuristic moves helps generate sensitivity to contextual factors and innovative conceptual flexibility to develop empirically supported new ideas and theories through in-depth and longitudinal explorations.

To explore bodily-mediated spatial, temporal and cultural realities and transitory, often tacit experiences in digital worlds, sensually oriented methodology and aesthetic ethnographies and interpretations (Stoller 1997; Warren 2008) as well as art-related research in the sense of a scholAR-Tistry (Knowles, Promislow, and Cole 2007) – 'a hybrid practice that combines tools used by the literary, visual, and/or performing arts with tools used by educators and other social scientists to explore the human condition' (Cahnmann 2006, 343) – are vital. Flâneuristic research is 'fully alive and creative when wide-eyed and involved, when it sees, touches, hears, tastes, and feels' (Sandelands and Srivatsan 1993, 19), thus when it is using and refining embodied sensory faculties. Although such arts-informed or flâneuristic research runs counter to more conventional research endeavours with their more sequential, and compartmentalised forms, the challenge will be to keep an internal consistency, coherence and communicability as well as to advance some kind of generative patterned insights and knowledge that reflects the multidimensional, complex, dynamic, inter-subjective, and multi-contextual nature of experiences and realities in relation to digital worlds.

### *Writing/expressing research differently*

Concerned with lived experience (Gluck 2003; Tester 1994), the flâneur epitomises a different way engaging with the activities of reading, observing and writing (Frisby 1994). This is an important point to consider, as demonstrated by the growing literature, across social sciences, which sets to engage with different ways of writing empirical accounts (Helin 2019; Pullen and Rhodes 2008). In that sense, the ways in which empirical accounts are written are better not be disconnected from practices of social researchers. Otherwise, they would run the risk of positioning the process of writing as a mere *addendum* to empirical studies.

Flânerie is an invitation to reject the categorisation and commodification of time and place as well as to refrain from remaining captured within the striating and constraining forces of traditional research methodologies. Taking the perspective of flânerie, writing becomes underlain by various rhythms that testify to the exploration of miscellaneous signs and intensities, while remaining playful. Thus, the communication of research findings would also dare to find more aesthetic or creative expressions, such as experimental writing (Neilsen, Knowles, and Cole 2001; Richardson 2000) or textual flâneurie (Kociatkiewicz and Kostera 2019), that blur the boundaries between science and art (Glesne 1997). Further forms of research along those spiralling lines outlined here can contribute to becoming sensible and sense-able about senses and sensations (Mills and Mills 2006) in a way that 'makes sense' in new and different ways.

## Conclusion

While the figure of the flâneur may remain associated with the Parisian life and culture of the middle of the nineteenth century (Gluck 2003), we have tried to show here that the distinctiveness of the flâneur imparts flânerie and its qualities with worthy potentials as a creative research approach in the study of digital spheres and movements in them. Importantly, we do not claim to invent 'cyberflânerie' as a scholarly endeavour (Hartmann 2004; Hogan 2016). By positioning flânerie as a different and revealing empirical sensibility, we argue that *digital flânerie* can help developing alternative

pathways to an over-obsession with chronos-fixated ordering of time, rationality, standardisation and repeatability. In that sense, the flâneur may be seen to 'mobilize and take over conventional notions of embodiment and our going-bout-everyday-life' (Shields 2006, 219) by forcing us to value instinct, to rethink velocities and rhythms and to challenge processes of boundarisation.

Moving into and within digital worlds alters and reconfigures relations between experiences of time, place, self and others, which is part of a much broader historical trend in the technologization of life. However, in the phenomenological spirit of an engaged letting-go, digital flâneurs (also as researchers) do not attempt to manipulate, master or control things, but instead, let things and phenomena (also in the digital manifestation) be how they appear. Through the practice of flânerie, the researcher can shift from representational, instrumental and calculative modes so prevalent in our technological era, towards more poetic relations mediated via ways of presencing and more contemplative thinking and a more mindful attunement. Such orientation thus discourages mindless organising, technologically-ordered functioning, easy consumption or exploitive attitudes of hyper-mobile rushing (standstill). Instead slowing down and resonating rhythmically are part and parcel of the practice of flânerie.

The flâneurs of today, who are moving through digital worlds, are co-constitutively in-habituating them, with flânerie as an open and emerging phenomenon in the making of every click, observation and communication, all to be researched in a likewise flâneuristic way. We hope that a revived flâneuristic approach, as outlined here, can contribute rendering refined knowledge of and research practice for these digital life-worlds.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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