

## VIDEOS

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# Being a woman in the city, or the art of avoidance

By **Anne Jarrigeon** (Anthropologist) 18 June 2019

Anne Jarrigeon has studied the ways in which women have learned to deploy internalized knowledge to keep strangers at bay in everyday life, in cities that impose an image of hyper-availability. Being a mobile woman in urban space is often about how to avoid the male gaze, of men themselves, and from billboards.

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## Dealing with the overexposure of a constructed femininity

When I started working on the issue of street harassment it was because, at the time, I was studying anonymous interactions in large cities and I was particularly interested in questions relating to the body. And I felt it was very important to combine two dimensions: on the one hand how women had a practical know-how, that was deeply internalized and that they rarely spoke of, to keep strangers at bay, and on the other how this know-how meant that on a daily basis in cities they had to constantly contend with a kind of hyperavailability that was plastered all over the place on advertising boards, newsstands, movie posters, magazine covers, bus stops, etc.

### - Avoidance strategies

There are many precautions, defenses, and avoidance strategies that women use. The first will be to avoid looking in certain directions, and this is something I believe is very important: rethinking mobility at the scale of bodies means also rethinking mobility at the scale of the eyes and where they look. Women are very careful about the gazes they elicit and are also very aware that they themselves cannot look anywhere they want, that there are mechanisms controlling where women can direct their gaze. One strategy, of course, is to dress in a certain way. No one is really ignorant about "what raises the skirt" to paraphrase the title of a famous work on these issues. No one is really ignorant, among women, about the kinds of sounds that shoes make at night. No one is really ignorant about the effects one can expect to elicit depending on one's outfit. But at the same time, women also internalize the norms constructing what is considered to be feminine, and having to be cautious is nonetheless

submission to a certain order of heteronormative and especially heterosexual appearances. Several works, including the ones I have conducted for more than 10 years on street flirting, show for instance that if lesbian women display an appearance that is clearly outside the bounds of heterosexual standards, they will perhaps be more subject to abuse than others. So there is quite a hard balance to find.

### **- Escaping a social construct**

Because the female body was of course present everywhere, and usually represented by men – and for me, there is a link – it is a body that in most cases is presented as an offering, available, with lustful poses, welcoming arms, inviting eyes, and mouths always opened. And the women who pass by them in the street find themselves constantly at odds with this type of imagery. What was striking to me at the time – this was 10 years ago – is that when trying to get young women to talk about these issues, they always started by saying that they were free, and then they would go on to describe at length how, more importantly, they were masters and experts in escaping and avoidance strategies. What struck me greatly is that, following a few recent scandals, the public finally took notice of this issue of street flirting and of harassment in the streets and in transport.

## **A collective awakening – but an incomplete one**

### **- What was obvious for women...**

And then it became a mainstream social topic following a number of events – for instance, a hidden camera video made by Sofie Peeters in Belgium. And I'm sure that for women this video was not surprising, because of course they all already knew of these things, but for men this was an astounding video to watch. It was quite staggering, in fact, to see just how much the invisibilization of women's experience and strategies leads to a such a disregard for their concrete and daily reality. Today I would say that we are in quite a different situation: nobody can pretend anymore to ignore cat-calling, harassing, whistling, and touching, to more serious and more demonstrable attacks, backed by evidence as it were. They are a regular backdrop to women's experience of being out and about in the streets. No one can pretend anymore they don't know this is happening.

### **- ... isn't always for men.**

We are now in what we might call a period of collective awakening. And yet, this new awakening, which at first glance is something we could be extremely happy about, especially when we have been involved for so long in making these issues more visible, contains a number of paradoxical effects. Here is one example I can give of such an effect: the recent anti-harassment campaigns that have been displayed in public transport, especially in Paris and its surrounding region, as I have had the opportunity to study and document these campaigns to include in my film. These are campaigns that reveal a reality

campaigns to include in my mind. These are campaigns that reveal a reality – that indeed women are harassed – but when it comes to campaigns such as those I’m referring to, women are shown inside a metro or RER train holding onto a bar, and the immediate environment of the train is turned into a jungle where the threat of a predator is embodied by the figure of an animal. And it is always the same: a wolf, a shark – these figures that are rather ideal-typical in the contemporary imaginary. This has several paradoxical and rather negative effects for women. These campaigns are anxiety-inducing, so instead of being true instruments of emancipation – which is what we might expect from such a campaign – they tend to reinforce stress and fear. Moreover, they have another paradoxical effect which is that they totally obfuscate something about the causes of this type of violence exerted against women, conveying the idea that predation, for example, or male domination, when it occurs in transport, is not human. It is animalized and therefore its threat is foreign to people’s ordinary condition. Yet we know very well that violence against women in transport, to use only this specific example, is not exceptional, inhumane or extraordinary. It is the backdrop to a continuum of harassment, stares and reminders for women to continuously be on guard and wear a ‘proper’ outfit.

## **- Deconstructing the masculine norms of how we view one another**

This type of campaign has rather a reverse effect. And I for one am quite amazed because I work with students who are obviously very interested in this topic and who ask me if cities are actually more dangerous for women today than they were in the past. And by “the past” they mean when I was first conducting my surveys, so that is 10 years ago, which really shows that the opposite has happened to what one might hope from a prevention campaign. So the risk I see in this type of collective awakening is twofold: first that the awareness-raising effect of some international events fades away, leading to a renewed silence – and this is really quite a serious risk – and second that we don’t consider robustly enough the consequences of the measures that are taken to resolve these issues. It seems to me that in this context where we can finally talk about things, the fact that more voices are now being heard should also lead us to be wary, wary of seemingly well-intended sympathy, especially if it is paternalistic. The point is that it’s not really about genuinely protecting women, but rather to make a special effort to make their knowledge and expertise available, and not only their practical knowledge – i.e. everything they can tell about their experience – but also the knowledge of female experts who are insufficiently included when it comes to issues of transport and mobility, especially when it comes to issues of transport and mobility relating to matters of daily life, where as we have seen there is a great deal of differentiation in the conditions of how men and women circulate. And any preventive action, or any act of resistance against this violence, cannot do away with a legitimate analysis of their potential effects, especially in terms of women’s emancipation. Obviously, all actions that aim to provide greater emancipation are highly valuable, but they aren’t that easy to produce. And finally, the levers of action perhaps aren’t so much to be pulled in transport or in the transportation sector as a professional industry or field of knowledge, but rather in ways that

encourage a more trans-disciplinary and even intersectional raising of awareness. In other words, it's also important to show what different stakes are at play in different social environments. And the obstacles facing women aren't related specifically to particular social environments, although in each one they may present themselves differently. In any case, for me the main issue and challenge here is really to make these differentiations more known and visible.

## Mobility

Broadly, the word mobility can be defined as the intention to move and the realization of this movement in geographical space, implying a social change.

More

Disciplines : Humanities, Social sciences

Transport mode(s) : All modes of transport



## Anne Jarrigeon

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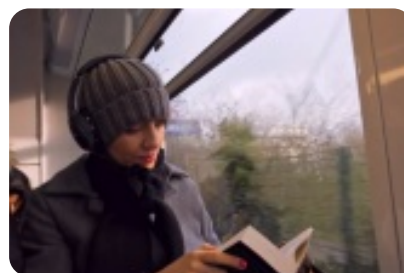
Anne Jarrigeon est photographe-vidéaste, anthropologue, docteure en sciences de la communication et membre du Laboratoire Ville Mobilité Transport et maîtresse de conférences à l'École d'urbanisme de Paris. Ses travaux, à la croisée de l'anthropologie visuelle, de la sémiotique et de l'ethnologie portent sur les pratiques et les imaginaires des mobilités. Elle a notamment réalisé en 2018 le documentaire *Toute chose égale par ailleurs*.

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