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Going, gouine, gone:

How dress altered women's experiences of walking in Paris, a city of spectacle.

Kitty O'Brien

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I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

Signed: Kitty O'Brien.

Programme: Department of Applied Materials, Textile Art & Artefact with Critical Cultures.

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Introduction.

Ever since people have lived in Paris, people have been writing about Paris. From Victor Hugo and Baudelaire, to Oscar Wilde and James Joyce, Paris has long been the love object at the centre of literature. Appearing first in the 1881 edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (2008) the cluster entitled Birds of Passage, consisting of seven poems, includes the line "And I send these words to Paris with my love," (Whitman, 2008) which, as an ex-inhabitant of the city, is what I intend to do by writing this essay.

In the English language, it is common for a piece of writing to be referred to as a passage. Passage in French is mainly used to refer to a narrow laneway. Dotted across the right bank, still standing proudly are a small number of the shopping arcades that cultural critic Walter Benjamin once chronicled. Each of these shopping arcades, or *passage couvert* (Benjamin, 2002) symbolises the modernisation and industrialisation that the city of Paris underwent in the nineteenth-century. But in French, the word passage not only describes these arcades, it can also be used to define a movement or crossing, and as a slang term similar to the colloquial gouine, meaning dyke or lesbian.

These are the passages I will be writing about in the city; the arcades - *le couloir*, the crossing - *la traversee* and the lesbian - *la gouine.*

As Elizabeth Wilson writes in *The Sphinx and the City* (1992), "With so vast a subject as life in cities, much has inevitably been left out. Many omissions have been regretted but deliberate. Necessarily, the result is something of a collage, as fragmentary and partial as the experience of city life itself." (Wilson, 1992, p. 10) Her writing is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's *One Way Street* (2016), which takes the form of a collection of detached meditations. Benjamin's work has also been described as a collage, or as the writer Michael W. Jennings puts it, in his introduction to the book, "Avoiding all semblance of linear narrative, the book seems on first reading to offer a jumble of sixty apparently autonomous short prose pieces" (Jennings in Benjamin, 2016) In another edition

of the work, *One Way Street And Other Writings* (2009) Susan Sontag declares “His sentences do not seem to be generated in the usual way; they do not entail. Each sentence is written as if it were the first, or the last”. (Benjamin, 2009) The style of these writings mimics the often-incoherent urban streetscapes, with “shops, cafes, and apartments, alive with the hubbub of social interactions and papered over with public inscriptions of all kinds: advertisements, signs, posters, slogans.” (Benjamin, 2016).

I think there is an intrinsic element of disjointedness when writing about a city. Such a substantial and diverse topic can hardly be minimised into a summary. Therefore, in this essay I intend to focus on three main topics and specifically the interactions between them. I will explore, through an investigation of binary gender deviance, women walking in Paris and how clothing intercepted their experiences of the spectacularist city. I will examine, alongside the notion of the female flâneur, the film *Cléo de 5 à 7* by Agnès Varda (1962) as well as the lives of women who famously cross-dressed such as George Sand and Colette. This essay will draw on theories presented by fashion and dress historians, including Anne Hollander and Joanne Entwistle, as well as gender theorists Judith Butler and Jack Halberstam.

Chapter One; Le couloir.

The arcades and shopping malls that were built across Paris in the early nineteenth century enabled women to relish in the new opportunity of being out, walking in the streets of the city. Women were, for the first time, encouraged to venture into the city from the suburbs to support the commercial hubs. Due to Walter Benjamin's untimely passing, *The Arcades Project* (2002) remains unfinished, however, it still provides a wealth of insight into the experiences afforded women by the city of Paris throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is a seminal work in visual culture studies because Benjamin presents the characteristics of the city at the time through sequences of descriptions of images, not theories.

To understand the advent of Paris becoming a city that offered both liberation and limitation to women's freedoms through its society of spectacle, it is important to acknowledge the context of the city at the time.

Naturally, the city that we see today has undergone substantial transformations from the Paris of centuries past, but the significant alterations made to the city of Paris presided over by Louis Napoleon Bonaparte, or Napoleon III, meant that the city was vastly different at the beginning of the nineteenth century to the end of that era.

Victor Hugo captured a particular image of the French capital as it used to be, "dark, unsanitary, foul-smelling, dilapidated, disease-ridden" (Kunstler, 2001, p. 2). in his 1862 novel *Les Misérables,* (2012) which is an unrecognisable portrayal of the city as we know it today.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Napoleon III appointed Baron Georges Haussmann as prefect of the Department of the Seine, which effectively meant that Haussmann became responsible for the reinvention of Paris. (Kunstler, 2001). The remodelling of the city exceeded seventeen years and was dictated by the growing population of the city which had more than doubled in the first half of the century (Stovall, 1990). Walter Benjamin reflects on the before-and-after of the city and cites Haussmann as having given himself the moniker of "demolition artist" (Benjamin, 2002, p. 12) or

“artiste démolisseur” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 12) because of the almost 20,000 buildings that he knocked down, turning the city “inside-out and upside down in the process”. (Kunstler, 2003, p. 4).

Fig. 1. Photograph taken by Charles Marville in 1876 of what was once Butte des Moulins, and is now the celebrated Avenue de l’Opéra.

Benjamin describes how the city, once made up of narrow streets weaving in and out of one another, was transformed into broad boulevards and large department stores, in place of the shopping arcades which only decades previous, “in the fifteen years following 1822” (Benjamin, 2002, p.3) were a feat of modernity in their own right.

Napoleon III then declared he intended to host an international exhibition in Paris comparable to the first International World Fair in London in 1851. Napoleon III hoped to consolidate “France’s role in the world.” (De Tholozany, 2011, n.p.) and promote Paris’s “transformation from an industrial to a commercial capital.” (Schwartz, 1998, p. 3).

Throughout the nineteenth century, five international exhibitions were held in Paris, and each one reinforced Paris as a city that had become commercialised, capitalistic, and a city of spectacle. Benjamin describes the world fairs as “places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 7), and although the arcades were the first major indicators of the commercialised urban potential of Paris, the world fairs fundamentally adjusted the fabric of the city. The cosmetic and structural alterations made to the city attracted transient swarms of people to the city who would previously have avoided it. Not only were the fairs about shopping, they were also about looking, and people travelled to the city to experience the mercenary phantasmagoric urban spectacle.

Fig. 2. View from pont Alexandre III of the entrance to the 1900 world fair.

It is around this time that Benjamin believes Paris had transformed into the “capital of the nineteenth century” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 3), and it was during these years that Charles Baudelaire chronicled the ardent feeling of alienation caused by urbanisation and spectacularisation. As Benjamin writes, “with Baudelaire, Paris becomes the subject of lyric poetry. This poetry is no hymn to the homeland; rather, the gaze of the allegorist, as it falls on the city, is the gaze of the

alienated man … whose way of life still conceals behind a mitigating nimbus the coming desolation of the big-city dweller." (Benjamin, 2002, p. 10)

The international exhibitions encouraged the development of the city to accommodate them, and so, there was a cycle of development, which was ever reaching toward a capitalist global position.

Gare Saint-Lazare, the oldest railway station in France, was renovated under Haussmann during this period to prepare for the crowds anticipated for the 1867 world exhibition. Due to this influx, the areas surrounding the larger train stations changed. "Paris did not merely host exhibitions; it had become one." (Schwartz, 1998, p. 1).

Fig. 3. Photo taken by Eugène Atget that exemplifies the commodity culture of Paris after Haussmann's reinvention of the city, with the reflection of his buildings in the new shop window.

This population was predisposed to find entertainment in the city and had the means to spend. Arcades and cafés were built around the stations, the spaces became purposely deceptive and spectacular, contributing to what is today referred to as Parisian café culture. “The society based on modern industry is not accidentally or superficially spectacular, it is fundamentally spectaclist. In the spectacle—the visual reflection of the ruling economic order—goals are nothing, development is everything. The spectacle aims at nothing other than itself.” (Debord, 2012, p. 9). This gave visitors a false sense of Parisian reality. According to Walter Benjamin, “In 1757 there were only three cafes in Paris.” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 108) and yet “By the last third of the nineteenth century, Paris had become the European centre of a burgeoning leisure industry.” (Schwartz, 1998, p. 1). Leisure had become a commodity, and the simple act of looking had become a cornerstone of Parisian culture, as art historian Vanessa Schwartz describes, “Although the connection of city life to visuality was not new in the nineteenth century, the identification of Paris as a place where everyday life was elevated to a spectacle for mass consumption was.” (Schwartz, 1998, p. 13)

In an environment where everything could be traded, more women began to inhabit the city as sex workers, and with the advent of commercial prostitution came a normalisation of a female presence on the streets. (Wilson, 1992) Émile Zola eternalises the fear of female sexuality felt by men at the time, most notably in his 1880 novel *Nana* (2022) which follows the life of a young girl who becomes the most famous courtesan in Paris, and her fall from grace after her sexuality becomes rampant and she dies from smallpox. We see this sexual anxiety in Baudelaire’s work too, for he saw the rising sexual expression of women as premonitory of the city’s unnaturalness, and used the symbol of the prostitute to represent the “new regime of nineteenth-century urbanism” (Wilson, 2012, p.85).

To Baudelaire, female sexuality was the problem of the urban environment, and exemplified all that had gone wrong; commoditisation, commercialisation and mass production, “In the prostitution of the metropolis the woman herself becomes an article that is mass produced.” (Wilson, 2012, p.85)

In *The Sphinx and the City,* Elizabeth Wilson questions whether or not it is plausible to suggest that the prostitutes of the time were the female equivalent of Baudelaire and Benjamin’s character of the *flâneur*, for “both shared an intimate knowledge of the dark recesses or urban life.” (Wilson, 1992, p. 55).

Chapter Two; La traversée.

From the French verb *flâner*, which means to stroll, the concept of the *flâneur* was established in the early nineteenth century in Paris. The image of the *flâneur* had been floating around the literary scene in Paris for the previous few decades, most notably in writer Charles Baudelaire's essay *The Painter of Modern Life*, (1978) represented the archetype of a well-dressed, middle-class man of leisure, who had the privilege to act as a connoisseur of urban exploration and observation by wandering the modern Parisian streets. Baudelaire (1978) describes that the job of the *flâneur* is to become an impartial and invisible observer of his surroundings, the city, and the inhabitants:

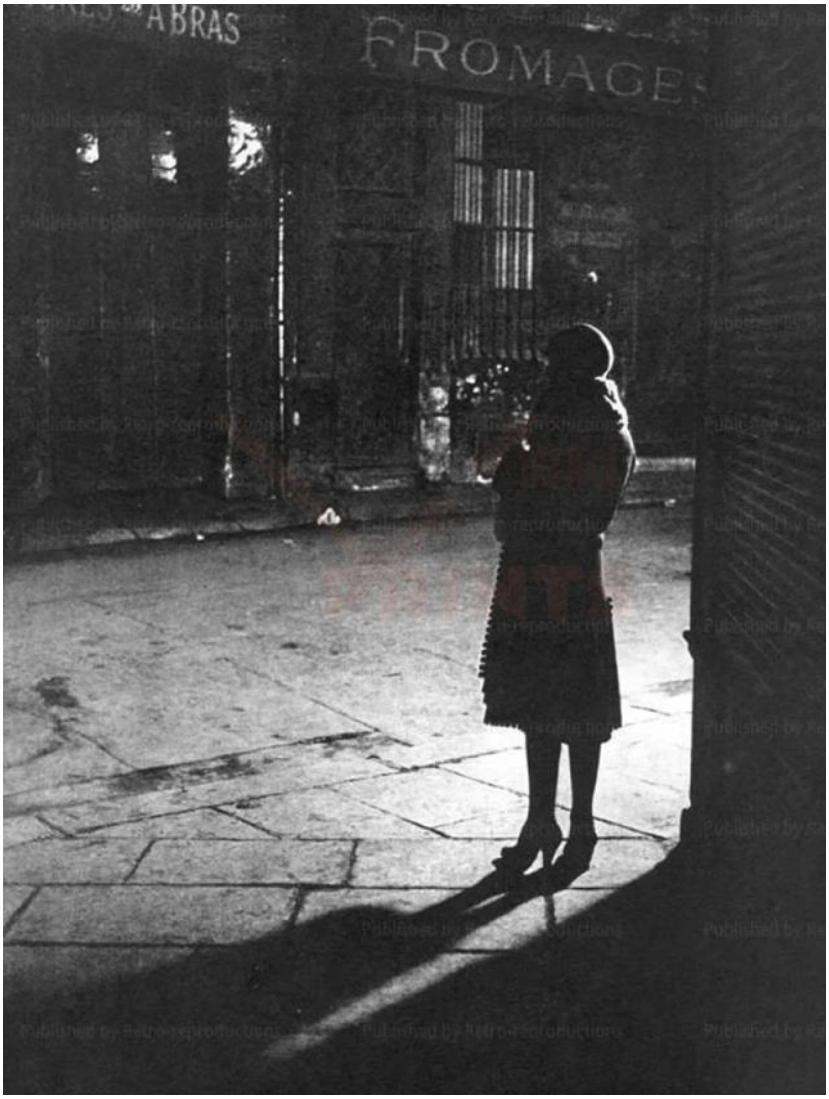
> His passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite.

In *The Arcades Project*, (2002) Benjamin elaborates on the concept of the *flâneur* as a quintessential figure of modern urban life, a figure that discovers each warp and weft of the city through idle wandering and investigation. This figure is a prime example of the spectaclisation of the city, even its people become spectacle. Because of the expanding centres of leisure and consumerism, there were more opportunities for people to go into the urban crowd and take advantage of its anonymity, "The proliferation of public places of pleasure and interest created a new kind of public person with the leisure to wander, watch and browse: the *flâneur*, a key figure in the critical literature of modernity and urbanisation" (Wilson, 2012, p. 74)

In the twenty-first century, feminist writers such as Lauren Elkin and Elizabeth Wilson proposed that the female counterpart be referred to as *flâneuse*, arguing that while it may not have been historically possible for a woman to behave like the flâneur, women too lived in cities, and were part of this aimless wandering, However, the very fact of their womanhood distinguished this act from its male equivalent. Baudelaire offers the figure of the *passante* (Baudelaire, 1978) as his idea of the urban female, but this reinforces her objectification, he does not question her identity or

what she is doing, she is simply a dream-like vision of a woman. “He (Baudelaire) is disinclined to consider who she might actually be, where she might be coming from, where she might be going.” (Elkin, 2017 p. 9)

In the oft-cited essay by Janet Wolff, she contests “There is no question of inventing the *flâneuse*: the essential point is that such a character was rendered impossible by the sexual divisions of the nineteenth century.” (Wolff, 1990, p.41) In her book *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (1988) Griselda Pollock argues that “there is no female equivalent of the quintessential masculine figure, the *flâneur*; there is not and could not be a female *flâneuse*” (Pollock, 1998, p. 71).



However, Lauren Elkin disputes this, “To suggest that there couldn’t be a female version of the *flâneur* is to limit the ways women have interacted with the city to the ways *men* have interacted with the city … Perhaps the answer is not to attempt to make a woman fit a masculine concept, but to redefine the concept itself.” (Elkin, 2017, p. 11)

Fig. 4: A photograph of woman standing alone on a street in Paris at night, taken by Brassaï.

Elkin illustrates that the "argument against the *flâneuse* sometimes has to do with questions of visibility" (Elkin, 2017, p. 13), again revisiting the problems arising from the city of spectacle, "We would love to be invisible the way a man is. We're not the ones who make ourselves visible … it's the gaze of the *flâneur* that makes the woman who would join their ranks too visible to slip by unnoticed." (Elkin, 2017, p. 13)

The notion of the city of spectacle inherently produces questions; who is 'doing' the looking? How does their gaze fall on the other inhabitants of the metropolis?

The film *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962) by Agnès Varda is often referenced in the historical exploration of the flâneuse, and the study of women as spectacle in urban environments. It is a fundamental text of the French New Wave cinematic movement which erupted in the late 1950s. In the film, Varda tells the story of a young, famous singer called Cléo, as she awaits the results of a biopsy. At the beginning of the film, Cléo is convinced that she has stomach cancer, and we follow on her physical journey across the left bank of Paris, and her personal journey, as she confronts her self-image and prepares to face her own mortality. Varda herself studied photography before moving to filmmaking, and a central theme of the movie is an examination of the ways by which people look.

Fig. 5: A still from Agnès Varda's *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962) interrogating the gaze and self image.

The film centres around Cléo's perception of herself, her beauty, death, and the ego-death she experiences about halfway through the film. Cléo has meticulously created herself as an image of a woman, as opposed to a real person. A key aspect of the film is the recurring emblem of mirrors.

Paris as a city of spectacle is represented as a house of mirrors, through the shop windows, the eyes of the onlookers as well as the actual mirrors that are scattered around the city. Cléo not only uses these mirrors to assess her appearance, but also to evaluate her self-image, looking through the eyes of the other. She is a spectacle to be consumed, and instead of observing the world around her she is obsessed with dictating how the world around her looks back.

This is underscored in the scenes where she is back in her apartment. Firstly, when her lover arrives Cléo has donned a white robe and created herself as a sexual object for his consumption. She confides in him her concerns over her illness and he claims she is merely looking for attention. We see in this scene how Cléo is constantly looked at but never actually *seen*. Secondly, the pivotal moment of the film comes after this encounter, when her musicians give her a new song to sing which is a heartbreaking lament of her nothing-ness if she does not have the other to acknowledge her, "If you come too late I'll be buried in the ground, alone, ugly, ashen." (Cléo de 5 à 7, 1962) At the end of this song Cléo confronts the songwriters and challenges their exploitation. She takes off her wig and changes into an all-black outfit, possibly as a symbol of her acceptance of her illness. Cléo then ventures back into the city, on her own this time, and at this point, while looking at her reflection in a mirror, she has a realisation, "I think others look at me. I look at no one but myself." (Cléo de 5 à 7, 1962) she shifts from being the object – the watched, to the subject of looking – the watcher. In the act of reclaiming her own identity, Cléo observes that other people look at her, but this time she does not see herself through their eyes. It is notable also that Cléo is a successful, white, conventionally beautiful woman, and yet because of her beauty, she has been subjected to furious anxiety over her value outside of her appearance. When she is walking down a staircase with a friend, Dorothée, Cléo's hand mirror falls and shatters on the ground. Cléo sees this as

another omen of her death, but it is the last mirror that we see in the film, and I believe it to be a symbol of her liberation from a limited self-image. In the final act of the film, we see Cléo dancing down the stairs at Parc de Montsouris, enjoying new feelings of independence and self-assurance. She meets a soldier who is due to go to fight in the French-Algerian war, and they discuss their worries of potential death, but like the soldier, Cléo is now ready to face the battle ahead.

After her doctor confirms Cléo's suspicions that she has cancer, she declares "I have the feeling my fear has gone. I have the feeling that I am happy." (Cléo de 5 à 7, 1962) because she is no longer just a reflection, or an object to be consumed, she is forced to face death, and therefore, life.

Cléo de 5 à 7 (1962) represents the character of the flâneur and their city through common symbols discussed by Benjamin and exemplified by Varda such as the repetitive emblem of the mirror as a symbol of the gaze. 'The way mirrors bring the open expanse, the streets, into the café—this, too, belongs to the interweaving of spaces, to the spectacle by which the flâneur is ineluctably drawn." (Benjamin, 2002, p. 537).

The film inspects the society of the spectacle and its effect on female identity. Laura Mulvey discusses the inequities between men and women in a spectacularist society in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1989) investigating "the way film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle." (Mulvey, 1989, p. 14)

Cléo de 5 à 7 (1962) was filmed on the longest day of the year from 5 to 7p.m. and is presented in thirteen chapters, the thirteenth being the main arrondissement that Cléo travels around that day. The thirteenth arrondissement of today's Paris is distant from the one we see in Varda's work, as it has become one of the business and banking hubs of the city. In fact, if Cléo was to exit the *Hôpitaux Universitaires Pitié Salpêtrière*, where she and Antoine, the soldier, stand at the end of the film, and continued walking down *Quai d'Austerlitz* for about three minutes, she would be standing outside my old apartment. The city is as important a character in the film as Cléo herself,

writer Janice Mouton describes, “Looking at how filmmaker Agnes Varda looks at Paris, and looking at Cléo learning to look, is an extraordinary experience with regard to both city viewing and filmviewing.” (Mouton, 2001, p.3) Mouton posits that over the course of the film, Cléo is transformed from an object of feminine masquerade, to a female flâneur.

Throughout the first half of the film, Cléo performs imitations of femininity, “The striking artificiality and constructedness of Cléo's look - her blonde wig, meticulous makeup, fifties "Maidenform" contour, and showy high heels-raise immediate questions about why she presents herself in this manner. Who is she masquerading for?” (Mouton, 2001, p.3)

She exemplifies what Joan Riviere referred to as Womanliness as Masquerade in her 1929 essay. “Fraudulent femininity covers up a wish for masculinity that must be hidden out of a fear of retribution.” (Hughes, 2013, n.p.) Riviere describes a woman who, due to her anxiety about her masculine characteristics, assumes a charade of femininity. It could be proposed that this is what drives Cléo to rely so heavily on others’ perceptions of her.

The film exemplifies how women in the spectacular city are forever constructing ways to escape the gaze. Cléo’s costume changes from a bright polka dot dress to a plain monochrome outfit as she, in her own way, attempts to use dress as a tool to slip into the crowd.

Fig. 6: A still from Agnès Varda’s *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962) representing Cléo’s new-found sense of contentedness.

Chapter Three; La gouine

The convergence of gender, dress and spectacle is significant because of the instances of female cross-dressing in an attempt to escape the relentless gaze of the other.

In an attempt to meld into the urban crowd more and to try to shed the coat of spectaclisation, there were women in the nineteenth century who adopted men's clothes.

The intertwined history of women in Paris assuming male dress goes back further, though, and a pivotal moment of that history was the law introduced in 1800 that banned women from wearing trousers. This law remained in place until as recently as 2013, however it had effectively "already been rescinded because of (its) incompatibility" (BBC News, 2013 n.p.) with contemporary beliefs surrounding women wearing trousers.

The law stated that women were only permitted to wear trousers if they were "holding a bicycle handlebar or the reins of a horse", (BBC News, 2013, n.p.) otherwise, they had to have authorisation from the local police. This law was an anti-radical tactic, because of the *Sans-Culottes* group that formed after the French Revolution, named as such to distinguish themselves from the culotte-wearing bourgeoisie. "The Sans-culottes were urban workers, artisans, minor landholders, and associated Parisians who took part in mass public displays during the French Revolution." (Wilde, 2016, n.p.)

Culottes were a type of silk knee-high trousers, and the uniform of the *Sans-Culottes* consisted of trousers that are similar to today's slacks.

The historically political associations with female cross-dressing in Paris begs the question, is the female wearing of the suit inherently political?

To consider the political and social significance of female cross-dressing, we now look at the history of gendered dress and investigate its relationship with urban mobility.

Before the invention of modern tailoring in the fourteenth century it was common for men and women to dress in drapery. (Doy, 2002, p. 22) After the renaissance, it was possible for people to alter their position in society, and fashion was born so that each individual had the opportunity to *create* themselves in a way that might produce a certain perception. (Arnold, 2009, p. 6) However, it was also at this time that gendered societal values crept into all facets of life, and it was therefore necessary to distinguish between men and women's clothing. "After those millennia of dresses, dividing the legs of respectable women with a layer of fabric seemed like sexual sacrilege." (Hollander, 1994 p. 53). At this stage, dress was observed as relating to the body in a way that it hadn't before. Joanne Entwistle writes of how dress and the body are indistinguishable, and that it is not possible to understand them at a distance from each other. Entwistle argues that dress makes the body recognisable in particular ways and that this is socially significant. "One needs to examine the way in which fashion … articulates the body, making it social and identifiable, and how this making of the body through dress is of considerable importance to the development of modern society." (Entwistle, 2015, p.237)

In *Body Dressing*, (2001) it is proposed that "Gender is probably the most crucial feature of clothes." (Entwistle and Wilson, 2001, p. 6), and so understanding how gender itself can be defined is crucial when exploring the social, economic, and political significance of women appropriating men's dress. Judith Butler, in her essay *Performative Acts and Gender Construction* (1998), makes the distinction "between sex, as biological facticity, and gender, as the cultural interpretation or signification of that facticity." (Butler, 1988, p. 522) Butler's performative gender theory describes how "the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised and consolidated through time." (Butler, 1988, p. 523)

In other words, gender is not a naturally occurring factor of our identities, it is created over time, in the home and in our wider worlds, through the affirmation of certain acts and rejection of others, gender is "an identity instituted through a stylised repetition of acts." (Butler, 1988, p. 519). Simone

de Beauvoir famously hypothesises this in her seminal text *The Second Sex*, (2015) “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman.” (De Beauvoir, 2015, p. 330)

Butler continues her analysis of gender construction by explicating that gender “must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.” (Butler, 1988, p. 519) and more importantly, the opportunities for gender subversion and deviation are endless “in the possibility of a different sort of repeating” (Butler, 1988, p. 520) of those ‘gendered’ acts. P520

Marjorie Garber describes how clothing can construct and deconstruct gender differences in *Vested Interests* (1993) “one of the most important aspects of cross-dressing is the way in which it offers a challenge to easy notions of binarity, putting into question the categories of “female” and “male”, whether they are considered essential or constructed, biological or cultural.” (Garber, 1993, p. 10).

The invention of the suit for men came at a time that “confirmed and approved a sharpened visual separation between the dress of men and women, whatever their class.” (Hollander, 1994, p. 4) and since their creation, suits have stayed the same. Anne Hollander explores this occurrence in *Sex and Suits* (1994) declaring “everyone knows that clothes are social phenomena; changes in dress are social changes … but since suits have stayed virtually the same for two hundred years, their continuity must illustrate something else.” (Hollander, 1994, p. 4) Elizabeth Wilson expands on this idea when she suggests that women’s dress lagged behind men’s by a century, because while the suit became the regular costume for the men, women’s fashion continued to rely on making the wearer an object of spectacle. (Wilson, 2012)

In *Female Masculinity* (1998), Jack Halberstam contends that because masculinity is constructed and performed, it is crucial to observe not only white middle-class male masculinity, but to also look at butch women and transgender men in their performances of masculinity. Halberstam believes that female masculinity is “far from being an imitation of maleness.”

(Halberstam, 1998, p. 1) and also discusses how “female gender deviance is much more tolerated than male gender deviance.” (Halberstam, 1998, p. 5).

Halberstam also claims that “female masculinity is a particularly fruitful site of investigation because it has been vilified” (Halberstam, 1998, p. 9) by many feminist writers and theorists. One doesn’t have to look hard to see in evidence, in *The Second Sex* (2015) De Beauvoir assures readers that the lesbian “adopts masculine attitude in part to repudiate any involvement with them; she disguises her clothes, her looks, her language, she forms a couple with a female friend where she assumes the male role: this playacting is in fact a masculine protest.” (De Beauvoir, 2015, p. 48)

In considering gender and sexuality, it is vital to evaluate the distance between female masculinity as gender expression and lesbianism as a sexual orientation. Halberstam conceives that “By making female masculinity equivalent to lesbianism, … or by reading it as proto lesbianism awaiting a coming community, we continue to hold female masculinity apart from the making of modern masculinity itself” (Halberstam, 1998, p. 46) while there were women who cross-dressed and also experienced same-sex desire, the intersection in some cases does not equal the overlap in all.

Before both sexology and psychiatry were founded in the late 1800s, there was little language to describe homoerotic desire. It was in this period that homosexuals were considered separate to larger society and were “forged as almost a distinct species” (Antosa and Ross, 2021, n.p.). Many accounts of lesbianism at the *fin de siècle* come from personal accounts, as opposed to the insights into the lives of homosexual men at the time - which were found in police reports because the homosexual concept was primarily concerned with those oppressed by the outlawing of sodomy. Historian Michael D. Sibalis argues that Paris was the epicentre of homosexual activity as far back as the middle ages. “Sibalis notes that Paris's reputation as a focus for queer life in France dates back as far as the Middle Ages, citing as evidence among other things a twelfth-century poet's description of the city as reveling in "the vice of Sodom.’” (Farmer, 2004, n.p.) This is partially

because during the French revolution, the criminal code was rewritten and made no reference to sodomy, in effect decriminalising it (Fleischmann, 2019, n.p.), though homosexuality was still socially and morally scorned, and was classified as a mental illness in France until 1981. (Johnson, 2020, n.p.)

Although there is scarce scholarly documentation on the presence of homosexual women in Paris at the time, what is known is that by the 1920s, Paris was the queer-female capital of the western world due to its lack of criminalisation of lesbian relationships, "it was the visibility and vivacity with which sapphic desire could be fulfilled in Paris … that made it, as far as lesbians were concerned, the queer capital of Europe" (McQueen, 2019, n.p.) In contrast to the prohibition of alcohol in the United States at the time, Paris in the 1920s harnessed a flourishing public nightlife, and many new bars and clubs began emerging across the city. Among them was *Le Monocle*, which remains one of the most famous lesbian clubs in European history. *Le Monocle* opened in Montmartre and was among the lesbian bars in the area that were discreet, but not entirely secret. Its name pays homage to a dressing trend among lesbians at the time, who wore monocles to signify their sexual preferences when in public. (Medhurst, 2021, n.p.) Most of what we know of the celebrated club and its clientele comes in snippets from Hungarian photographer Brassaï's work. Brassaï, born Gyula Halász, was a renowned sculptor, filmmaker and photographer. Brassaï was ascribed the nickname "the eye of Paris" (George Brassaï, n.d.) by his friend and fellow member of Parisian high society, novelist Henry Miller, and he went on to exhibit multiple times at the Museum Of Modern Art in New York.

The image on the following page is one that was not included in those exhibitions, but it is my favourite of his. These women, who we assume were sapphic (due to the context of the image being taken in a lesbian bar), display variations of female cross-dressing. One is dressed in what appears to be a bellboy's uniform, another a sailor, and others with adaptations of the classic suit, tie, trousers and jacket.

The tender embraces of the four couples in the foreground of the image, and the bustle of the four characters in the left background, all unaware of the documentation of this intimate moment. All apart from the woman standing in the centre of the image, who stares right back into the camera.

Fig. 7: Brassaï (1932) photograph of Le Monocle club including the club's owner, third from the left foreground, and other guests.

The woman in the centre of the image does not succumb to the spectacularist gaze of the viewer – she confronts it, but to some degree she also blends into the hustle and bustle of the crowd surrounding her. I take this image as a metaphor for the way that women used male dress as a way of going 'incognito' in the assemblies of urban spaces.

A key historical figure of female cross-dressing, often referenced in work on the subject, is Amandine Lucile Aurore Dupin. Aurore was scandalising Paris with her cross-dressing almost 100 years before Le Monocle opened. She was brought up in Nohant, the French countryside and her cross-dressing began when her parents dressed her in boys clothes to save money. Aurore married but left her husband and children (who later joined her) in 1831 because of dissatisfaction with the

marriage. She moved to Paris and soon moved in with her then-lover, Jules Sandeau. She and Sandeau wrote together under the pen name J.Sand, and when Aurore decided she wanted to write independently she took their pen name with her and chose the forename George, perhaps taking advantage of a sexually ambiguous name so that it was more likely her work would be published. Just as Mary Ann Evans became George Eliot, and the Brontë sisters became the Bell brothers, Aurore became George Sand.

Fig. 8: Drawing by Eugène Gaucher 1884 entitled *Political Gigogne* featured in an article poking fun at George Sand.

George Sand had cross-dressed while horse riding in the countryside, but in Paris she adopted male attire completely, and took up smoking in public to the outrage of the French media and public.

Sand famously describes in her autobiography (Sand, 1991, p. 904) the freedom that her male costume afforded her:

> my clothes feared nothing. I ran out in every kind of weather, I came home at every sort of hour, I sat in the pit at the theatre. No one paid attention to me, and no one guessed at my disguise . . . No one knew me, no one looked at me, no one found fault with me; I was an atom lost in that immense crowd.

but her male disguise only lasted so long. I believe Lauren Elkin put it best; "How ironic that a trick to blend in would cause Sand to stand out." (Elkin, 2017 p. 110).

Written and visual accounts of the public lesbian bars and clubs of the time, such as the work of Brassaï, are the only ways we can learn about lesbians who were not famous authors, painters or performers. "The lesbian communities that we know the most about are those of the wealthy and the titled – women who wrote, or painted, or lived off of inherited family wealth. They were the lesbians who had the means to live without husbands" (Medhurst, 2021, n.p.) If you were a cross-dressed woman of a lower class, or you were financially reliant on your husband, "your journey to the bar would likely have been more covert – no matter how stiffly the wind blew, it probably never quite explained the blanket wrapped around you" (McQueen, 2019, n.p.)

Writer and actress Colette describes this of her friends, "They wore long trousers and dinner jackets at their private parties, but in the street they covered them with a long cloak, 'which gave them an excessively respectable look'" (Wilson, 1992, p. 62) Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette was, like George Sand, another protagonist in the world of Parisian female cross-dressing – only Colette was just three years old when Sand died aged 71.

Colette was no stranger to the gaze of the other, after she left her husband who had forced her to ghost-write several novels for him, she took up acting as a way to financially support herself. But although Colette had no fear of costuming herself in various obscure regalia for her performances, it wasn't until she met Max (Mathilde) de Morny, who was biologically female but

had dressed in male clothing for most of their life, did Colette begin to experiment with her own gender deviance.

Fig. 9: Newspaper excerpt about Colette.

As much as de Morny incited Colette to experiment with her identity off-stage, Colette convinced de Morny to play the male role in a pantomime they wrote called *Rêve d'Egypte*. The audience was scandalised not only by the fact that there was a woman dressed in a suit assuming a male character, but was outraged when Colette and de Morny kissed on stage as part of the production.

Although it could be said to be anachronistic to call these women gender-queer, their gender-deviancy was, whether intended or not, an act of protest and rebellion.

The above evidence shows that women often used dress to disguise themselves and manipulate the gaze of the other in an attempt to escape the position of spectacular object.

In many cases of female cross-dressing, there was a component of cross-over between gender deviancy and sapphic homosexuality.

Fig 10: Photograph of Mathilde de Morny and Colette.

Conclusion.

In this essay I have discussed the convergence of the city as spectacle and women's use of dress and walking to absolve their role as object. Drawing on theories proposed by Judith Butler and Jack Halberstam I have illustrated how performance of gender and gender subversion can offer women in urban environments both liberation and limitations, while examining the lives of George Sand and Colette. I have demonstrated how dress and gender are historically, politically and socially linked while drawing on key theorists such as Joanne Entwistle, and explained the intersection between women's freedoms and restrictions in urban environments in reference to Agnès Varda's *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962) and writers Elizabeth Wilson and Lauren Elkin.

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