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Macs Smith, *Paris and the Parasite: Noise, Health, and Politics in the Media City*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2021. 296 pp. 37 b&w photographs, notes, bibliography, and index. \$40.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780262045544. \$24.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780262362559.

Review by Greg Hainge, University of Queensland.

April 2023. I find myself in Paris, walking through streets that are spookily empty and quiet. It is the day of one of the major demonstrations against the Macron government's pension reforms, taking place days after article 49.3 of the French Constitution has been used to force through the passage of a law without a vote that will see the retirement age in France lifted from sixty-two to sixty-four. This is the calm before the storm, the silence before the noise as the protest route is prepared. Barriers are erected, hundreds of Compagnies républicaines de sécurité (CRS) vans line the avenues and water cannon trucks rumble by to take up their place, waiting, ready to wash away any serious threat to the order not so much desired as enforced.

While I did not realise it at the time, it was entirely fitting that I should be carrying in my backpack, as I walked across the city, a copy of Macs Smith's *Paris and the Parasite: Noise, Health, and Politics in the Media City*, for the scene I found myself in contained so many elements central to this book. Smith, indeed, delves into some of the street protests of recent times that have taken place in Paris, and touches on many aspects of Paris' architectural history, including, of course, Haussmann's redesign. Fascinating parallels are drawn between elements such as these as Smith notes how the Paris police attempted to control and contain 2015's *marche républicaine*, releasing a map with colored, geometric shapes traced on it and intended to "predict and prescribe the limits of the demonstration", much as Napoleon III had drawn color-coded lines on a map of Paris in 1853 (p. 145). At stake here is mastery of the space of the city, the ability to organise and navigate Paris according to officially sanctioned and ordered channels or, alternatively, via unofficial, unsanctioned, individualistic, underground modalities.

Yet things are not quite so simple, and herein lies the particular strength of Smith's book, because what we are dealing with here is not a simple binary. Drawing heavily on Serres's work on the parasite, which necessarily exists in a symbiotic bind of mutual reciprocity and benefit, Smith investigates the ways in which the striated, regimented space of the city is deterritorialised, re-energised, and seen anew by alternative forms of navigation, reading, and mapping.[1] If the figure of the *flâneur* and the psychogeography of the Situationist International spring immediately to mind, this is entirely unsurprising and Smith touches on these at various points throughout his book. Of more interest, however, are the contemporary examples Smith uses across his chapters to illustrate the ways in which the space of Paris is recoded by different kinds of artistic engagement and political praxes. Diving into new media artworks, alternative

cartographies, parkour, graffiti, literature, film, architecture, and much more, Smith skilfully documents some of the many attempts to resist the anti-parasitic order of Western modernity diagnosed by Serres, and that he finds at the heart of Parisian urbanism and urban politics.

As will be apparent from the description of his project thus far, as is the case for Serres, for Smith the parasite is a particularly useful theoretical figure because (in French) it deploys four different meanings: “an unwelcome guest”, “the mooch who lives off another person’s labor”, “an organism that lives in and off a host organism”, and “a mediatic sense: noise or interference in mediation” (p. 3). Like much recent work in sound studies examining the concept of noise, Smith begins his study rooted in a very literal sonic understanding of noise before extending this out to a far broader, conceptual understanding of this term. In doing so, and extending out his reflection on the health impacts of noise that occupy the vast majority of literature on the subject, Smith dives deeper (or tackles these various meanings more literally, perhaps) than Serres in his investigation of the parasite, thinking through not only the relationality of the host and parasite in the outside world but inside our bodies also, drawing on recent research on the importance of viruses for the gut microbiome. While it may seem, given the scales, disciplines, and formats that Smith’s work wanders across, that there is here little coherence, it is perhaps this focus on health (that figures of course in the work’s subtitle) that provides the key to understanding something crucial about Smith’s project. Noise control is most often considered a necessity from the perspective of the maintenance of good health, but the eradication of the parasite, inherent in the project of Western modernity, can but produce an inherently unhealthy society. As he himself puts it in his closing lines: “Thinking the city in frameworks other than the pathologization of parasites opens up radically different ethical and political horizons. How the city as an aesthetic work, as an environment, and as a space of encounter is thought, written, read, and interpreted bears a direct relationship to the kinds of ethical and political practices possible within and through it” (p. 228).

As impressed as I am by very many aspects of Smith’s work, given the importance of the political throughout this book (never more perhaps than in these final lines) and of the fleshy materiality of bodies, my only real reservation (apart from the book’s final sentence which I simply do not understand in light of what has come before) comes in the final chapter where the key to resistance seems to lie in the heightening of the literary aspects of the city and our relation to it. “What would it mean to create literary cities, to engage in literary urbanism? In what ways can a city be structured to favor literary practices and experiences? Is there an architecture that structurally favors relationality and becoming? Is there an architecture without *oikos*, a deconstructive architecture?”, Smith questions (p. 218). Given the very real impacts on bodies documented earlier by Smith both real world, such as the Charlie Hebdo attacks, and literary, such as the fate of the main character in Rachid Boujedra’s *Topographie idéale pour une agression caractérisée*, to end up simply privileging the literary city, “in which no distinction is made between signal and noise, or host and parasite”, against the informatic city, “wherein information, resources, and bodies are communicated from defined place to defined place, individual subject to individual subject”, rings empty (p. 216). The form of relationality privileged here leans heavily on Deleuze’s concept of becoming, of course, but it is Deleuze also who meticulously unpacks the logic of capitalist society that, built on the principle of deterritorialization, needs constantly and ever more violently to re-territorialise in order to maintain a semblance of order. In the wake of the deployment of 49.3, standing next to a water cannon truck, I could but ask myself what kind of peaceful action would have a hope of deterritorialising a state power such as this, of making Paris and the Republic a place and a thing for the people once more. As brilliant as Smith’s book is in many respects, ultimately I am not certain that it can help us answer this question.

## NOTES

[1] Michel Serres, *Le Parasite* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1980).

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