

Flânerie and Zen: the *flâneur* and *flâneuse* as practising Zen

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Abstract

The philosophy of Zen is a very wide discipline that is very popular in the East. While it is not so common in the West, there exists another philosophy that has some similarities with it: the *flânerie*. In this essay, I claim that both disciplines have philosophical similitudes and that their comparative element should be studied. I also claim that the feminine figure of the *flânerie*, the *flâneuse*, is the most agreeable with Zen. For this aim, I firstly will examine the philosophy of the *flânerie* at the beginning of Modernity, going over the figure of the *flâneur* and vindicating the importance of the *flâneuse*. Then I will analyse the philosophy of Zen, focusing on the subject-object dichotomy as well as on some authors such as Dōgen and Nishida Kitarō. Lastly, I will compare the two disciplines in order to defend my claims.

Keywords

flânerie, *flâneur*, *flâneuse*, gaze, Modernity, Zen, subject-object dichotomy, *mushin*, pure experience, nature.

Flânerie y Zen: el flâneur y la flâneuse practicando el Zen: La filosofía del Zen es una disciplina muy amplia y popular en Oriente. Aunque no es tan común en Occidente, existe otra filosofía que tiene algunas similitudes con ella: la *flânerie*. En este ensayo, sostengo que ambas disciplinas tienen similitudes filosóficas y que su elemento comparativo debe ser estudiado. También sostengo que la figura femenina de la *flânerie*, la *flâneuse*, es la que más concuerda con el Zen. Para ello, en primer lugar examinaré la filosofía de la *flânerie* a principios de la Modernidad, repasando la figura del *flâneur* y reivindicando la importancia de la *flâneuse*. A continuación, analizaré la filosofía del Zen, centrándome en la dicotomía sujeto-objeto, así como en algunos autores como Dōgen y Nishida Kitarō. Por último, compararé ambas disciplinas para defender mis tesis.

Palabras clave

flânerie, *flâneur*, *flâneuse*, mirada, Modernidad, Zen, dicotomía sujeto-objeto, *mushin*, experiencia pura, naturaleza.

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Introduction

The philosophy of Zen is a very wide discipline, but one of the definitions commonly given is that of *zazen*. Studying zen is *zazen*, the practice of sitting meditation, in which thinking, ideas, imagination, or perception do not play a role. It is thinking of not thinking³³. However, it could be argued that studying zen could happen while wandering or strolling if the same principles are kept. As Parkes states, Dōgen encouraged practice that “effects an opening up to normal, everyday awareness”³⁴ so that the true teachings of the Buddha Way can be perceived and learnt. Since Dōgen understands the natural landscape as the body of the Buddha, there seems to be no better way to learn the teachings of Zen³⁵.

While this philosophy was popular in the East, it was not in the West. However, with Modernity and the changes it brought upon Europe's large capitals, a new practice inspired various philosophical works: the practice of *flânerie*.

Even if *flânerie* is defined as a rational activity, there exist a lot of similarities between it and the practice of Zen philosophy. In this essay, I claim that there exists a similarity between the two practices and that their comparative element is worth studying. Also, I claim that the figure of the *flâneuse*, and not the *flâneur*, is the most agreeable with the philosophy of Zen.

In order to make these claims, I will first examine the philosophy of the *flâneur* at the beginning of Modernity, its definitions, and the defence of the *flâneuse* as an important and necessary figure. Then, I will go over the philosophy of Zen, focusing on its practices, the dichotomy established between the “I” and the subject, the importance of context, and the theories of some thinkers such as Dōgen and Nishida Kitarō. Lastly, I will compare both philosophies, drawing on their similarities and differences, and attempt to defend my main claims.

³³ James W. Heising, Thomas P. Kasulis, and John C. Maraldo, *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011): 142.

³⁴ Graham Parkes, “Dōgen’s “Mountains and Waters as Sūtras” (Sansui-kyō)”, in *Buddhist Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009): 85, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195328165.003.0008>.

³⁵ Parkes, “Dōgen’s “Mountains and Waters as Sūtras” (Sansui-kyō)”: 84.

The Practice of *Flânerie*, The Figure of the *Flâneur*, and The Impossibility of The *Flâneuse*

In the essay *Mujer y Ciudad: Reivindicación y Representación Cinematográfica de la Flâneuse* (Woman and City: Vindication and Cinematic Representation of the Flâneuse), Elsa Rodríguez López examines the figure of the *flâneur* and its female version, the *flâneuse*, as the ones that engage in the practice of *flânerie*, the act of aimless strolling through the city while observing it and taking in all its physical manifestations³⁶. However, *flânerie* is only reserved for men, and the female figure, the *flâneuse*, represents an impossibility. Rodríguez López analyses this impossibility and argues against it by reviewing four films that depict *flâneuses* resisting the imposed patriarchal view³⁷.

Let us begin by examining the characteristics of the *flâneur*. The *flâneur* was a figure of the developing metropolises of the XIX century that has been defined as the stroller who wanders aimlessly through the city and perceives it as an aesthetic experience. It is a man who wanders through the public spaces of the city at a slow pace, moving aimlessly, and distracting himself with everything he sees. While he uses all senses, sight is the most important, being the *flâneur*'s gaze his most characteristic feature³⁸.

There exist various elements that some authors consider most important in the practice of *flânerie*. Charles Baudelaire focuses on time, claiming that the *flâneur* moves in a phantasmagorical temporality where space is observed in an illusory time since the poet views the experience of modernity as ephemeral. The author also states that the *flâneur*'s gaze is rational and intellectual and that the *flâneur* always has a reflexive attitude. Moreover, the *flâneur* remains hidden from the gazes of the passers-by while being able to observe them, and, whereas he observes all social types, women always are reduced to their beauty and their status as objects³⁹.

Walter Benjamin also focuses on the reflexive capacity of the *flâneur* by stating that the *flânerie* is an exercise in memory. The author pays special attention to the

³⁶ Elsa Rodríguez López, "Mujer y ciudad: reivindicación y representación cinematográfica de la flâneuse" (Bachelor's Th., Universidad de Oviedo, 2023): 4.

³⁷ Rodríguez López, "Mujer y ciudad: reivindicación y representación cinematográfica de la flâneuse": 4-7.

³⁸ Rodríguez López, 8-9.

³⁹ Rodríguez López, 10-13.

metropolis where the *flâneur* conducts his stroll and its continuous changing⁴⁰. He also stresses the importance of his gaze: “his open eye seeks something quite different from what the crowd comes to see (...) to the thinker, to the philosopher lost in his reflections, this external agitation is beneficial, because it mixes and shakes his ideas, as the storm does with the waves of the sea”⁴¹.

Furthermore, this gaze is also described as naïve and anti-prejudicial by Franz Hessel, who narrates his own experience as a *flâneur* and emphasises his desire to want to look again at the city in which he lives as he did the first time. Like Benjamin, he wants to recover the historical memory of the city along with his own memories. Thus, the *flânerie* becomes an action that links present, past, and future of the city and relates the subjective experiences of the flaneur to what is observed in the urban world⁴².

Lastly, Siegfried Kracauer argues against Hessel that the development of the culture of distraction is where the *flâneur* understands the existential emptiness present in this lifestyle. Thus, the *flâneur* is a melancholic figure and his only consolation is the aesthetic experience that the ever-changing modern city never fails to provide⁴³.

All in all, the practice of *flânerie* allows one to observe all the details of the city, to reflect on what one sees, to understand the social relations that take place there and, in doing so, to form a basis for the development of artistic work and philosophical-political reflections. However, the authors repeatedly stress that women cannot engage in this practice, and even that *flâneries* practised in the company of a woman should be avoided⁴⁴.

Along with women’s confinement to the domestic space, the *flânerie* could not be practised by women due to them being regarded as objects. Since one of the characteristics of the *flâneur* was observing without being observed, women could never become *flâneuses*, as they are always being looked at. Nevertheless, some women have attempted to practice the *flânerie*, and some authors have defended the importance of the *flâneuse*⁴⁵. As Rodríguez López accurately points out, “the very

⁴⁰ Rodríguez López, 14-17.

⁴¹ Rodríguez López, 15.

⁴² Rodríguez López, 17-18.

⁴³ Rodríguez López, 18.

⁴⁴ Rodríguez López, 22.

⁴⁵ Rodríguez López, 22-32.

figure of the *flâneuse* brings the [patriarchal] division and discrimination into focus, making her walk not just a contemplative activity but an action that inevitably entails a critique and a subversion of the paradigmatic patriarchal model of the walk”⁴⁶.

All in all, the *flâneuse* is a crucial figure when studying the patriarchal division present in the modern metropolises and the modern period, but it also entails a subversion of the understanding of *flânerie* as an exclusively masculine practice⁴⁷.

Zen Philosophy

Let us now go over some important Zen theories and concepts. T.P. Kasulis explains in the book *Zen Action / Zen Person* that Japanese is a language spoken from the perspective of the context in a given instance, the R, instead of the I and you, the *a* and *b*, which only become meaningful insofar as the former gives them meaning. Thus, context is an organic reality that gives meaning to everything, including the individual. Zen philosophy establishes the context of nothingness, or mu, in which Zen persons find their identity. In this way, Kasulis claims that Zen Buddhists should not try to stand outside this context to understand it, but rather understand themselves and the objects around them from the perspective of nothingness⁴⁸. As he points out in *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, “[t]o practice-authenticate the totality of phenomena by conveying yourself to them—that’s delusion. To practice-authenticate yourself by letting the totality of phenomena advance—that’s realisation”⁴⁹.

Regarding the subject-object dichotomy, H. Hashi describes consciousness as a threefold structure: viewing (I see), thinking (I see myself), and acting (I see objects of mine). She claims that, while scientists believe in the existence of absolute objectivity, Zen Buddhism states that in believing and keeping the most objectivist knowledge, the thinking human limits the absolute truth in this knowledge and forgets to reflect on one’s own thinking position from a self-critical distance, i.e., “as

⁴⁶ Rodríguez López, 31.

⁴⁷ Rodríguez López, 32.

⁴⁸ Thomas P. Kasulis, *Zen Action/Zen Person* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2021): 3-15.

⁴⁹ Heising, Kasulis, and Maraldo, *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*: 145.

an observer to the thinking and acting unit of one's own self"⁵⁰. As she says, "[t]he world is always a limited world which remains in a frame of one's own self-consciousness and which is always changing in a network of relations between the environment and the human"⁵¹.

Further, she points out Nishida's claim about the self being both the true self in the subjectivist way and part of the phenomena of the whole world and universe. The dynamic flexibility to solve human subjectivism and remind the mutual transmission between the I and nature is the *mushin*. Thus, subjectivism is abandoned by a clear awareness, i.e. *mushin*, that integrates body and mind⁵². Ultimately, Hashi believes that "[e]very subject (individual, particular one) is regarded from the viewpoint of other, an object. Every object is, regarded from another viewpoint, a subject"⁵³.

Along with this theory of clear awareness, Kasulis regards thought as an intermediary stage. However, he refuses to accept that reality is retrospectively reconstructed. He states that humans isolate aspects of experiences in this reconstruction that were not isolated within the original experience as it occurs. Thus, he claims that reality is what is now happening and not a "higher realm of fixed reality", thence stressing immediacy as a crucial characteristic of true experience⁵⁴. This immediacy is key in the two ideas that will now be described: Dōgen's existential moment and Nishida's pure experience.

Dōgen's existential moment, or *Uji*, is constituted by the character for being or having and the character for time. In this way, Dōgen explains that this existential moment means that "each moment is in itself an existence and that all existences are momentary"⁵⁵. This notion implies that something in time is not self-identical at different moments, opposed to the Western view⁵⁶. Dōgen thus claims that everything

⁵⁰ Hisaki Hashi, "The Significance of "mushin": The Essential Mind of Zen Buddhist Philosophy for Humans in a Contemporary World", *Asian Studies* 4, no. 1 (February 29, 2016): 99-101, <https://doi.org/10.4312/as.2016.4.1.97-112>.

⁵¹ Hashi, "The Significance of "mushin": The Essential Mind of Zen Buddhist Philosophy for Humans in a Contemporary World": 105.

⁵² *Ibid.*: 103-109.

⁵³ *Ibid.*: 109.

⁵⁴ Heising, Kasulis, and Maraldo, *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*: 60-63.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*: 148.

⁵⁶ Rein Raud, "The Existential Moment: Rereading Dōgen's Theory of Time", *Philosophy East and West* 62, no. 2 (2012): 153, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2012.0033>.

is in change, that nothing stays the same, and that shifting is the very quality of the momentary that the existential moment entails⁵⁷. Past and future are refused and the immediate now is the only way to experience reality truthfully⁵⁸.

The experience of reality in the immediate now with a non-reflective form of consciousness is what Nishida Kitarô calls pure experience. Pure experience, as Zavala claims, is the condition in which the self becomes conscious of its own self-perception, thus establishing the identity of subject and object. Immediate experience is a present consciousness where neither seer nor thing seen, neither subjectivity nor objectivity, exist. In this pure experience, nature is something active itself⁵⁹.

Zavala then analyses Nishida's conception about thinking and states that, when it becomes corporeal, we are led to reflect on the relationship between spirit and matter, notions that, according to the theory of pure experience, refer to one same experience where no mind or things exist. Thus, knowledge is just a cognitive activity that extends to a reality independent of individual minds. When this reality reaches the mind's internal processes, objectivity and subjectivity coincide, and knowledge is thus being⁶⁰. As Zavala shows:

[W]hile knowledge discovers unity in multiplicity and discovers the I within the non-I, our will unifies multiplicity through the one and makes the non-I to follow and obey the I. This is why complete knowledge is a unity of subject and object, and this complete unity is the truth. Immediate experience is a condition of complete unification of consciousness, that is to say, it is complete knowledge.⁶¹

Applying the Concepts: *Flânerie* as a Zen Practice

As Graham Parkes shows, Charles Baudelaire states that "[t]he perfect *flâneur* is like a mirror as vast as the crowd itself, or a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness, which with each one of its movements represents the multiplicity of life and the dynamic grace of all life's elements⁶²". Further, he notes that Benjamin claims that

⁵⁷ Heising, Kasulis, and Maraldo, *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*: 150.

⁵⁸ Raud, "The Existential Moment: Rereading Dôgen's Theory of Time": 154-157.

⁵⁹ Agustín Jacinto Zavala, "The Fragments Concerning Pure Experience and the Zen No Kenkyu", *Journal of Nishida Philosophy Association* 9 (2012): 173-172, https://doi.org/10.32133/jnpa.9.0_154.

⁶⁰ Zavala, "The Fragments Concerning Pure Experience and the Zen No Kenkyu": 172-169.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*: 169.

⁶² Graham Parkes, "Flânerie", *Transit* 2, no. 1 (January 1, 2005), <https://doi.org/10.5070/t721009709>.

the fundamental experience of this figure is the “colportage phenomenon of space”, meaning that “everything that potentially happened in a particular place is experienced all at once”⁶³.

In a different paper, Parkes references the undermining of the distinction between sentient and non-sentient beings brought forward by the Mahāyāna universalism and claims that Buddha-nature exists not only in plants, trees, or the earth but even in particles of dust. Thus, understanding the natural world is the actualisation of the ancient Buddha Way⁶⁴.

The *flâneur*’s kaleidoscopic gaze perceives the city in the same way that the Buddha-nature is supposed to be learned: through a non-prejudicial perception of the world, in which all that exists in that moment is taken in without judgement or discrimination, but as a preaching of the Buddha, that is, the *dharmā*. This is just one of the several similarities and parallelisms that can be drawn between the practice of *flânerie* and the philosophy of Zen.

Nishida’s pure experience as a present consciousness could be linked to the way the *flâneur* perceives the city during an aimless stroll rather than fixating on certain elements of the city. This aimless stroll is characterised by getting lost in the city and taking it in just as it appears. Even if the *flânerie* is defined as a rational activity whereas Zen philosophy refers to thinking as an intermediary stage, immediacy is common to both, just as the refusal of a retrospective reconstruction of reality is⁶⁵.

Moreover, Dōgen’s existential moment, meaning that each moment represents an existence in itself, stresses the importance of the present as the *flânerie* does. In this immediacy, as Dōgen claims, the compound of past, present, and future is found, thus finding in each existential moment everything that is, has been, and will be. A correlation can be found in Baudelaire’s and Hessel’s accounts of time regarding *flânerie* as a phantasmagorical temporality that regards the experience of modernity as ephemeral and serves as a way to evoke historical and personal memories.

Lastly, revisiting Parkes’s ideas, it must be noted that, while Zen focuses on nature, the *flâneur* strolls around the metropolis, but in both exists a character of continuous

⁶³ Parkes, “Flânerie”.

⁶⁴ Parkes, “Dōgen’s “Mountains and Waters as Sūtras” (Sansui-kyō)”: 83-85.

⁶⁵ Kasulis, *Zen Action/Zen Person*: 60.

shifting, a reality that is only found in this walking and non-prejudicial gaze. For if you do not relate to your surroundings as alive and changing while strolling, “it is not that you do not walk, but that you do not understand your own walking”⁶⁶.

However, one may wonder whether the *flâneuse* meets Zen’s principles just as the *flâneur* does. I argue that the female figure is a more accurate representation of Zen’s postulates since she embodies the identity of subject and object. The fact that a woman cannot fulfil *flânerie*’s requisite of observing while remaining hidden is not an obstacle but a reconciliation with Zen’s predicament. Her point of view is more valuable than the *flâneur*’s because she understands the experience of being both seer and thing seen, both subject and object, and relating to her surroundings from this perspective.

Conclusion

As mentioned, Japanese is a language spoken from the perspective of the context rather than from the I and you. Thus, the individual becomes meaningful insofar as one perceives oneself as a result of the context in which one is imbued. This can only be achieved when one perceives oneself as both a subject and an object shaped by the relations existing in one’s surroundings. The *flâneuse* is the perfect personification of this statement.

The figure of the *flâneuse* has always been discussed and problematised. While many argued for her impossibility, others see in her walk a critique of the established social norms and a resistance against the status quo. As Rodríguez López claims,

Proposing the *flâneuse* as a critical archetype means thinking of walking as a tool that has served both to transgress limits and to resist the imposed repression that women have suffered over time and continue to suffer today. The *flâneuse* is the woman who constitutes herself as a subject and claims her full right to inhabit the modern and contemporary city.⁶⁷

Even if this self-constitution as a subject cannot eliminate her condition as an object, Zen teachings and theories show that only in this way one can achieve true knowledge and begin the path towards Buddha nature. After all, as Masakatsu Fujita and Bret

⁶⁶ Parkes, "Dōgen's "Mountains and Waters as Sūtras" (Sansui-kyō)": 87.

⁶⁷ Rodríguez López, "Mujer y ciudad: reivindicación y representación cinematográfica de la *flâneuse*": 79.

Davis point out, “[w]e reach the quintessence of good conduct only when subject and object merge, self and things forget each other, and all that exists is the activity of the sole reality of the universe”⁶⁸.

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⁶⁸ Masakatsu Fujita y Bret W. Davis, "The Significance of Japanese Philosophy", *Journal of Japanese Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (2013): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jjp.2013.0003>.