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Aimée Boutin, *City of Noise: Sound and Nineteenth-Century Paris*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015. viii + 208 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$85.00 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 978-0-2520-3921-8. \$25.00 U.S. (pb.). ISBN 978-0-2520-8078-4.

Review by Robin Walz, University of Alaska Southeast.

The noise referred to in the title of Aimée Boutin's perceptive study are the shouts of ambulant peddlers advertising wares and services along the streets of Paris, in passageways and cul-de-sacs, and among apartment block courtyards, more than the hubbub of the modernizing city. Her concern is with the anachronistic din of those who plied their small trades within the transforming urban landscape, irreducible voices that challenged and resisted nineteenth-century modernity and bourgeois sensibilities, so gung-ho about urban renovation, commercial culture, and individual privacy. To evoke the ephemeral soundscape of nineteenth-century Paris in an era before sound recordings or the establishment of decibel levels, Boutin relies upon multiple literary commentaries to recover "the shrillness, the incongruity, the discordance of peddlers' voices" (p. 4) that contrasted with the modernizing noises of urbanization, such as carriages, trains, or construction, "inevitably linked to economic progress and bourgeois mobility" (p. 5). Such preindustrial work "noise" was incorporated into the modern urban landscape in a variety of literary forms, from the melancholic nostalgia Victor Fournel expressed in descriptions of street performances in *Ce qu'on voit dans les rues de Paris* and the antiquarian street types depicted in picturesque *Cris de Paris* imprints, to the lyrical "primitive memory" and the "discordant modernity" that Arsène Houssaye and Charles Baudelaire, respectively, wrote into their prose poems about the street cries of window glaziers. As literary criticism, Boutin has done a marvelous job of interpreting the cries of street vendors as an irreducible, persistent, and resistant source of "noise" that disrupted nineteenth-century bourgeois attitudes about social harmony and historical progress.

Boutin situates this work within the emerging field of "sound studies."<sup>[1]</sup> Key to her analysis is the distinction between harmony and noise, which "must lack syntax and be disorderly, unregulated, unrhythmical, and discordant" (p. 5). On a musical or lyrical level, such a distinction is more subjective than formal; the listener's perceptual ear determines what coalesces or remains unassimilated. Instead, city noise must be socially perceived as noxious, producing a tumult that is a nuisance, troublesome, at odds between parties. In this regard, Boutin asserts, the street hawker's shouts and songs display a flagrant disregard for bourgeois urban space with its expectations of quiet and privacy. Yet whether perceived in terms of nostalgic anachronisms or as abject remainders of modernity, in all instances street peddlers were spoken about rather than speaking for themselves, socially marginalized amidst the commercial modernization of nineteenth-century Paris.

Boutin's theoretical approach to Parisian street noise is literary rather than historical. She seeks a corrective to an overemphasis on the visual in Walter Benjamin's philosophical and Georg Simmel's sociological critiques of nineteenth-century modernity by supplementing and extending their theoretical concerns into the aural realm. Parisian soundscapes are emphasized over the visual landscape, the echoes of the plaintive cries of street peddlers replace iconographic ragpickers, the ephemeral sounds of

hawking supersede the static illustrations and photographs of street vendors. Unsurprisingly, the *flâneur* reemerges as the nineteenth-century connoisseur of street sounds. For Boutin, the key literary figure is Victor Fournel, whose *flâneur* makes use of all his senses, not only sight, as he strolls the streets of Paris in *Ce qu'on voit dans les rues de Paris* (1858). In contrast to other contemporary commentaries on street music, such as Delphine de Girardin's *Lettres parisiennes* (1837) and Bertall's *Le Diable à Paris* (1846), which generally decried street musicians as untalented noisemakers, Fournel's *flâneur* delighted in the sounds of street musicians and performers as the charming, living embodiment of popular music and traditional arts. Other lowly inhabitants of the streets, however, such as beggars and ne'er-do-well peddlers, were disdained by Fournel as parasitic and disgraceful elements upon the Parisian social landscape. While the noise produced by street musicians could be recuperated through social nostalgia as a soothing anecdote to the sights and sounds of modern urbanization, the voices of paupers and downtrodden workers hawking their trades had no place in Fournel's Paris.

Boutin next considers the *Cris de Paris*, the transposition of hawking calls into musical compositions and visual iconography. Since the late medieval period, the circulation of itinerate tradesmen, vendors, tinkers, and colporteurs in Paris and other French towns had been increasingly circumscribed and regulated, and by the nineteenth century the street cries of the remaining peddlers advertising their wares and services were scant. Yet, like other fading folkloric traditions, over the course of the centuries the diminished sounds generated by actual street vendors were transposed musically into chansons, vaudeville airs, and comic opera, and visually into a prolific iconographic culture of *Cris de Paris* text and image woodcuts and etched engravings. Musical reformations of street cries began in the sixteenth century, with composers such as Clément Janequin and Jean Servin who harmonized the street cacophony into popular chansons and polyphonic vocal works for courtly society. By the nineteenth century, the *Cris de Paris* had lost such contemporary resonance and instead evoked the panoramic "sound memory" (p. 57) of a receding national past, which grew in nostalgic value among antiquarians and folk collectors. In visual mass culture, the *Cris de Paris* were transposed into text and image imprints. From cheaply mass-produced Épinal broadsheets to fine engravings advertised in elite periodicals, and ultimately to the photographs of Eugène Atget later prized by the modernist avant-garde, the imagery of *marchands ambulants* (strolling merchants) and *petits métiers* (small trades peddlers) proliferated over the course of the nineteenth century, even as their practitioners were driven to the margins of society and to Parisian peripheries. In musical compositions, rather than preserve the "vocal monstrosities" (p. 56) of disappearing street vendors, nineteenth-century musicologists transcribed them according to accepted modal scales, and composers adapted *Cris de Paris* printed texts along the lines of old musical forms, such as medieval plainchant and baroque countertenor recitatives. The cultural impulse was to harmonize the antiquarian past with the modern present, instead of drawing out auditory and social dissonances.

The Haussmannization of Paris, with its urban renovations and construction of *grands boulevards*, further displaced peddlers hawking goods, trades, and services. Boutin emphasizes that peddlers typically sought out confined urban spaces such as enclosed courtyards, apartment stairwells, passageways, and cul-de-sacs to cry out their wares and services, where their voices could resonate more loudly than along open streets and boulevards. Not only did open air settings require more powerful voices that could rise above the urban babel, in confined locales peddlers could pursue and badger potential customers until they had reached the safety of a shop or apartment door. Boutin notes that Parisian residents largely tolerated hawking activities during the day, accepting them as part of the to and fro of daily life, and they tended to limit their official noise complaints to nocturnal rabble-rousers. Instead, the kinds of street noises regulated by ordinance tended to be coachmen crying out for cab fares, the clack of carriage wheels against paving stones, the loud shrill of instrumentalists and street singers, and the "pointless" ringing of bells (p. 72). Rather than being subjected to noise ordinances, increasingly peddlers were restricted from selling merchandise or plying their trades according to time and location. While ambulant workers provided vital services for urban residents—grinding knives, repairing shoes, grilling meats, carrying water, scrounging through castoff clothes and household items

for resale—the rationalized city restricted the sale of goods and services, as well as street fairs (*forains*) and performers (*saltimbanques*), to designated urban locales and hours of the day. More and more, peddlers were confined to older neighborhoods, such as the Temple district, and associated with the “Boulevard of Crime.” The *petits métiers* of Paris, Boutin stresses, had lost their economic purpose and were largely reduced to a decorative role on the Parisian landscape for nostalgic and entertainment purposes.

Poets Arsène Houssaye and Charles Baudelaire, however, strove to bring nineteenth-century street criers back into the present through their respective meditations on the cry of the window glazier. Houssaye’s “La Chanson du vitrier” (“Song of the Glazier,” 1850) recounts an early morning encounter between the narrator and a young glazier strolling the streets, repeatedly punctuated by the refrain, “*Oh! vitrier!*” Boutin ruminates upon the various auditory configurations of the glazier’s “*Oh!*”—announcing his presence (“*Oy!*”), an appeal for customers to rally to him (“*Au!*”), and a cry of pathos (“*Ô!*”). However interpreted, the glazier’s cry goes unanswered; “the cry has lost its efficacy as a sales strategy” (p. 90). Instead, Houssaye delivers an aesthetic commentary on *la misère*, the dying of hunger produced by this economically discarded glazier’s life of abject poverty. Houssaye evokes a “primitive memory” for this once noble trade, and he elicits sympathy, and possibly a sense of guilt, within bourgeois audiences (“La Chanson du vitrier” was also adapted for the stage in 1859). But, Boutin emphasizes, his glazier’s story falls short of constituting a social critique or calling for political action.

Baudelaire’s prose poem, “Le mauvais vitrier” (1855-1864, published in 1867), by contrast, delivers a “piercing and discordant cry” (p. 83) against a modern world that has no place for rag-pickers and ambulant glaziers. Beyond Baudelaire’s self-identification with impoverished and socially marginalized beggars and peddlers, the glazier’s cry stridently insists upon being heard within the modern Parisian soundscape. Akin to sound feedback, the dissonance is amplified, overwhelms, and replaces comforting harmonies, yielding a modern poetics rife with contrasts, incongruities, conflicts, and noise. Boutin follows this line of a modern fascination with noisy peddlers in the late-nineteenth century with a discussion of parodic and iconoclastic literary *fumistes*, such as François Copée and Jean Richepin, and literary and artistic symbolists, like Stéphane Mallarmé and Jean-François Raffaëlli, who persisted among the Dadaist and Surrealist avant-garde in the early twentieth century. The peddler fades, but the irreducible cries persist as a modern poetics that indicts the capitalist marketplace, bourgeois values, and comforting cultural nostalgia. Boutin recognizes that this poetic move shifts the social register as well. Speaking directly about Baudelaire, but in terms applicable to other modern poets, Boutin notes, “He speaks for the peddler, but about poetry’s, rather than peddling’s, meaning” (p. 135). At the same time, Boutin strives for a dialectical critique in which “these poems argue for the resiliency of peddling” (p. 136), drawing together street peddlers and modern poets and artists into a camaraderie of political resistance against the status quo of the capitalist modern world.

Yet Boutin’s theoretically based literary critique may be of limited use to cultural and social historians. As a literary meditation, *City of Noise* skillfully builds an interpretation of social effacement, nostalgic cultural appropriation, and modern poetic reformulations engendered by the dwindling *petits métiers* in nineteenth-century Paris and develops it into a critique of capitalist economy, society, and culture. But do disappearing street peddlers really provide the best angle to crack into this history? The vogue for Benjamin’s *flâneurs* and rag-pickers runs the risk of an academic fetishizing of social marginality. Historians would likely want to explore more richly textured social and cultural terrains: a Parisian social and cultural geography that more carefully delineates between bourgeois and popular neighborhoods; a social imagination that constructs a multivalent Parisian “bourgeoisie,” as well as a complex lower social strata *bas-fonds* of vagabonds, criminal gangs, and impoverished street vendors; an actual fusion of working-class, intellectual, and modernist cultures as a radicalized politics.<sup>[2]</sup> Street hawkers are no doubt a part of these histories, but their role among other historical players is not fully elaborated upon in this book.

A criticism more internal to Boutin's argument concerns the status of street criers in relation to Parisian "noise pollution." It is not apparent why the strident cries of street vendors are privileged over the other sounds in the din of modernizing Paris during the nineteenth century, other than to emphasize the particular critical interpretation Boutin develops. Parisian noise abatement ordinances seem to have been directed at other noxious sounds, rather than at street criers. In extended passages from Paris visitors and commentators quoted by Boutin, the noise of carriages on cobble stones, shouts from open air market vendors and by newspaper hawkers, and the blare of street musicians and performers are emphasized as much as, if not more than, the cries of strolling vendors and tradesmen. Why the sounds of street peddlers, admittedly dwindling in practice, should weigh more significantly than other kinds of "noise pollution" in nineteenth-century Paris requires further contextualization.

Then again, Boutin has written *City of Noise* for the critical insights that this particular literary interpretation provides. It is a perceptive reading of how, as the *petits métiers* declined in practice, the *Cris de Paris* were culturally appropriated, harmonized, and proliferated in print and visual mass culture, folkloric ethnography, and musicology for nostalgic and nationalistic purposes on the one hand, and how the plaintive cries of peddlers were poetically transformed by sympathetic literary writers into critiques of modern life on the other. Boutin provides a particular perspective on comprehending nineteenth-century Paris as a "city of noise," and it is a rich one.

#### NOTES

[1] Emily Ann Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002); Michael Bull and Les Back, eds., *The Auditory Culture Reader*, Sensory Formations Series (Oxford: Berg, 2003); Jonathan Sterne, ed., *The Sound Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

[2] The scholarship on each of these topics is vast, but to cite a few relevant works: David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Luc Santé, *The Other Paris* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015); Sara Maza, *The Rise of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000); Dominique Kalifa, *Les bas-fonds: Histoire d'un imaginaire* (Paris: Seuil, 2013); Richard D. Sonn, *Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989) and *Sex, Violence, and the Avant-Garde: Anarchism in Interwar France* (University Park, Penn.: Penn State University Press, 2010).

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