

Evans on Boutin (2015)

Boutin, Aimée. *City of Noise: Sound and Nineteenth-Century Paris*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015. Studies in Sensory History, 4. Pp. x + 198. ISBN: 978-0-252-08078-4

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This fascinating study of the *Cris de Paris*, the centuries' old tradition of peddlers' cries, examines how textual and pictorial representations of street vendors flourished in nineteenth-century France while the actual numbers of peddlers and hawkers on the streets gradually dwindled as Paris moved towards a modern age characterized by sedentary shopkeeping, wide open boulevards and a bourgeois intolerance for street noise. The cultural significance variously ascribed to this urban network of sounds—socio-economic, aesthetic, affective—is here explored across a wide range of sources, from literary guidebooks, cultural histories, and *flâneur*-writing to poetry, the Vaudeville stage, and drawings; Aimée Boutin argues “for an aural rather than a visual conception of modernity” (3). Chapter one, therefore, looks at the aural dimension of *flânerie*, showing how writers such as Honoré de Balzac and Victor Fournel, and visual artists such as Jean-François Raffaëlli and Bertall, presented the disorientating soundscape of the city as a concert—intellectualized, harmonized, and idealized. For Boutin, this transformation of the din into an aesthetic experience brought the uncontrolled hubbub closer to the rarefied atmosphere of salon culture which these artists found more appealing, and provided a way of alleviating bourgeois anxiety over the sonic permeability of their private interiors.

Chapter two shows how the various street cries of peddlers and hawkers, each with their own distinctive linguistic or melodic marker, came to be viewed with nostalgia as they were gradually erased from public spaces, the victims of modern capitalism, urban transformation, and class conflict. After tracing the history of these cries back to the thirteenth century, Boutin shows how the sounds were recreated in nineteenth-century concert halls and opera houses, providing “collective memories of sounds of the past that have been silenced” (50). Moreover, the cataloguing of this social underclass in prints by François Boucher and Paul Gavarni imposed a curatorial order at odds with the disorientating sonic reality, creating a safe distance from their noise which gave free reign to nostalgia and melancholy. Thus, Boutin suggests, as “ghostly traces [...] out of sync with modern times” (60), the *crieurs* articulated a sense of mourning and loss. This process of gradual eradication is read in chapter three through the city's experience of Haussmannization, which reorders the sonic environment and views peddlers, whose shrill, incongruous and discordant cries formed “the disappearing soundscape of the medieval core of the city” (63), as both resistance and threat to the new social order. Regulations were implemented to limit their operations, while the move away from resonant courtyards, stairwells, and arcades to boulevards and wide, open spaces flattened the Parisian soundscape and silences the political resonance of these cries with *la voix du peuple*. Thus the process of gentrification and social control eradicated the underclass from the heart of the city and reduced them to the status of silent artefacts in albums and on postcards.

Such sounds, however, had great potential to influence artistic practice, and chapter four explores the treatment of the glazier's cry in poems by Arsène Houssaye and Charles Baudelaire. Boutin argues that the former's verse poem “La Chanson du vitrier” harmonizes the cry, lending it a pathetic note which undermines its radical potential, while the latter's prose poem “Le Mauvais Vitrier,” by embracing its strident dissonance, draws out the latent violence in these urban sonic relations and introduces “discordant breaks into the harmonious weave of the lyric” (103–4). Boutin effectively demonstrates how the noise erupts into Baudelaire's poetry, disrupting sentimental clichés as the poet makes no attempt to assimilate, tame, or defuse it. This provides the starting point for a broader investigation in chapter five of the relationship between the dissonance of the outside world and the poetic avant-garde who reclaimed street noise “as an antidote to bourgeois complacency” (106). Jean Richepin's *La Chanson des Gueux* and Charles Cros's parodies of François Coppée's sentimental poems foreground the dissonances which are tidied up and harmonized in urban picturesque; the bathos of Mallarmé's miniature “Chansons bas” clashes with the pathos of Raffaëlli's images, which they were written to accompany; and Jules Laforgue embraces the white noise of the modern metropolis in *Les Complaintes*. This “unstable alliance” (122) between peddlers and poets is especially apt, Boutin suggests, since both groups practiced a declining trade at odds with modern market forces which they critiqued, implicitly and explicitly. In conclusion, this richly documented and timely book makes an important contribution to studies in sensory history and enriches our understanding of the context in which nineteenth-century French poetry developed, illuminating the visceral shocks of modernity which writers placed at the heart of their work.

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