THE ART OF TAKING A WALK

FLANERIE, LITERATURE, AND FILM
IN WEIMAR CULTURE

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WALTER BENJAMIN’S essay “Die Wiederkehr des Flaneurs” takes as its model the writer Franz Hessel. For Benjamin, Hessel, a close friend and collaborator, a child of Berlin and tenant of Paris, is the exemplary manifestation of the flaneur in Weimar culture. More explicitly than Benjamin, Kracauer, and other Weimar intellectuals, Hessel’s texts both articulate and illustrate a theory of flanerie in the twentieth century, and in so doing suggest a means for approaching contemporary Weimar Berlin. Hessel’s reflections on Berlin form a phenomenology of flanerie that, in its orientation toward his own modernity, tangibly surpasses Benjamin’s studies on the flaneur, especially when the latter merely reconstructs the flaneur retrospectively as an anachronistic type of nineteenth-century Paris street life. Despite the compelling aspects of his life and literary practice, Hessel has returned only recently from the margins of German literature to a certain measure of critical interest. His personal stature as one of Benjamin’s closest friends and his professional status as an editor with Rowohlt, the prominent publishing house of the 1920s, have been rediscovered along with his intimate familiarity with the city’s literary circles of his time. Forced to leave Germany as a Jewish citizen under Nazi persecution, the writer also had been obliterated from the pages of German literary encyclopedias, his life reduced to the fragments of an oblique existence. In revisiting some of the stations of this life, this account of Hessel’s biography is intended less as an exhaustive enumeration of his curriculum vitae than as an outline of the formative places and times contributing to the flaneur’s development.

Born in the eastern Prussian city of Stettin, Hessel and his well-to-do bourgeois family relocated to Berlin in 1888, a move to the city that introduced the eight-year-old to the decisive ground of the flaneur’s development, his knowledge of urban spaces. The father’s death paradoxically presented the young man with the opportunities of instant leisure: the immediate leave, financial independence, and freedom from professional concerns and purposes that is the precondition of any aimless flanerie, the leisure to pursue an independent existence as a student of literary history, mythology, and archeology—a constellation of subjects that already circumscribed the focus of his metropolitan observations. These “studies” anticipated the further Studium of cities, reality, and history that moved him beyond Berlin to the major locations of the European bohème of his times. Frequenting the literary circles of Munich,
drawing on conversations with Stefan George and his friends, with Franziska von Reventlow and her admirers, Hessel began editing his first publication, the *Schwabinger Beobachter* (Schwabing Observer), aptly predicting the predominant stance of the later flaneur. In 1906, Hessel moved on to Paris and the Montparnasse circles of Gertrude Stein and Henri-Pierre Roché, a writer who would soon become his close friend and intimate rival for the affections of his later wife, Helen Grund, a Berlin expatriate and fashion journalist. Their literary and erotic triangle inspired not only Roché’s fabled novel *Jules et Jim*, the fictional foil for Francois Truffaut’s filmic adaptation, but also Hessel’s earlier, by now nearly obsolete novel of Parisian memories, *Pariser Romanze*. In 1993, the posthumous publication of Grund’s own diaries from this period presented the final angle to the mutual mirroring of relays and conflicts among these three participants in one of the more remarkable personal and cultural, literary and emotional constellations of the early twentieth century.

The metropolitan existence of these strangers in and lovers of Paris was abruptly suspended through Hessel’s shock-ridden encounter with the political realities of World War I, but unfolded again when—via battles in Alsace and Poland, East and West—he returned to his home city. Transferring the language, culture, and images of Paris, he began a new life in Weimar Germany, translating and editing French literature in Berlin—Stendhal, Balzac, and others. Founding his journal, *Vers und Prosa*, in 1924, he presented to the public some of the more intriguing German authors of the era, among them Robert Musil and Robert Walser. As editor for Rowohlt, a publisher central to Weimar’s literary sphere, Hessel formed relationships with the intellectual minds of his times: he met Ernst Bloch, discussed cities with Siegfried Kracauer, and entered into a close friendship with Walter Benjamin. This latter relationship yielded a long and inspiring collaboration: as of 1925, Hessel spent the better part of two years in Paris translating Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* with Benjamin. Along the way, but certainly not as an afterthought, he introduced Benjamin to his sense of the city, to its history and its margins. It was during this time, and due to the inspiration of their mutual conversations on Paris, that Benjamin’s plan of a *Passagen-Werk* began to evolve into the project that would occupy him for the rest of his life. Hessel’s influence on Benjamin’s Parisian reflections is as indisputable as its extent is only surmisable. His own work during this time shows a significant turn toward cities and their cultures. This work includes a trilogy of revelations in the city, beginning with *Der Kranzladen des Glicks*, continuing through his *Pariser Romanze*, and concluding with a return to his childhood in *Heimliches Berlin*. Besides these poetic texts on the city, Hessel’s work includes several volumes of poems, a number of novellas, and a few shorter plays. His most intriguing text for our purposes, however, can be found in a collection of essayistic approaches to the city under the title *Spazieren in Berlin*. These essays constitute one of the most important contributions to the literature of flanerie and intellectual thought of

Weimar Germany. Their motifs and themes are revisited throughout his writings: in the posthumously discovered fragment *Alter Mann*, and in several overlooked pieces of essayistic writing—excursions to the literary market, records of his Parisian impressions, and a portrait of Marlene Dietrich—all of which, in their very fragmentariness, closely reflect the kaleidoscope of this flaneur’s aesthetics.

**WALKING IN BERLIN**

In contrast to preceding nineteenth-century notions of the flaneur, Hessel suggests that flanerie finds a new footing in modernity. In a number of the essays comprising *Spazieren in Berlin*, he understands the concept of walking as a metaphor not only for this particular work but for his works in general. In its central theoretical essay, “On the Difficult Art of Taking a Walk,” Hessel deliberately proposes to mobilize apparently obsolete forms of “walking” toward an aesthetics that might provide him with access to his own era. Naming this process an “art” instead of mere “action,” he accords the status of a new artistic movement and theoretical significance to the process of walking. This essay contains *in nuce* some of the pivotal aspects around which Hessel will organize his thoughts on the movement and motion at the heart of his ambulatory theory of modern flanerie. Considering movement to be the primary term of his literature and philosophy, he revisits Fournel’s questions about the intricate net of reflections, thought, and looking from which a “theory” of flanerie might be articulated.

For Hessel, the anachronistic aspects of flanerie are what render it a form of resistance, giving it its critical significance in an age of modern rapid transit. The “aimlessness” of the flaneur’s motion works to question prevailing notions of purpose and social rationale, in contradiction to the regulated movement of modern traffic and the pragmatically defined era of “New Functionalism,” one possible translation and interpretation of *Neue Sachlichkeit*.

With the aimless gaze of the flaneur, Hessel introduces a figure of thought into literature that responds to some of the most significant theoretical thought of the twentieth century. Walking the streets of the city, Hessel’s flaneur experiences them as a “text.” Modern reality, for the flaneur, consists of an incessant series of encounters that unfold in the sheer contiguity of experiences that describe its “textuality.” Naming the relays between walking and seeing, reading and writing, Hessel has recourse to an analogy between the street and the text, a trope that had first appeared in the early modern period. This turn toward the “legibility” of the world allows us to approach reality as a continuum in which there is nothing to be seen and experienced “outside a text,” a continuum in which every phenomenon can be read as a “text.” While early examples in Jacques Derrida’s *Grammatology* focus on the text of a “book” that depends for its
legibility on authorities beyond the reader, the figure of the flaneur makes the question of legibility a modern question. In German literature, Börne formulates the flaneur’s metaphor of textuality in regard to Paris. He describes the place that Benjamin will interpret as the “capital of the nineteenth century” as “an unfolded book, [and] wandering through its streets means reading.”

Börne’s argument for an extended, leisurely “reading” of the street originates in the nineteenth century, an era in which modernity only gradually accelerates its tempo. The stroller’s leisure is thus defined in terms of a preceding age, with its implicit understanding of the walker’s sense of the world as that of an artist whose perception of artefacts, scriptures, words, and images is influenced further by latenly romantic, nineteenth-century (self-)definitions of the artist as dreamer, outsider, and genius. In his reconstructions of the nineteenth century as a formative period of modernity, Benjamin returns to this walking figure of reflection and emphasizes its focus on the essential legibility of the world. He postulates an equivalency that registers the underlying assumption of the flaneur’s textual metaphor in the city: “Perception is Reading.” In both perceiving and reading “Berlin’s Boulevard,” his friend Hessel offers one of the more detailed definitions of flaneur in Weimar modernity as he pursues his feuilletonistic reflections on Tautenzienstraße and Kurfürstendamm. Extending Benjamin’s aphorism, he writes:

Flanerie is a way of reading the street, in which people’s faces, displays, shop windows, café terraces, cars, tracks, trees turn into an entire series of equivalent letters, which together form words, sentences, and pages of a book that is always new. In order to really stroll, one should not have anything too specific on one’s mind.

Hessel’s textual metaphor forms an essential part of his essayistic theory of modern flanerie. As he writes, “The real city stroller is like a reader who reads a book simply to pass the time and for pleasure.” This analogy of book and text, city and street, allows us to experience in Hessel’s writings on Berlin in the 1920s a current and significant textual metaphor that has helped to formulate our sense of modernity from its very inception. In spite of the seemingly timeless and hedonistically aimless character of flanerie, Hessel’s aesthetics explicitly pursues its objects in the newest phenomena of modernity. He postulates an equivalency that registers the underlying assumption of the flaneur’s textual metaphor in the city: “Perception is Reading.” In both perceiving and reading “Berlin’s Boulevard,” his friend Hessel offers one of the more detailed definitions of flaneur in Weimar modernity as he pursues his feuilletonistic reflections on Tautenzienstraße and Kurfürstendamm. Extending Benjamin’s aphorism, he writes:

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Approaching Berlin’s realities from its margins, the flaneur arrives to read between the lines of these street-texts. He finds the material of his readings on the surfaces of a cityscape whose inflationary increase of marginalia forms a vast “wasteland” of textual fragments, a “crowd of temporary structures, of demolition scaffoldings, construction fencings, board partitions, which become glowing spots of color in the service of advertising, voices of the city” (EG, 56). These voices and signals, signs and letters, together constitute a metropolitan text that abounds in countless facets and excessive hieroglyphs, a text whose decoding is carried out by Weimar flaneurs in what Hessel calls the “difficult art of taking a walk.” This version of flanerie transforms the textual metaphor of the city into a mode of perception that understands all of reality to be a text. The metaphor applies as much to Benjamin’s expedition into the decaying arcades of Paris as it does to Hessel’s reception of an evolving modernity in Berlin. It suggests that the flaneur walks in order to uncover traces of the past and to read these reflections as symptomatic of their respective time, be it the nineteenth century or Weimar modernity in all its sensations.

This aesthetics, with its focus on subtle variations in light, color, and structure, is prone to perceiving these visible sensations under the aspect of a mild idealization—a sense of Verklärung that surrounds all of its appearances with the veil of a benevolent gaze. Hessel’s version of flanerie, a search for memory through the beauty and harmony of images, offers the modernist a refuge in the relic of an aesthetics originating in the late nineteenth century but present in the 1920s. In an earlier Berlin, Theodor Fontane’s writings also focused on the particular quality of light in the city, on the light effects that enveloped his likewise muted depictions of the very real dynamics and conflicts of his society. Hessel seeks a similar Verklärung, a quasi-ethical affirmation of life in which, exceeding simple “beautification,” he advises the novice flaneur to abandon himself to the light and atmosphere of the street: “Also let yourself be deceived and seduced a little by the lighting, the time of day, and the rhythm of your steps. The artificial light, particularly in competition with a residue of daylight and dusk is a great magician, it makes everything more manifold.” Dusk is the natural analogue to Verklärung, an aesthetics of indirect illumination in which everything appears in more shining, mysterious, luminous.
Hessel’s way of seeing endows the metropolitan world of modernity with a “veil of beauty” similar to that which Fontane had envisioned as befitting the artistic depiction of an experienced world. This careful and attentive gaze lends a new aesthetic angle to any of the “objects” that Hessel perceives in his writings: “By looking at it in a friendly manner, even the ugly is imparted with a trace of beauty. The aesthetes do not know that, but the flaneur experiences it” (EG, 60).

Hessel’s optical philosophy perceives everything that can be seen through the lens of this harmonious aesthetics. Its corollary is an equally benevolent and reserved poetics: “If the street is therefore a kind of reading, then read it, but do not criticize it all too much” (EG, 59). The flaneur calls for a kind of writing that might reflect his open way of seeing, a kind of writing that offers “Preferably somewhat less judgment and more description [besprechen].” This poetic statement reveals a host of dangers that might arise from the exhortation of “valuefree” discussion and epic depiction, the lack of an explicit critical perspective being only the most obvious one. On the other hand, however, the very openness of this maxim suggests its virtues. The somnambulatory state of flanerie and its reveries gives access, in its very undecidedness, to an entire spectrum of insights that awaken new senses of the familiar ways of observing the world. In the dream state within which he moves through the exteriors of his society, the flaneur enters realms that may not be accessible to more conscious, controlled, and controlling approaches. Experiencing and expressing aspects of reality in a nonjudgmental, momentary-minded immediacy removes the filter that would block certain revelations. In this way, Hessel partakes in the sensory metaphors of flaneurs like Benjamin and Kracauer who speak of drifting along in the intoxication of atmospheres and objects. Benjamin’s analysis of what he calls the “dream-sleep” of capitalism, a state that his Passagen-Werk seeks to both chronicle and criticize, testifies to the significance of reverie as an epistemological concept. Similarly, the multiple insights in Kracauer’s Denkbilder—for example, in “Erinnerung an eine Pariser Straße” (Remembrance of a Paris Street) or “Schreie auf der Straße” (Screams in the Street)—result from various states of hypnotic trance.

Within their characteristic Weimar modes of thinking, these authors figure walking as a pivotal process whose movement transmits its own sensitivity as a distinct dream state, a kind of “gentle tiredness [Ermüdung and Ermüdung]” (EG, 60). In Hessel’s texts, this ongoing trance of continuous movement, of consecutive thoughts and steps, in the mind and in the street, guides the walker and thinker along the sensory stimuli of his movement, back into a past comprised of individual and collective memories. In Hessel’s experience, this space most often gives way to a pleasant reverie, a daydream of the ongoing memory of a happy childhood. This reverie stands in sharp contrast to manifestations of the city trance that do not always transport a restful dream. In Kracauer’s writings, for example, this unconscious condition more often translates into a psychic nightmare. While Hessel walks safely within the comforting borders of a quiet “sensory pleasure,” Kracauer is overcome by the dangerous aspects and tormenting memories of the streets, his short, piercing “Screams in the Street” or “Remembrance of a Paris Street” consistently overshadowed by a foreboding sense of omnipresent horror. As if he should defend his walking pleasure against such intrusions, Hessel warns “the aspiring walker [not to be] led too far astray into the unconscious” (EG, 60), unless he would have his bourgeois identity dissolve into complete intoxication. For Hessel, the flaneur’s writing follows slow and tranquil forms, individualist and nostalgic paths, and proceeds at a gradual pace back to the fairytales of his childhood.

**BOULEVARD SUSPECTS**

Hessel’s essay “The Difficult Art of Taking a Walk” forms the cornerstone of his theory of flanerie. It articulates a retrospective poetics that aims to collect every facet of the city, tracing the steps of a philosophy of the flaneur in such significant titles as “Der Verdächtige” (The Suspect), “Ich lene” (I Am Learning), and “Berlins Boulevard” (Berlin’s Boulevard). Figuring himself as a “suspect” of his times, he offers a theory of flanerie in the anthology’s first sentence: “It is a special pleasure to walk slowly through lively streets.” Hessel wishes to discover a measure of slowness within the margins of society’s hectic activities, within the space of individual perception. “I want to gain or find again,” he writes, “the first gaze upon the city in which I live.” This “first gaze” names a fictitious instance of perception—entirely open to impressions, uncompromised by prejudicial judgments, and free of routines and conventions. It looks upon the exterior world with the curiosity and fascination of a child, but also with the historical awareness and experience of the modern city dweller.

This “first gaze” is not the tourist’s stare: it overlooks obvious attractions and finds its objects on the edges of metropolitan space, reading its insights as “a piece of city and world history” which has been preserved precisely in those very locations of the city that seem to have been forgotten. This first gaze is suggestive, not intrusive; it does not enter aggressively, it lingers tentatively upon the surfaces it touches. It does not seek to reveal, uncover or inquire; it is not voyeuristically invested in pursuing gratification—it merely returns a cautionary, preliminary impression; it is a first foundation for the collection of memory. Within the city’s crowds, the singular gaze of the flaneur emanates from the perspective of a kind of self-chosen “exile” that names another formative feature of modernity: “He is the native who has removed himself in order
This is why, for Hessel, the flaneur is potentially a critical observer of his society. His seemingly aimless search for the aura of the city pursues in time what Benjamin’s definition situates in space—the appearance of a distance even at closest proximity. The flaneur tries to reconstitute the primacy of his impressionability, a distance of vision even within the close familiarity of his hometown. Emerging from the attention of his tentative and slow gaze, he formulates the suspicion of another Berlin pedestrians: “In this city, you have to ‘have to,’ otherwise you can’t. Here you don’t simply go, but go someplace. It isn’t easy for someone of our kind.” The flaneur in Weimar Berlin transgresses the city’s tempo and functionalism with each of his steps. The suspicion of a society of “New Objectivity” is directed against the flaneur’s privileged “waiting without an object,” against a figure who is neither a consumer of commodities nor a regular pedestrian. Experiencing himself as a “suspect,” “waiting without an object,” against a figure who is neither a consumer of commodities nor a regular pedestrian. Experiencing himself as a “suspect,” Hessel subjects himself to a time that encompasses both the enforced waiting of unemployment and the disorientation of intellectuals, a contemporaneous experience of those whom Kracauer refers to as “Die Wartenden.” While Kracauer reflects on this phenomenon in the medium of the detective novel, and Benjamin in his portrait of the artist as Charles Baudelaire, Hessel articulates the features of these dispositions in the context of the reality of Berlin. The flaneur encounters public perception in the age of photography with every step he takes through the streets of Berlin. If Hessel’s flanerie is “suspicious” to his contemporaries, it is also because it questions the prevailing “aims” and functions of this society by introducing the possibility of a mere “aimlessness” that would be free of the usual purposes and conventions of seeing. He declares this aimless drifting to be an exemplary, didactic approach to the history and modernity of the city.

In his essay “Ich lerne,” he discusses the flaneur’s painstaking attention to detail, embarking on a search for the traces of a lost childhood, that of the individual as well as of a culture that occupies the space of a “home” in the modern city. This position is informed by a notion of Bildung that preserves traditional knowledge and erudition, even as it takes its departure from Hessel’s personal affinity for the slowness of past eras. Hessel’s prevalent sense of space lets him realize the flaneur’s concept of a “home” in the street, an extended notion of the public sphere that Benjamin sees as central to the flaneur’s experience. Hessel himself views the “house and street [as] one unit [Einheit]” (FB, 146), signaling in this way the relatedness of all public spaces. His insistence on the relations among history, home, and childhood directs his gaze most often toward phenomena that seem obsolete and anachronistic, about to be discarded by modernity, a forgotten part of those fascinations that used to attract his “first gaze” in the city dweller’s childhood. In this way, Hessel’s essays repeat a movement and method that informs Benjamin’s understanding of the nineteenth century’s heuristic value for the present, for the Jetzt-Zeit of modernity.

Hessel’s predilection for historical shifts guides his aesthetics to focus on the transient reflections of transitory spaces, such as those offered by the scenes of old-fashioned variété theaters. These theaters are characterized by their intense affinities to the very process of seeing, a primary affiliation that links the variétés to flanerie. Like fairgrounds, markets, streets, and cinema, they too belong to the traditional haunts of scopophilia. In moving through the variétés of Berlin, the flaneur is most vividly affected by the effects of light on display: an enthusiasm for visual shocks that relates his spectatorship and the scenes he views to the spaces and Lichtspiele of early cinema. During his visit on location, he extols the “heaven” that he finds represented in the “ceiling painting” (FB, 150) above the stage. He admires the stature of the “light commandant” (the director responsible for these illuminations) and of all the “marginal and unnamed figures” (FB, 153) who form an essential part of the visual spectacle of any veritable variété. The flaneur’s search for marginal and nearly obsolete details replicates the impulse of his movement toward the “aimless” and “purpose-free,” toward anything that would be “transparent” enough to transmit everything, toward any viewer who would be sufficiently “invisible” to perceive everything. The variety of objects in the variété, in all of its metaphorical senses, forms the focus of a flanerie whose experience is analogous to that of the many objects and phenomena that the street presents on its daily stage. Hessel’s flanerie corresponds to an aesthetics of marginal phenomena that is no longer marginal to the modernity of Weimar Germany, a plurimedial time in which culture and perception appear increasingly in multiple perspectives.

Hessel demonstrates this new aesthetics of the everyday in the essayistic principle of his “Rundfahrt” (Sightseeing Trip), transforming a bus tour of the city into a flaneuristic text of his Berlin anthology. The flaneur infiltrates the organized sightseeing tour with subversive views that understand it as a recent, functionalized phenomenon of the shared labor and leisure of modernity. Hessel refers to this process by its original English name: “Sight seeing. What a forcible pleonasme!” (FB, 51), he writes. He converts this event into a subjective walk through the Berlin of the Weimar Republic, ironically proceeding against the grain of the city’s presumed attractions. For Hessel, any effort by a tour guide to direct or filter our perception is highly suspect; he calls this guide “trip steward” (Wanderwartl), or “our Führer.” “The Explainer,” he suggests, “now forces our gaze” toward national monuments, or “tears our gaze” over to the “palace of justice.” Hessel’s own gaze resists such guidance, refusing to surrender to any predetermined interpretation of the sights before him. The “bus travels too quickly” for the flaneur, he writes, “we must put it off until a journey through the streets on foot.” Organized and motorized sight-
seeing allows neither the free space nor the unencumbered time necessary for his detective-style observations: "There is no time to research the native secrets [Heimlichkeiten] of the area from this tourist bus." The native flaneur focuses rather on the "secret" aspects of his "home" in the city, secrets that are intrinsically located in the imaginary place of a magical childhood. Hessel lets his gaze, resplendent of personal and cultural memories and histories, roam freely along the edges of the street. He lingers on the hidden sights and unexplained details of what is officially presented to him: "The tourists' attention is directed toward the Prussian State Bank, meanwhile I glance over to the famous wine cellar which E.T.A. Hoffmann used to frequent" (FB, 63) (it is no accident that he looks for Hoffmann's spaces, the haunts of another strolling writer obsessed with viewing the city).

Ridiculing all-too-guided Weimar audiences, he suggests: "Sometimes it is worthwhile to enjoy, rather than the antiquities, the entertaining presence of the doorman of the arts and lords [Kunst- und Fürstenportier] and his carpet-slipper-shuffling herd" (FB, 92). Along with this mildly ironic admonition for a critical examination of this authority, Hessel's flaneur advises his "dear stranger and fellow tour member" that it would be better to "come back to this area and have time to get lost a little." as it predates—Benjamin's sense of an Irkunst, an art of erring and getting lost that is translated into reality, that is lived in Hessel's understanding of flanerie. For both Benjamin and Hessel, the flaneur's perception deviates, deliberately and decidedly, from predetermined routes. It ignores imposing sites and shuns prescribed "views." This independent stance is apparent in the urban critique of architecture that prevails in Hessel's flanerie, transcending the official monument-megalomania and taking its own idiosyncratic look at the buildings of Berlin. In an analysis that seems to dwell on purely stylistic terms, it formulates a critique of the collective spirit of edifices that seek to serve a unified representation of German nationalism. In the newest amusement center, "Haus Vaterland," the Unheimlichkeit of a perfectly planned city of entertainment strikes in the flaneur the larger suspicion of a "fatherland" that, having emerged from a destructive war, now moves toward new constructions of totalitarianism. Hessel suggests that such structures and creations of a patriotic architecture help sustain in the Republic the barbaric relics of nationalism. He detects in the newest Haus Vaterland nothing if not a construction of what he calls "das Monster-Deutschland" (FB, 57). Similarly, his critical stance toward political and bureaucratic authorities suggests that the two bronze dukes erected on the Mühlenbamd function only in order to disturb his walking pleasure: "They need not necessarily stand right here" (FB, 68), he says. The walking critic pauses to criticize any instances of "conventional wisdom turned stone." from "the usual boredom of sad tenement houses and Kaiser-Wilhelms-Plätze" to those "horrible, speedily-constructed buildings built after 1870 that derive their style from construction firms and bricklayer foremen."

Like the streets he loves and walks, Hessel is disturbed by anything that is too uniform, goal-oriented, monumental, bureaucratic, and officious. "The pleasantly private character of Queen Augusta Street," he writes, "is disturbed in a few places by pretentious public buildings, the Ministries of Defense and the offices of National Insurance and that sort of thing" (FB, 96). His own idiosyncratic perception of the secret city through which he walks provides—regardless of its underlying sense of aesthetic harmony—a critical analysis of society and the ideology that it both constructs and extends through its architecture. In this, the text of flanerie aligns itself with other pivotal Weimar texts—Kracauer's Strafen in Berlin und anderswo or Benjamin's Einbahnstraße come to mind—which also understand the external phenomena of modernity as significant indices of cultural and social dispositions. Indeed, one might say that the decidedly Weimar genre of critical essayistic Denkbilder originates first in an aesthetics of flanerie, in the images it reflects. The "views" [Ansichten] of Hessel's images of reflection can lead to surprising "insights" [Einsichten] which in the case of the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche prove to be of uncanny clairvoyance: "The guide [Führer] explains, this building is one of Germany's most beautiful churches. But it is unfortunately still light out, and one can see it too clearly" (FB, 135). Hessel's gaze already sees this church in the 1920s as a "massive traffic obstruction" that is tolerable only under the neon lights of the nearby cinemas, or through the visible effects of its decay: "If this cathedral with the long name would at least age and decay a little. Here it stands amidst the rattling and droning in a Prussian, unhallowed way." It remained so until it was destroyed in the final days of World War II, after its nationalist Führer aesthetics had officially come to an end.

If this flaneur of Weimar culture resists official programs, he turns in fascination to the images and signs of its collective modernity. Hessel's gaze is decidedly resistant and widely eclectic in its historical scope: it connects the remembrance of the flaneur's individual past with a declared openness toward the most recent cultural modernity. He describes with noticeable enthusiasm the "enormous letters and images of advertisements on house sides and roofs... sharp and smooth, a most recent Berlin." In the same way, what he calls the "Broadway" of Berlin-Charlottenburg—"with its cafés, cinemas, neon lights, and running letterings"—exerts a spell on him. Despite this fascination with modern stimuli, Hessel's primary empathy extends to the historical background of spaces in time, to a history of the city that moves him beyond a "neo-objectivist fetishization with technology." 38 Hessel "feels his way" into distant eras and situations by retracing his steps along historical objects and anachronistic sights. Joining the sightseeing bus tour of Berlin, for example, Hessel remains a few steps behind the tourist crowd, aligning himself with a position beside the official route. Prone to stay behind in his mind and memory, he retraces the few steps in space that locate his reminiscences in time.
The stops that he suggests are stations from the local history of his home and city. He directs his reader, for example, to the Gasthaus zum Nußbaum, a prototypical locale of the pub(lic) sphere that also happens to be situated in “the oldest house of Berlin” (FB, 67). What appears to the flaneur as a “piece of the best of old Berlin” contains the essence of the “historical charm” that he seeks to discover on his historically guided excursions. As moments of epiphany, these insights occur in a trancelike state that, transported by calm wanderings, traverses the passage of time, as when “in the late light, with Fachwerk and gables, an entirely old Berlin can arise here” (FB, 70). Hessel’s flaneur presents excursions into local history as a history of its locations, in which stories and anecdotes are released by the sight of its sites: Hessel calls this project “Heimatkunde treiben” (FB, 75), a study of Heimat by way of flaneur. The flaneur pursues knowledge by walking and drifting in a stream of perception that understands the streets, the museums, and the neighborhoods of everyday Berlin as significant locations of history and memory. He renders images of the contemporary city in the mirror of pictures from its past and superimposes one layer upon the other in order to “construct,” in his mind and in his writing, “a bygone city amidst the present one” (FB, 96).

For Hessel, a kind of “home” is constructed that fuses these various locales with the distinct notations of a forgotten, yet familiar cityscape. Each of these locales evokes a cluster of personal associations linked to the flaneur’s past and childhood, and he registers its historical significance in anecdotes, citations, or other passing texts. “Heimat” or “home” are therefore interpreted as autobiographical and intellectual spaces. If Hessel’s reflections overtake the tourists’ experiences, by the reminiscences of this city that so remarkably enters into his description.30 In the Alte Westen area which figures in his Heimliches Berlin, Hessel remembers his life as a child, joining it with a sensory memory of the city that includes those “long-familiar apartments” (FB, 154), museum-like spaces, and labyrinthine bourgeois interiors of his beloved “Berlin rooms,”290 the dwellings of the nineteenth century. He recognizes that much of his memory is attached to the area surrounding Berlin’s famed Museumsinsel that housed the young student’s historical and personal explorations. He moves on to scenes of petit-bourgeois dance halls that involuntarily recall, as his own madeleines, those “memorable violet perfumes which were in permanent clash with nature” (FB, 50). For Hessel, Heimat is this kaleidoscope of impressions and memories—redolent of the sensations of lived experience that remain stored in places and images, sensations encapsulating the collective and public implications of his own history.

The flaneur’s historical method seeks out a highly personal, yet historically aware approach to both Heimat and history, particularly in those instances when an environment stimulates the acute spatial reconstruction of experiences that previous flaneurs may have undergone in the same place. Hessel is eager to follow these leads into history, to explore their traces in personal stories and anecdotes. A singular name might set in motion a whole spectrum of associations and narratives: “The name makes me wonder who might have in bygone courses of time [Zeitläufte] looked down from this height upon the old towers” (FB, 176). Hessel’s stories are invariably linked to the visual, to the immediate sensory experience of streets, places, and buildings. Indeed, the very history of the city, according to him, seems to be located within the history of urban space itself. The city’s history presents a series of phenomena to the flaneur, a series of experiences and atmospheres that can be positioned and approached until they are indeed “accessible” [begehbar]. But the flaneur relates as much to literature as he does to locations, remembering the “stories that are tied to the antiquities” along his way. On a walk in the park, Hessel comes across the landscaped memorabilia of another notable flaneur, in the shape of a carp pond in the Tiergarten, an aquarian mirror of literary fame: “On this very spot E. Th. A. Hoffmann himself interred his beloved Kater Murr” (FB, 165).

Hessel’s stories and strolls bear witness to the flaneuristic traditions that preceded him. He follows the traces of a literature of flanerie that came before him and his texts: Hessel walks almost literally in the footsteps of E.T.A. Hoffmann, not only to revisit his predecessor’s wine pub, or the wet grave of his literary cat, but all those places where he can share in the other flaneur’s literary haunts. Following this lead, Hessel looks down over the Gendarmenmarkt from the higher, historical perspective of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s “Des Vetters Eckfenster.” Imagining the stance of an entire history of physiologists, he recalls “how [Hoffmann] overlooked the lively Berlin market square” (FB, 63). Similarly, he calls attention to a part of the city that is another piece of its literature. A seemingly inconspicuous alley, for example, turns out to be “Raabe’s Sperlingsgasse” (FB, 65), he tells us, reminding us of the location of another nineteenth-century author’s “chronicle” of a Berlin street.41 In Hessel’s understanding, flanerie cannot simply be relegated to a phenomenon of personal leisure. It is always already preceded by a specific tradition of texts. Situating itself within this tradition of history and literature, flanerie goes beyond its own particular experience and extends the realms of legible space, allowing the rambling reader and suggestible stroller to connect his or her own experience of reading to an extended history of literary flaneries. Collecting quotes and passages from texts by August Varnhagen, Heinrich Heine, and other nineteenth-century poets, Hessel provides his reader with an historical anthology of imaginary promenades on Berlin’s main boulevard, Unter den Linden.42 In extensive excursions, he again and again returns to his predeces-
Hessel’s pronounced historical interest insists that we understand modernity as a series of new texts at a specific stage of historicity. Wherever the flaneur finds himself in the city, he is always “most interested in the placards and inscriptions above and on the shops” (FB, 202). Ranging from “newspaper announcements and posters carried by sandwichmen” to shop windows and advertisements, these texts are interpreted as “a specific kind of advertising literature” (FB, 243) that is characteristic of modernity. For Hessel, all of modern life is at once flanerie and literature, a vast text that provides an instant mixture of theory and praxis, a lived and perceived interpretation of everyday experience, an enactment of modernity in its various mythologies. This exchange of writing and reading names a dynamic process of seeing that looks back to the childhood experiences that have helped form this visual disposition. Looking at a group of stone grazias, a moving and monumental sight that touches the young flaneur as if they were living women, he writes: “They followed our path with their white stone eyes, and it has become a part of ourselves that these heathen girls have looked at us” (FB, 156). This exchange of gazes between Hessel and the “heathen girls” continues to inspire the later flaneur’s pagan pursuit of pleasure and sets into motion a gaze that follows the silhouettes of passersby, that traces the shadows of other structures with the same desirous eyes. The walking writer imagines himself being viewed by a world of objects, subjected to the gaze of those very images that are presumed to be not only the objects of his gaze but also the materials of his writing. Returning his gaze, the figures and objects of reality offer the onlooker their own invisible text, leading him to enter into a mute visual dialogue with them. In Hessel’s rendering of the exterior world, the flaneur’s aesthetics emerges via an empathetic description of what he sees—not by a process of judgment and evaluation.

This way of looking at the world preserves a childlike affinity with things, what Hessel calls the child’s “fairy-tale gaze” [Märchenblick]. His inclination to go beyond historical anecdotes, to imbue objects and images with an aura of the miraculous, mysterious, and magical, is grounded in this sympathy with the world of fairy tales. In keeping with this altered but magical logic, Hessel suggests that the house standing next to the Anti-War Museum in Parochialstraße must be haunted (FB, 77)—must house some of the ghosts that were exorcised from the house next to it. A small-town theater becomes a “fairy-tale world”—a world he enters from the streets as if he were walking into the pages of children’s books and onto stages of doll’s salons—a piece of suburban Berlin inhabited by “evil plum-eyed witches.” The walker-writer, Hessel suggests, is inspired by myths of all kinds, even by the simple, seemingly trivial forms retained from his memories of early childhood. This childlike sense of the world flees from the monotony of adult purposes, from anything that might restrict his sightseeing gaze. The flaneur’s abberant eye takes solace from the functional world even in an old-fashioned ice-cream cart that still projects its magic as “a sweet dwarf’s shop, translucent like Snow White’s casket” (FB, 100). His eye is drawn, moreover, to the fairy-tale architecture of the Berlin Zoo, a space that for Hessel represents “the Thousand and One Nights of beautiful buildings” (FB, 138). Perceiving the scurrilous nuances of this “other world,” the flaneur exhibits the spirit of discovery that at the same time motivates the explorer of the arcades of modernity to seek “cave-like, labyrinthian things.” In the zoo’s “palaces of the animals” he sees both the traces of prime-

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Hessel’s pronounced historical interest insists that we understand modernity as a series of new texts at a specific stage of historicity. Wherever the flaneur finds himself in the city, he is always “most interested in the placards and inscriptions above and on the shops” (FB, 202). Ranging from “newspaper announcements and posters carried by sandwichmen” to shop windows and advertisements, these texts are interpreted as “a specific kind of advertising literature” (FB, 243) that is characteristic of modernity. For Hessel, all of modern life is at once flanerie and literature, a vast text that provides an instant
The flâneur discovers his critical perspective regarding the collective mythologies of everyday life in the Weimar Republic. This critical perspective belongs to the Weimar *Denkbild* that interprets both surface and essence, myth and modernity, as visual and sensory phenomena. At one point in Hessel’s essay, the genesis of this *Denkbild*, as a genre of observation and reflection, is in fact attributed to the text of flânerie. The observer strolling in the zoo notices in passing the striking affinities between a decorative sea anemone in the aquarium and the fashionable fabric flowers in modern shop windows. Under his critical gaze, nothing is any longer “pure nature.” Instead, culture assumes a second nature as commodity, animals take their places as accessories of fashion, and their palaces set the stage for collective myths and fantasies. For Hessel, everything lends itself to be read and regarded by the eye as structure, pattern or decor. Viewing Weimar flânerie as a mode of theoretical thought that emphasizes sensory reflection, his fascination with phenomena and their surfaces is inspired by a complex sense of distraction that connects his childhood viewing pleasure with the desire for social and historical insight. As he suggests, “the Thousand and One Nights and the thousand and one legs of the big revues . . . these magnificent children’s dreams for grown-ups” (FB, 238) are performed daily in the “fairy-tale palaces” of Berlin theaters and cabarets of the Weimar era. This flâneur’s walks through the city are characterized by an effort to join a kind of naïve viewing pleasure with the critical scrutiny of his society.

Nonetheless, it could be said that Hessel’s project presumes a bourgeois utopia of harmony that in turn presupposes a contented childhood: “The tumble of children,” he explains, “is in our walking and in the blissful floating feeling which we call ‘balance’” (EG, 53). This emphasis on “balance” is what distinguishes Hessel’s flânerie from the often traumatic intoxication that defines Kracauer’s, Benjamin’s, and Aragon’s versions of flânerie. Despite his prevailing fascination with the visible, Hessel’s flânerie works to maintain an inner balance that prevents him from becoming fully absorbed by the phenomena he encounters. In other words, Hessel’s flâneur is always guided securely back into a childhood that is deliberately devoid of horrors. If these walks into his past, his history and childhood, lead him to his version of flânerie, his particular biography and privileged background allow him to enjoy this process in a relatively lighthearted manner rather than suffer through it psychoanalytically. Whereas a more despairing sense of flânerie leads Benjamin to view Baudelaire’s Paris allegorically, or evokes the traumatic shock in Kracauer’s “Erinnerung an eine Pariser Straße,” Hessel’s flânerie is induced by a mild rather than desperate sense of melancholy. His insistence on harmony and balance allows him to direct his steps away from himself. This distance at times enables him to offer a more detailed and attentive, since less anxiety-ridden, perception of the city and its history. As this flâneur puts it, “One has to forget oneself to be able to stroll happily” (EG, 59). Hessel’s foundation in both a happy childhood and bourgeois sense of *Bildung* facilitates his steps into the urban past, away from the abyss of his own unconscious, to an otherwise original and idiosyncratic *Heimatkunde* of his city and its history: “Visit your own city, stroll in your quarter, promenade [erlege dich] in the stony garden. . . . Experience in passing the curious history of a couple of dozens of streets.”

Hessel’s move toward local history is determined by this search for an idyllic exile amidst modernity, the stony garden amidst the city. In search of “curiosities,” it signals an ongoing pursuit of the exceptional, the unusual, the different, one that may lead to a more extended understanding of what a text is, to the possibilities of a textual metaphor that everywhere opens new avenues of insight.

### Denkbild-Critique

All too often, however, the almost naive tendencies of Hessel’s aesthetics reveal their limits, especially in their at times uncritical and even nebulous attempt to consider the realities of labor and politics. For example, Hessel’s premises encourage the flâneur to view women workers of the Berlin proletariat as “cheerful” and “quiet” sights, or to regard a calculated film arrangement as a naturally “charming” site. Such temporary blindness occurs most strikingly when, in spite of—or because of—his being overwrought by emotion, Hessel fails to recognize that an idyllic scene on the Landwehrkanal is also, and more importantly, the scene of Rosa Luxemburg’s murder. Hessel’s harmonious flânerie overlooks the explicitly political aspect of this murderous place in favor of the quiet melancholy of bygone “private” suicides that there plays on his imagination. When he does recall this infamous political murder, he refers to it merely as a “desecration” of the “stillness of this bridge” (FB, 167).

For Hessel’s Weimar flânerie, politics often remains just another spectacle, a world that he regards as “somewhat foreign” (FB, 124). Coming from a spectator who, casting his “fairy-tale gaze” on the “Parliament Building,” views it as a “huge animal lying growling,” this confession comes as no surprise. Observing the Reichstag plenum, he even tells us that he is in danger of confusing right with left, of mistaking Communists for nationalist Volkskiche. He accepts the first public speeches of the National Socialists with the same tolerance, attributing to their Sportpalast location “a kind of gigantic cheerfulness” (FB, 266). As everything else for Hessel, politics is above all a visual spectacle. But his tranquil, intrusive magnanimity cannot see through the complex realities of a new political fanaticism—instead he understands these realities as simply “the excess of the same unbroken lust for life.” Here Hessel’s harmonious gaze reduces serious differences and real dangers to a purely
visual and naively humanistic way of seeing. Overlooking the actual conditions of a world of labor by perceiving its processes merely as aesthetic structures, pleasingly regular and repetitive motions, he suggests that Berlin—"when and where it is at work" (FB, 21)—radiates nothing if not a "special and visible beauty." As he "visits" factories, for example, he pays attention not only to "temples of the machine" and "churches of precision," but also to workers whom he views as the autonomous "guards . . . of the machines." Hessel's unreflected perception of a flanerie that simply passes by its objects mirrors the fetishism of technology evident in the New Functionalism, a fetishism that fails to regard its economic and political implications.48

In regard to the world of labor, the impressions of an idle observer distort reality, forming an idyll of the city which no longer corresponds to the actual conditions of working. For the strolling viewer, "sacks of cement shimmer with spring green shades in the autumnal street" (FB, 203); workers function mostly as color accents, wearing jackets "of a green that is illuminated by the gaslight next to the machine, like the park greenery by the candelabra of elegant avenues." Regardless of the subtlety with which the observer renders the respective shades in question, the supposedly democratic impetus in such impressionistic flanerie misses its mark as a recorder of social reality, particularly in view of the very real exploitation at work in Hessel's Berlin. The pleasure-seeking flaneur understands laborers pouring cement to be performing a "spectacle of work," a Schauspiel that he perceives as "spectacular," as "playful" or "dramatic." He underestimates the extent of the present's unfolding drama, the politically catastrophic consequences of the Reichstag's increasingly polarized politics.

While Hessel perceives the reality of his Berlin in images, in a manner characteristic of the many flaneurs who wish to "remain with the mere sight of the present" (FB, 120), he at the same time seeks to prevent this balanced form of flanerie from being disturbed by the unpleasant social details of this present. Walking in the newspaper district of Berlin, he flirts with the feuilletonistic airiness that often marks the self-imposed limit of efficacy in many essayistic genres of Weimar literature. "Let's not go into the serious areas," he tells us, "where politics, trade, and local affairs are carried out. We belong below this straight line and in the entertainment section" (FB, 257). This deliberate but potentially problematic abstinence from theory and social criticism—what he refers to as "all too much judging!" (EG, 59)—aligns his sociological efforts with a naiveté that borders on an involuntary cynicism whose only recommendation is that, in these "serious times," we should all simply take a walk. The serious times to which he refers—the Berlin of 1929—are relativized by a definition of flanerie whose "aimless" pleasure can be experienced in the presumably value-neutral space of society, and this without reflecting on the social conditions of such leisure and idle walking. "It is certainly the cheapest pleasure," he says of his walking, "really not a specifically bourgeois-capitalistic enjoyment. It is a treasure of the poor and nowadays practically their privilege" (EG, 54). This attempt to dispel the suspect air of elitism and luxury surrounding his leisurely strolls takes on an involuntarily cynical tone. Seeking to popularize his pastime by emphasizing its democratic character, he diminishes the reality of unemployment, a phenomenon that he romanticizes, if he does not ignore it.

Kracauer, on the other hand, is more sensitive to the situation of unemployed workers in Berlin. In his 1932 essay on the contemporary realities of "idle walking" (Müßiggang), for example, he describes a scene that Hessel would prefer to overlook: "The crowd . . . is in no hurry. Slowly it drags itself forward, one perceives that unemployment weighs it down." Rather than idealizing "idleness" by neglecting its conditions, Kracauer recognizes that "the audience on Münzstraße is a slave to enforced idle walking, one that is less a pleasure than a way to expel the ghosts of evil times." In jarring contrast to Hessel's utopia of a public flanerie, the enforced idle strolls of unemployment suffocate the sensory perception of Weimar reality, promoting much more somber prospects. As Kracauer goes on to note: "The awareness of uselessness clouds their glances . . . the sun is shining, but what do these people care about the sun?" Hessel sidesteps the material, economic, and political privileges that distinguish the pleasure of freely chosen, leisurely walks from the despair of a state of waiting that is imposed by unemployment. His naively democratic utopia certainly wishes to see everyone happy, able to walk freely, to enjoy this "pleasurable process" and its capacity to skip over several steps on the ladder of political rights and social progress.

If Hessel's aesthetics of flanerie remains problematic, he still owes some of his most subtle images of the city to precisely this visual emphasis. Beyond all suspicious levity, the same seemingly aimless strategy manages to lead him to observations that, in the shape of Denkbilder, provide telling and significant portraits of his time. In a sensory and intellectual operation characteristic of Weimar flanerie, Hessel reads the modernity of his era precisely in the most banal aspects of its mass culture. As does Kracauer in his remarks on the Weimar detective novel, another contemporary reflection on the public but cryptic spaces of his society, Hessel experiences the café of a central hotel in the city as a "mystery-inducing twilight assembly [rätselaufgegebene Dämmerungsversammlung]" (FB, 242). Even though Hessel does not proceed to solve the mysteries of the Weimar hotel lobby in an extended excursus of its theoretical implications, he is still ready to perceive the signature of his time in even its most insignificant, seemingly ephemeral elements. As he notes of the acute boom in gold-framed oil prints: "Ever since the days of the inflation, the German has been in need of some glitter in his shack" (FB, 25). As framed collections of family pictures are replaced in the 1920s by the single portrait, the individual is isolated in space as well as in popular crafts. Following the tendencies of this period to promote liberal but superficial images of women,
Hessel reflects on a trend he observes in actresses who portray the repentant Magdalena with the bobbed hairdo of the 1920s [Babikopfl]: “How many Magdalenas does Magdeburg need? . . . I am beginning to get interested in statistics.” Hessel consciously understands such “trivial” culture in terms of the “intellectual sustenance” it offers the people. The oil print for him always signifies much more than mere kitsch: “It furnishes an endless number of rooms and souls” (FB, 26).

Like Kracauer and Benjamin, Hessel also sees a connection between space and fashion. He too views “externalities” and “interiors” as collective dispositions. In contrast to his contemporaries, however, he often limits himself to atmospheric portrayals, and thereby bypasses their ensuing critical interpretations. For example, when his subtle intuition for latent dispositions recognizes the distraction in the dance halls around Alexanderplatz as an expression of despair, “as if there lurked misery or danger” (FB, 208), he does not proceed to contextualize these observations within the terrain of a prefascist, petit-bourgeois population. Nevertheless, even Hessel occasionally moves in the direction of social commentary. Remarkin on the poor districts of northern Berlin—on how this poverty is “written” in “lightless back buildings,” miserable backyards, and in the lines of despairing faces—he notes: “Whoever has the opportunity to feel his way up the stifling flights of stairs, up to the miserable little apartments with their coal vapor and the bedchambers with their sour smell of nursing infants, can ‘learn’ ” (FB, 220). Yet this passage may also appear as a form of practiced “alienated leisure,” with the writer becoming a tourist to a reality of living and working situations that ultimately remain alien and incomprehensible to him.

In other words, if Hessel sometimes practices a flanerie of social awareness and critical contexts, he seeks out these opportunities all too rarely. A declared aesthete, this hedonistic city stroller in the long run prefers to renounce any didactic protocols about what might be “learned” from such critical practices. If Hessel’s flanerie displays an obvious lack of political engagement, this difficulty derives at the same time from the unconditional aesthetics to which he owes his very insights, that is to say, from what elsewhere we might view as a virtue: his wish to accept everything that he sees without passing aesthetic or ideological judgement. It is in this acute but sometimes limiting focus of perception that we can begin to read—within the process of Weimar flanerie—the ambiguity that often prevented Weimar intellectuals from taking more explicitly political stances. Even given a certain amount of empathy for Hessel’s project, an engaged author such as Kurt Tucholsky here identified a dangerous negligence—one that he pointed out to Hessel in 1932 when he asked in a review: “Is not our aimless impartiality, which twelve years ago was still a privilege and license, today guilt and emptiness?” Yes, Franz Hessel—that is what it is. Guilt and emptiness.” Nevertheless, Hessel continued to drift through the city as a flaneur along the lines of his most cherished principle: “It is not necessary to understand everything, one only needs to look at it with one’s eyes” (FB, 23). Within this affirmation of the primacy of vision, it is not essential to “interpret” everything; rather the task is to perceive the image of exterior reality in its entirety and with the utmost intensity that one can bring to it.

This visual focus is accompanied by Hessel’s appeal to the hedonist primacy of pleasure, to the enjoyment of any diversity, style, and distraction that may arise from the multiple forms of metropolitan impressions. With the end of the Weimar Republic, Hessel’s implicitly political and subversive flanerie would rapidly confront the harsh consequences of a reality punctuated by an unimagined degree of cynicism and brutality: Benjamin was driven to death, Kracauer chased into exile, and Hessel, the serene flaneur, continued “invisibly” to pursue his observations of Berlin until October 1938, when he became increasingly endangered and persecuted as a Jewish citizen. Finally, his status as a strolling “suspect” was concretized in intolerable ways: his expulsion and subsequent exile in France would come at a time when the state itself would occupy the streets, when the state would begin to erase a culture marked by the “return of the flaneur” in Weimar Germany.
Chapter 4
The Art of Walking


2. Hessel's life and writings are gradually receiving some attention in recent criticism, including the first literary monograph about motifs of eros and death in Hessel's novels by Jörg Plath, entitled Liebhaber der Großstadt. Ästhetische Konzeptionen im Werk Franz Hessels. These "aesthetic conceptions" include categories such as the ones summarized in "chapter 2.2.3.4: Der Flaneur, der Liebhaber," with specific consideration of "2.2.3.4.1: im Intérieur" and "2.2.3.4.2: im Extérieur." They do not engage a reading of flânerie as an aesthetics of literary scopophilia and the early manifestation of a protocinematic gaze. Among previous investigations of Hessel's works—along with Benjamin and Kracauer—figures primarily the part of one chapter dedicated to his writings in Eckhardt Köhn's survey of German flânerie, Straßenrausch, 153-94. Also cf. Neil H. Donahue, Forms of Disruption, 148-60, and Michael Bienert, Die eingebildete Metropole, Berlin im Feuerlenton der Weimarer Republik, 78-82. Hessel's urban writings have undergone a minor "renaissance" as a result of the celebrations on the occasion of Berlin's 750-year anniversary and the concomitant interest in discourses on the city and flânerie.

3. For many decades after Hessel's death in French exile in 1941, the historiography of German literature perpetuated absence and amnesia concerning this author. The Deutsches Literatur-Lexikon, for example, continues to list his date of death as "unknown" even as late as 1949, and the same reference work does not register any of the author's writings between 1924 and 1933. As late as 1969, the Handbuch der deutschen Gegenwartsliteratur does not acknowledge Hessel at all as an author with writings in his own right, footnoting him only in relation to Benjamin and Polgar.

4. I will focus here on certain junctures in the development of the concept of flâneur as author that will go beyond the facts of biography, to name some of the pivotal influences that have shaped the particular kind of experience that characterizes these writings. The following account is indebted for its factual information to the editorial and biographical essays provided by Bernd Witte in the new editions of Hessel's novels, background portraits that are based on conversations with Hessel's wife, Helen, and his sons, Ulrich and Stephane. See in particular Witte's biographical notes following Hessel's Der Kranladen des Glücks, 245-54, Heinliches Berlin, 127-37, and Alter Mann, 128-36, as well as his perceptive essay "Auf der Schwelle des Glücks. Franz Hessel," in Erinnerung zum Geist, 229-51. Also illuminating in this context are recollections and reminiscences provided by Hessel's wife and sons, collected in Letzte Hinsicht nach Paris. Franz Hessel und die Seinen im Exil, 43-96 and 109-50, as well as details from Hessel's own fragmentary diary, posthumously published in Juni. Magazin für Kultur und Politik.

5. Munich also saw Hessel's literary debut as a neoromantic in his collection of poems entitled Verlorene Gespielen (Lost Playmates). Indicative of Hessel's preferred attitude of a "gender blind" approach to flânerie's sexual politics, he does not name these figures "Gespielinnen," as Köhn quotes this title. The "Gespielten" of one of Hessel's first texts are thereby already not necessarily marked as, and limited to, female figures of diversion. Cf. Köhn, Straßenrausch, 153.

6. Cf. Susan Buck-Morss on this cooperation and the spatial origins of Benjamin's Paris Arcades, in her Dialektik des Seienden, 38ff.

7. See for example, Hessel's first volume of poetry, Verlorene Gespielen (1905), the Munich novelists Laura Wandel (1908), the poetry collection Sieben Dialoge (1924), the dramatic poem Die Winke von Ephesos (1925), the contemporary stories Teigwarten leicht gefährbt (1926), and the anthology Nachfeier (1929), all of them diverse, if somewhat epigonal, poetic exercises derived from traditional models of literature.

8. In one of Hessel's journalistic pieces, appearing under the heading of "Selbstanzeige" on occasion of the publication of Spazieren in Berlin, he announces his book and its aesthetic principles in a way that shows the inclusive nature of his engagement with the city: "Zur Liebhaberei will der Verfasser den Leser verführen, indem er ihn über Straßen und Plätze, durch Schlösser und Fabriken, Gärten und Zimmer, zu Kindern und Erwachsenen begleitet und ihm dabei erzählt, was ihm Mittelsamtes von altem und neunem Berlin einfällt." Das Tagebuch, 21 (1929): 870.

9. EG. This text presents the slightly abridged and altered edition of Hessel's original Erinnerungen zum Geist, his last text to appear in Germany, in 1933.


12. See Derrida, Of Grammatology.

14. Also cf. contemporary reflections of this central boulevard by Joseph Roth, "Der Kurfürstendamm" (1929), in Werke, 854-56, and Hans Siemsen, "Kurfürstendamm am Vormittag."
15. FB, 145.
17. Also see Hessel's reflections on the particular aesthetic openness that allows the flaneur a new or "first" gaze upon presumably familiar surroundings, experienced in revisiting some of the changes that the original location of scopophilia, the "Rummelpalate," has undergone on its way to becoming the democratic diversion of a modern amusement park: "Hier in der Luna-Park ist das nun alles moderner und in größtem Maßstab geboten. . . . Luna-Park ist 'für alle' " (Ein Flaneur in Berlin, 149).
18. See also, for example, Wilhelm Schnarrenberger, "Schilder als Zeichen."
19. Hessel draws our attention, in particular, to the most recent markers of modernity, describing the textuality of this new reality in its "advertisement signs that light up and disappear, wander off and come back again." FB, 145. Contextualizing this sensitivity to the variations in (artificial) lighting as a historically and culturally specific discourse, cf. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, Lichtblicke. Zur Geschichte der künstlichen Helligkeit im 19. Jahrhundert.
22. According to this great artist of nineteenth-century realism, it was the ethical task of the poet to highlight the benign aspects of modern life, especially in a time that he increasingly views as a vast, fractured "quarry of marble that carries within it the matter of eternity." Fontane, "Unsere lyrische und epische Poesie seit 1848," 12.
24. FB, 7. This text presents the unabridged, new edition of Hessel's original collection Spazieren in Berlin (1929).
25. Gaston Bachelard situates the genealogy of this tender gaze in the world of childhood and reverie, approximating the "first gaze" in a stance wherein "we relive by dreaming in our memories of childhood . . . precisely the world of the first time." See The Poetics of Reverie. Childhood, Language, and the Cosmos, 117. Paul de Man operates at a somewhat more deliberate distance by describing a similar innovation of vision characteristic of modern literature: "The human figures that epitomize modernity are defined by experiences such as childhood or convalescence, a freshness of perception that results from a slate wiped clean." Emphasis mine. In "Literary History and Literary Modernity," 157. The "first gaze" that Hessel has in mind differs markedly from what appears in other modernist texts, which on the surface seem predicated on a related visual intensity. While the flaneur follows the stream of images in a patient and attendant manner, the pedestrian employs a more aggressive, penetrating gaze, embodying the male gaze of a military modern, as in this example from Jünger's Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis: "Mit der geschürften Witterung des Großstädters durch-
exchange of looks." He goes on to paraphrase the flaneur's experience of an exchange range from historical texts and city calendars, to examples of poetry, songs, and other literature about Berlin.

43. Cf. the original reverie that frames Bachelard's genealogy of this experience, traced to a foundational exchange of the gaze between the child and his world of childhood: "Then . . . the dreamer believes that, between him and the world, there is an exchange of looks." He goes on to paraphrase the flaneur's experience of an exchange of the gaze in this moment of a childhood reverie: "It would be necessary to say that everything I look at looks at me." Poetics of Reverie, 185.

44. Many theoretical reflections on film pursue a similar aesthetics that emphasizes an attentive gaze and a quasi reversible relationship between the presumed "objects" and "subjects" of this scopophilic exchange, most prominently among them Kracauer's Theory of Film, while an animation of the gaze also figures in Béla Balázs's various writings on the cinema.

45. Cf. Weimar authors who pursue a similar sensory approach to theoretical thought, in particular authors such as Bloch, Benjamin, and Kracauer, but also Yan Goll, Wilhelm Speyer, and many others, among them female authors such as Irmgard Keun, Claire Goll, and Annette Kolb.

46. Hessel, for example, deplores the loss of a "holde Kinderstbenhomnung," the naive quality of an early childhood anarchy to which the adult flaneur ascribes certain intimate charms, "gewisse intime Reize." FB, 162.

47. EG, 55. Hessel's wording in the original text—"eine merkwürdige Geschichte"—evokes both the memorable and the remarkable aspects of both this "history" and its "narrative."


49. These and the following citations of Kracauer's text are from his "Kino in der Münzstraße," reprinted in Straßen in Berlin und anderswo, 69–71.

50. Cf. Kracauer's comments on "Der Detektiv-Roman" in Schriften, 103–204, as well as "The Hotel Lobby," one of the pivotal chapters in Mass Ornament, 173–85.

51. Cf. Dean MacCannell's observations on the tendency to exoticize aspects of workaday realities and to experience labor as a quasi-foreign territory: "The tourist's inability to understand what he sees is the product of a structural arrangement that sets him into a touristic relationship with a social object, in this case, work," The Tourist. A New Theory of the Leisure Class, 68.

52. One might indeed criticize Hessel's approach for a lack of explicit engagement. Yet even these problematic tendencies in his flanerie are a result of his attention to all, even seemingly negligible visual discoveries in the places and spaces of a society that he sees every day. The grounds for once criticizing and crediting this approach are based on the same unconditional, aestheticizing gaze that conjures the very insights of his flanerie: the attempt to valorize [gelten lassen] everything in a process of seeing without judging, perceiving the multitude of modern phenomena without subjecting them to aesthetically or ideologically preconceived notions.
