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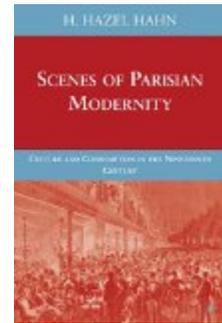
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

H. Hazel Hahn. *Scenes of Parisian Modernity: Culture and Consumption in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 304 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-61583-0.

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Published on H-Urban (November, 2010)

Commissioned by Alexander Vari



Paris, Capital of Commercialization

In the 1820s to 1830s, the landscape of Paris consumer culture was durably changed. Amid the building of its famous shopping arcades and a boom in new forms of advertising, the spaces, texts, and images of Paris's consumer culture took on modern forms that we still recognize today. Thanks to Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (1999)—and more recent scholars like David Harvey (*Paris, Capital of Modernity* [2003]), Charles Rearick (*Pleasures of the Belle Epoque: Entertainment and Festivity in Turn-of-the-Century France* [1988]), Vanessa Schwartz (*Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-siècle Paris* [1999]), and Rosalind Williams (*Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France* [1991])—H-Urban readers probably already know this narrative of nineteenth-century Paris as an international capital of commercialization. H. Hazel Hahn's book retools this narrative, analyzing "Paris as it underwent intense commercialization" (p. 2). Integrating histories of Paris, consumption, the press, publicity, advertising, and spectacle, the book is consistently interdisciplinary, reading texts, images, and urban spaces. Hahn's scope is remarkably broad, laterally connecting many far-flung domains in sometimes surprising and subversive ways, but also sometimes lacking depth as a result. Hahn highlights many of the risks and benefits of truly interdisciplinary urban studies.

Hahn stresses "the significance of the collective imaginary about consumption which circulated associations with values, ideologies, fashionable themes and lifestyles" (p. 2). Circulating texts, images, and ideas,

she argues, created "constructed imagined scenes," which called consumers to emulate them (p. 7). Hahn's analysis often gains in richness and subtlety what it loses in directness and clarity. Many argumentative claims meant as dialectical come off as flatly paradoxical. Theory, method, and historiography are under-specified. Hahn lets her sources shine, but the reader is unsure what tools she uses to read them, because terms and analytic procedures are not clearly defined. One example is the repeated distinction between "culture" and "commerce." Though these terms appear in the book's title, and seem to be organizing concepts for the entire argument, they are never clearly defined. This analytic fuzziness prevents the book's great theoretical potential from being fully actualized.

Broadly, Hahn makes three arguments. First, she claims that the onset of "modernity" in Paris occurred earlier than the 1850s through the 1910s, the period preferred by generations of French historians. Following Benjamin, as well as recent work by Harvey, Karen Bowie (*La Modernité avant Haussmann: Formes de l'Espace Urbain à Paris, 1801-1853* [2001], an edited collection), and Nicholas Papayanis (*Planning Paris before Haussmann* [2004]), Hahn sees modernity emerging in the 1820s to the 1830s. Via Mary Gluck (*Popular Bohemia: Modernism and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* [2005]) and following Charles Baudelaire and Georg Simmel, Hahn equates modernity with dynamic, fleeting sensory experiences of urban life and consumption, both pleasurable and disorienting.[1] This definition of modernity

stresses its urban, aesthetic, and commercial features. Second, Hahn argues that culture develops in relative autonomy from the economy, by now a familiar claim in cultural history. Third, she argues that French consumer culture's tendency to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction, news and advertisements, constituted a distinctive national trend, a French exception. Hahn relies on foreign (mostly American, British, and German) observers of French consumer culture to make her case, but how can we take these sources' portrayal of France at face value, without asking what constructions of France may have shaped their perceptions? Hence, her first two arguments are more convincing and less original, while the third is more original, but less convincing.

Part 1 of the book spans the period from 1815 to 1848, though ostensibly Hahn's sources deal with the July Monarchy (1830-48), especially the mid-1840s. The first chapter connects publishing, retail, urban development, fashion, and advertising. Hahn theorizes "images of consumers," new subject positions or roles projected by publicity, as well as "scenes of consumption," scripts for consumers to act out and spaces to act in (p. 20). These are the "scenes" of Parisian modernity from the book's title, a concept meant to link "the evolution of both the urban fabric and the urban imaginary" (p. 62). So amid Paris's commercialization, the city was constructed as a consumer space while Parisians were interpellated as consumers. Consequently, Hahn connects familiar Parisian sites of consumption (the arcades, *grands boulevards*, *bazars*, industrial expositions, specialty shops, and *magasins de nouveautés*) with new forms of publicity (newspaper ads, posters, cartoons, illustrations, editorial ads, mobile ads, and reviews of products, performances, and other events).

This argument continues in the second chapter, on Paris as a capital of amusement, fashion, and modernity, and comes together nicely around her reading of famed illustrated journal *L'Illustration* (founded in 1843), whose "large illustrations invited the viewer to insert oneself into the scene, to visit the sites depicted ... [and] to emulate the people depicted" (p. 58). These "scenes" are perhaps under-theorized, which is disappointing because the concept has the potential to connect subject formation and consumer identity with urban development and cityscapes in original and thought-provoking ways. Paris is an interesting case precisely because it was seen as a capital of commercialization, and Parisians were understood as a particular kind of subject: modern, fashionable, pleasure driven, and consumerist. Hahn treats these ideas with zest and originality, but not always with

enough argumentative and analytic clarity.

Chapter 3 offers a close reading of fashion magazines and Delphine de Girardin's column "Parisian Letters" (*La Presse*, 1836-48) to highlight the feminization of consumption, advertising's targeting of women, and female agency. In her column on new trends, events, and sites in Paris, Girardin evinced a complex and ambivalent view of commerce and modernity. While largely conformist about beauty standards and fashion trends, she also encouraged women to be individualist, to reflect on trends and not follow them blindly. Girardin's ambivalence, like that of her contemporaries J.-J. Grandville and Charles Philipon, shows a dialectic of consumer agency and consumer manipulation at work.

Chapters 4 and 5 zoom in on this widespread Parisian ambivalence about commercialization in the 1840s, producing striking and original readings of famous Parisians, like Honoré de Balzac, Honoré Daumier, Girardin, Grandville, and Philipon. Hahn's book is at its best in reconstructing the Parisian experience of commercialization as conflicted, anxious, even contradictory—as irresistible as it was scorned. Faced with increasing commercialization of urban spaces and experiences, while nearly all architectural and textual surfaces were gradually sold out for advertising space, Parisians imagined two radically different potentials for advertising and publicity. On the one hand was a vision of transparent, honest, rational information about products, services, and sellers. On the other hand, ads were made by "charlatans" peddling hype, which blurred overt and covert endorsements, mystified consumers, and fetishized commodities. Many, like Balzac, dreamt of purifying and rationalizing advertising to defuse/diffuse its power to manipulate, deceive, and confuse. Advertising highlighted many of the perceived dangers of modernity, and for Hahn the dual potentials of advertising serve as a sparkling proxy for familiar debates about the dualities of modernity. This analysis of ambivalence peaks with Hahn's reading of *Le Tintamarre* (1843-1910), a journal containing equal parts of actual advertisements and self-conscious critique and parody of advertising. Chapter 5 enacts an extended reading of Grandville's illustrated book *Un Autre Monde* (1844), whose parody of advertising and publicity was so subtle and complex that it baffled, even angered, many critics. While Balzac hoped that modern commercialization of urban culture could be rationalized and made safe, *Le Tintamarre* and Grandville suggested that modernity meant nothing but dangerous boundary busting, which would level high and low, news and ads, honesty and dishonesty, consumer agency and

consumer manipulation, and so on. Hahn argues that the depth of this boundary busting made French advertising culture unique in the 1800s.

Part 2 of the book covers the period from 1848 to 1914, though here the bulk of material deals with the 1870s to 1910s. The purpose of Hahn's long-range chronology is to establish continuities across Paris's long nineteenth century, but the conspicuous gap in evidence from the 1840s to 1870s calls this very continuity into question. Hahn has deliberately taken focus off the Second Empire (1851-70) to combat French historians' longstanding (now somewhat threadbare) tendency to treat the era as a watershed for modernity. But by largely skipping over the Second Empire, Hahn's historical narrative inadvertently undermines its own case for continuity. A useful comparison is Harvey's *Paris, Capital of Modernity*, which similarly argues for historical continuities from the 1830s to 1880s, but does so by treating the Second Empire in some detail. This is an important argument in French history, and Hahn is in good company with recent works by Harvey, Papayanis, and Bowie.

Chapter 6 focuses on "the changing modernity of the Grands Boulevards from 1852 to 1914 and especially the 1880-1914 period" (p. 127). Hahn sees Paris's legendary boulevards as both the stage for and expression of Paris's intense commercialization. The celebrated arc of streets known as the *grands boulevards*, cutting through the Right Bank core, also crossed a neighborhood thick with the offices of newspaper publishers. This created a circuit of reference, wherein newspapers referred to and promoted boulevard events, while boulevard advertisements pointed consumers toward newspapers and their offices. The press thus had deep incentives to create the very news they reported, staging publicity stunts to amplify the semiotic and economic feedback between boulevards and the news. The conspicuous blurring of fact and fiction in this chapter connects Hahn's analysis of the French news with recent work by Schwartz and Gregory Shaya.[2]

Chapter 7 examines in detail how the boulevards were commercialized, embellished with kiosks, shelters, columns, benches, light poles, and other "street furnishings" that could be leased out for advertising space. This is the most rigorously archival of all Hahn's chapters, based on close readings of materials on billposting agencies and municipal advertising policies from Paris's City Archives. Here, Hahn treads closest to urban history in a strict sense, where the city itself and the built environment become objects of study. But even here, the

real targets are cultural space and urban representation, not the production of space. After mid-century, billposting became an enormous industry in Paris, as major advertising agencies, like that of the Renier family, petitioned the municipal government for concessions to hang posters; distribute handbills; or use mobile advertising, like men in sandwich boards or carriages covered in ads. Urban spaces became so saturated with advertising between 1870 and 1900 that local civil associations began to campaign against advertising in the name of aesthetics, morality, and traffic. In 1900, all advertising vehicles were suppressed.

These campaigns against advertising show that commercialization had its limits, and consumers retained their agency, but they also suggest that urban rationalization had its limits: "The commercial and cultural dynamic trumped the ideology of the control and rationalization of public space" (p. 155). Hence, modernity in the one sense (rationalization) could never quite control or manage modernity in another sense (the unruly streetscape of spectacles and sensations). Parisian reactions to boulevard culture, then, were just as ambivalent in the late 1800s as reactions to print advertising had been in the early 1800s. Transposing advertising from the press to the city's built surfaces at mid-century did little to change Parisian anxieties about modernity, and in both cases, modernity's rationalizing tendencies seemed insufficient to protect against modernity's disorderly energies.

Chapter 8 analyzes "consumer technologies" and "celebrity culture." By "consumer technologies," Hahn means various "technologies of attention," as Jonathan Crary put it in *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (1999). In Hahn's analysis, this includes monumental architecture and new scenes of modernity, *fait-divers* publicity, and multimedia campaigns. An important example here are the many-sided and often sensationalist promotions of Sarah Bernhardt, created as a celebrity by frequent performance reviews, media scandals, and publicity stunts. This chapter and the next, on poster art, zero in again on women as both objects and agents in consumer culture. Public debates about commercialization in the late 1800s often took sexualized, aestheticized visual representations of women as props for debate. Disputes over whether they were artistic or popular, vulgar or alluring, were another two-sided way of mobilizing women in negotiating the ups and downs of a commercialized urban modernity. Chapter 10 reveals similar ambiguities in *Le Courrier Français*, a modernist magazine associated with the Montmartre avant-garde and its racy, satirical, antiestablishment journals

and cabarets. The question of advertising and artistic production is particularly clear here, since this avant-garde journal was largely funded by the Géraudel cough-drop company, whose ads often appeared in its pages. Like Paris's celebrated turn-of-the-century art posters, *Le Courrier Français* mixed high and low, art and ads, culture and commerce in complex ways.

The book's extremely short conclusion (two pages) is indicative of Hahn's ongoing problem with following through on argumentative claims. But she does hint at why her analysis is relevant today with deft references to television and Google. This clear relevance will leave many readers disappointed not to see more conclusion here. If there are things that American readers do not like about our own consumer-driven society, we may well do well to look to nineteenth-century France for answers, as Benjamin did from Weimar Berlin. We might blame the French for inventing the blinding glitter of commodities and the obnoxious and incessant barrage of hype. But as Hahn demonstrates, we may also mine French archives for innovative, intelligent, invigorating critiques, parodies, and manipulations of consumer culture, which prove that consumer agency is as old as consumer manipulation. Paris's experience in the nineteenth century is indicative of what would become a global experience in the twentieth. What many foreign observers saw as uniquely and dangerously "French" in the 1800s has a lot in common with what many observers around the globe see as uniquely and dangerously "American" today.[3] In each case, commercialization, and the disordered modernity it reflected, has been at the heart of the critique.

Hahn's book will appeal to readers in many disciplines. Theorists of modernity will find here a concrete, empirical attempt to study modernity as grounded in local practice. Hahn builds on decades of discussion about the duality of modernity, pinpointing the experience of commercialization as inspiration for Parisian controversies and ambivalence about modernity's multiple potentials. Students of urban culture will find little here about the social production of space, but they will find rich and detailed readings of urban texts and images that illuminate the cityscape, representations of the city and its inhabitants, and consumer culture's complex self-referential tendencies. French historians will

find little surprising here, but will find that the book dovetails nicely with existing research, filling in gaps between other urban studies of Paris. For example, the book does a fine job connecting recent arguments about the early onset of modernity (Harvey, Bowie, and Papayanis) with recent arguments about French popular culture's tendency to blur fact and fiction, reality and spectacle (Schwartz and Shaya). The book is strongest as a history and close reading of advertising, the single theme that runs throughout the book and holds together its many other wide-ranging topics. Hahn's book deepens our understanding of advertising business, advertising media, its regulation, its cultural representation, and its critique. She shows how various realities (celebrities, commodities, spaces, events, media, images, texts, etc.) can be commercialized, and works to raise commercialization to the status of a defining feature of modernity. For students of advertising history in particular, this is an important and stimulating book.

Notes

[1]. Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne, 2nd ed. (London: Phaidon, 1995), 1-41; and Georg Simmel, "The Metropolis and Mental Life," in *The Blackwell City Reader*, ed. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (London: Blackwell, 2002), 11-19.

[2]. Gregotheyry Shaya, "The Flaneur, the Badaud, and the Making of a Mass Public in France, circa 1860-1910," *American Historical Review* 109, no. 1 (February 2004): 41-77; and Gregory Shaya, "Mayhem for Moderns: The Culture of Sensationalism in France, c. 1900" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2000).

[3]. Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); Philippe Legrain, "Cultural Globalization is not Americanization," *The Chronicle Review* (May 9, 2003): B7; William Marling, *How "American" is Globalization?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); and Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

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Citation: Peter S. Soppelsa. Review of H. Hazel Hahn, *Scenes of Parisian Modernity: Culture and Consumption in the Nineteenth Century*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. November, 2010.

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