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H. Hazel Hahn, *Scenes of Parisian Modernity: Culture and Consumption in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. 289 pp. 36 black and white illustrations. \$90 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 978-0-230-61583-0.

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By now the centrality of modern Paris for the visual, literary, and performing arts as well as fashion, spectacle, and tourism has become a familiar topic for scholarly literature on the history of France. The contribution that Hazel Hahn makes in *Scenes of Parisian Modernity: Culture and Consumption in the Nineteenth Century* to this rich tradition of writing is to extend the periodization of the development of the culture of consumption in France to the beginning of the nineteenth century rather than focus exclusively on the period after 1860. In her interpretation, consumerism is seen as the unifying element of culture for this period, which she characterizes as having produced a powerful collective “imaginary” for Parisian society from 1815 to 1914. Hahn therefore dates the advent of consumer culture (and in particular the rise of marketing) much earlier in the nineteenth century than previously theorized and not exclusively in England, but in France where these developments are usually regarded as happening much later.[1] In *Scenes of Parisian Modernity* Paris is portrayed as a frontrunner, along with London, in the development of publicity and THE center of a culture of consumption throughout the entire century.

In her introduction to *Scenes of Parisian Modernity* Hahn clearly states the purpose of her book is “to integrate the history of Paris with the history of consumption, the press, publicity, advertising, and spectacle. It traces the evolution of the urban core districts of consumption such as the Grands Boulevards. It explores elements of consumer culture such as print media, publishing, retail techniques, tourism, city marketing, fashion, illustrated posters, and Montmartre culture” (p. 2). The immense scope of such a project would be daunting to a senior scholar who has dedicated his or her career to the study of French consumer culture, but to examine such a range of topics—the history of consumption, the press, fashion, advertising, and spectacle—within a book that is essentially an extensive revision of the author’s dissertation and over an entire century is ambitious indeed. In order to fulfill the purpose of the book, she examines “the significance of the collective imaginary about consumption which circulated associations with values, ideologies, fashionable themes and lifestyles, spread not only through commercial images and texts but also through an array of cultural sources” (p. 2).

Although Hahn maintains that she is writing about the interconnectedness of culture and commodity, in actuality she is writing about the culture *of* consumption that is fairly broadly defined through printed material (books, journals, newspapers, prints), shopping, and publicity on the boulevards, as well as advertising spectacles. Hahn’s organization of the material follows a chronological arrangement in two separate sections. The first section covers the rise of the consumer economy primarily during the July Monarchy (1830-1848) and the second section on the late nineteenth century focuses above all on the Second Empire (1851-1870) and the Third Republic (1871-1914). In the first section she devotes five chapters to the early nineteenth century and portrays the city of Paris as a thriving center for both the manufacturing and consumption of luxury items and prints along the Grands Boulevards well before the renovation

of Paris under Haussmannization. The Grands Boulevards as well as the arcades are highlighted as early centers of shopping and publicity that provided leisure activity and amusement for Parisians and tourists in the 1830s and 1840s. Hahn argues that representations of consumption in the form of printed images of Paris and urban crowds (in particular those reproduced on the covers and in the pages of *L'Illustration*) are evidence of a “new consumer economy” and when circulated helped to instigate and shape those consuming behaviors (p. 45). Chapter three, entitled “Fashion Discourses in Fashion Magazines and Delphine de Girardin’s *Lettres Parisiennes*,” is one of the more sharply focused chapters in the first section that recounts the role of the fashion press in fueling consuming behaviors through text and images for a wider public. Her focus on Delphine de Girardin, a female fashion critic who published under the pseudonym Vicomte de Launay, is a particularly convincing case study of a historical personage in the early nineteenth century who advocated for the cultivation of new identities through fashion and self adornment in the pages of *La Presse*.

In Hahn’s account, activities associated with consumerism began to be constructed in the 1830s and 1840s as amusement to be experienced *en masse*; consumption is characterized as an activity that unites audiences and holds the potential for individuals to create new identities, themes paralleled in the scholarship of Vanessa Schwartz and Lisa Tiersten.^[2] Indeed, according to Hahn, the activity of commercial consumption developed because of the efforts of consumers themselves (p. 31). She writes, “That consumers—dependent on class, gender and other social frameworks—strongly influenced the course of the evolution of consumer culture resonates with the view that the evolution of urban commercial modernity formed a symbiosis with industrial and economic development rather than resulted from it” (p. 42).

Chapters four and five present a more negative portrayal of the development of publicity (the dissemination of information) and advertising (*réclame* or promotion) through the theme of charlatanism that predominated literary texts and caricatures of the 1820s and 1830s. Rather than employing a critical method to explore this historical material, Hahn instead allows the primary source material to present an appraisal of advertising. In this regard, Hahn maintains that an ambivalent attitude to advertising existed from its very onset.

The second section of the book deals with material dated 1848 to 1914, but the majority of the information actually dates after 1860. Hahn emphasized throughout her book the consistency of consumer culture in France and presents it as a gradual development across decades. Therefore, the renovations of Paris are given passing consideration and are interpreted as hardly altering consumer behavior since the Grands Boulevards, the heart of Parisian publishing, shopping, and publicity, were minimally affected (p. 127). By doing so, she downplays the view that the Second Empire and the city’s renovations marked a violent rupture in the history of the city and accounted for a dramatic rise in commodity culture.

In Section II, Hahn summarizes more familiar terrain with chapters devoted to late nineteenth-century boulevard culture (shopping and publicity), street furniture, poster displays, and advertising in the journal *Le Courrier français*. These topics have been previously dealt with elsewhere, but Hahn has excavated an impressive array of archival material and advertising industry documents that will prove of particular value for scholars. The evidence amassed here elucidates an enormous effort on the part of the press, fashion industry, and nascent advertising industry to provide publicity—both in terms of material that simply informs the public as well as texts and images that promote products and events—that presented consumerism as entertainment. Scholars of many disciplinary fields will benefit from her research, but it holds perhaps the greatest appeal for historians of visual communication and consumption. The details she documents about printing, marketing practices, and advertising displays outlined with particular force in chapter seven, entitled “Furnishing the Street: Urban Rationalization and Its

Limits,” present new ways of thinking about marketing in this period. One example is Hahn’s discussion of an early version of “niche advertising” in which poster display firms used census records to target advertising for audiences in specific neighborhoods as early as the 1850s (p. 144). The material presented in these later chapters will prove particularly useful for providing much needed context for the display and consumption of advertising and thereby challenging the supremacy of Anglo-American examples in many English-language histories of graphic design.[3]

While Hahn points to Walter Benjamin as a major impetus for her work and the key figure for identifying the July Monarchy as the source of spectacle culture, *Scenes of Parisian Modernity* does not utilize his critical stance as a guiding theoretical force and barely references his characterization of modernity in the nineteenth century. Arjun Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large* is known for its development of the concept of the collective “imaginary” and in many ways Hahn is writing a history of modernity at large in the nineteenth century that emphasizes gradual development, rather than rupture, and the ubiquity and entertainment value of technology, media, and consumption.[4] This assessment is borne out by Hahn’s comments in the book’s conclusion that draws parallels between nineteenth-century “surreptitious advertising” and our current exposure to marketing through mass electronic media (p. 220). While this concept of nineteenth-century Paris as a global center for media and marketing is touched upon, it is not always consistently argued throughout the book. Instead, because *Scenes of Parisian Modernity* contains so many fascinating pieces of information from French primary sources, the reader is often left feeling inundated with examples.

A key point in her evidence of consumer behavior is the representation in art and literature of scenes of consumption that presumably resulted in a collective imaginary in which shopping was constructed as a societal activity rather than an isolated, individual one (p. 42). Nevertheless, illustrations that could have strengthened this point of view are only mentioned or described in the text but not reproduced, probably due to budgetary constraints.[5] *Scenes of Parisian Modernity* often takes it for granted that the visual delights and conveniences provided by the new technologies of “lithography, photography, gas lighting, fashion, the railroad, and Industrial Expositions” were accessible to all and universally served to unite audiences and liberate women (p. 2). In the use of the term “collective imaginary,” there is an assumption that images were freely distributed in the spaces of the city and unbounded by modes of distribution, costs, censorship, or regulations that would have restricted their broad profusion.

Although *Scenes of Modernity* includes two chapters that critique consumer culture through primary sources, the book dwells for most part on the glittering sights and sounds of Paris’s shopping districts, illustrated journals, pleasures and diversions of the *bourgeoisie*, and the overall effusion of commodities and spectacle as inflecting the artistic and cultural advancements of the entire century. Her book thereby presents us with the dazzling spectacle of the culture of consumption, which, to paraphrase Joris-Karl Huysmans’s writing on French poster designer Jules Chéret, concentrates on the frothing effervescence of the commodity and omits the noxious, bitter dregs.[6]

NOTES

[1] Marc Martin writes about the “retard de la publicité française” in comparison to the British and Americans and notes a cultural hostility to publicity in general. Martin, *Trois siècles de publicité en France* (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1992), p. 122+.

[2] Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); and Lisa Tiersten, *Marianne in the Market: Envisioning Consumer Society in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[3] The standard text for the history of graphic design documents the development of the illustrated press and advertising posters in the nineteenth century largely through American and British examples. See Philip Meggs and Alston Purvis, chapter nine "Graphic Design and the Industrial Revolution," *Meggs' History of Graphic Design*, fourth edition (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley and Sons, 2006), pp. 134-166.

[4] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). Hahn instead cites Benedict Anderson as a source for the concept of the collective imaginary.

[5] There are many instances of images cited rather than reproduced: pp. 1, 17-18, 20, 21 (two examples), 24, 25, 28, 40, 41, 95, 119, 121, 139, 143-160 and 161. Chapters seven and nine contain no illustrations of publicity displays although contemporary photographs exist for this period.

[6] Joris-Karl Huysmans, Chéret, *Certains* (1889) in Lucien Descaves, ed., *Oeuvres complètes de J.-K. Huysmans* (Paris: G. Crès, 1928-34), v. X, p. 53.

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