H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Adrian Rifkin. *Street Noises: Parisian Pleasure, 1900-1940.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995. 272 pp. $22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7190-4589-9.

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Should historians review theoretical books by professors of fine arts simply because these happen to be historically situated? Historians take their subjects from the past, but they also write about historical processes of change and continuity, cause and effect, and at the very least about why their subjects mattered in the larger flow of things. Historians are interested in context, argument, coherence, and analysis built out of rigorously marshalled evidence rather than coincidence or overlap. They expect the books they read to have a clearly stated argument or to be about a clearly stated question or issue in history. They value good writing and expect, at a minimum, lucidity.

Since Adrian Rifkin's *Street Noises* does none of these things, it is easy to criticize from an historian's vantage point. On the back of the dust jacket Rosalind Krauss applauds Rifkin's "fragmentary, montage-like style," a warning sign to the historian that s/he may be in for a difficult time. The longest chapter is entitled "Some Snapshots," another signal that this study is not going to conform to historians' conventions. For the first time in twenty years of writing reviews I must acknowledge that I am not sure what this book is about. In its specifics Rifkin's work treats Parisian popular and mass culture. The author writes about popular song, photojournalism, film, stars like Maurice Chevalier and Edith Piaf, gay culture, the gaze, Walter Benjamin, Pierre Mac Orlan. But how these all fit into a coherent presentation has escaped me.

In an introduction to *Street Noises* George Melly writes that "certainly the main theme of the book [is] the tradition of the cabaret and variety artist as the emblem of working-class Paris, their links with the world of the criminal and the prostitute, and with the middle-class flaneur who raided this territory in the pursuit of vice and pleasure" (p. vi). Melly has correctly pointed to a thread running through the book, but I cannot see it as such a tightly sewn one that it holds the study together as a work of historical analysis or interpretation. My suspicion is that Rifkin was after something larger: to capture the textured play of sights and sounds and associations that endow all great cities with their specific resonance and that allow visitors and residents alike to say (in this case) "This is Paris." The author appears to want to show (or "unravel") the forms, formulas, and representations through which the experience of recognition has been produced and reproduced, especially the workings of modern consumer culture, which select and shape the emblematic figures and cityscapes while rendering these into the requisite cliches.

This is provocative and interesting territory. But my suspicion concerning Rifkin's intentions is at best an educated guess because the author does not say what he is doing: chapters do not open with clear statements of where they are going or necessarily follow from preceding ones; interesting (sometimes very interesting) starting points receive neither (historical) analytical treatment nor resolution. Subjects of the author's interest–for example, the gramophone–are invoked as historical agents of change without explaining how or why. Moreover, many of the author's sentences, despite several readings, remain unintelligible.

To be fair to Rifkin, *Street Noises* was not written for historians. As a study of ways of seeing, hearing, presenting, and remembering, it conforms to the language and approach of cultural theorists for whom it was intended. The author clearly possesses a deep and wide-ranging intelligence, and an eye and ear for provocative material. I am sure he would be fascinating to read if he wrote in ways that historians expect. But since he has chosen a different mode and a different audience, I cannot recommend this book to a wider circle of scholars of French history. A final remark: Manchester University Press would be well advised to hire a proofreader.

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