



**Patricia Pye, *Sound and Modernity in the Literature of London, 1880–1918* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), ISBN: 9781137540164 (hardback); 9781137540171 (ebook), 179 pages, £74.99 (hardback); £59.99 (ebook)**

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Outdoor London between 1880 and the end of the First World War resounded with sounds now largely gone from it. Human voices addressing noisy crowds, or musical instruments and other machines playing the latest tunes, would move indoors in the later twentieth century or disappear altogether, making the sound of streets, above all, into that of motor vehicles.

This is a short book which tackles an important subject about which a mass of sources exists. The newly gigantic city of the nineteenth and early twentieth century was overwhelming in ways that were above all sonic, caused by unprecedented concentrations into relatively small spaces of people, vehicles and often very noisy industry. The book emerges, broadly speaking, from the new modernism studies which have fuelled research since the 1990s by massively expanding the range of source material covered by literary scholars. Literature, including fictions such as novels and non-fictional writings such as memoirs, contains evidence of past atmospheres and felt qualities of cities that are otherwise inaccessible, but the precise historical reliability and applicability of this evidence remains doubtful. Connections between literary urban descriptions and the actuality of that city at any particular moment are treacherous. However, realist, impressionist, and early modernist literary authors such as those on whom Patricia Pye focuses here transmit aspects of London experience which build towards a

sensory history of London in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras. London was then reaching the end of its century as the biggest city on earth. The British Empire was at its greatest extent but also approaching a swift decline. A city the nineteenth-century world saw as canonically modern — in some way its capital, *pace* Walter Benjamin — would become, in the twentieth, one whose glory was fading or lay altogether in the past.

### **Kaleidoscope of Sound**

Pye provides a view of London built on contemporary mediations and representations of the rapid technological and infrastructural change it was undergoing between 1880s and 1918. As the city's spatial extent greatly increased, the new phenomena of motor vehicles and the cinema appeared, then coexisted uneasily with their predecessors, horse-drawn transport and the music hall. To grasp this change, Pye ranges through many evocative London writings, the vast majority of them by middle-class male writers, either of art fiction or more journalistic texts. The book lies somewhere between a thorough survey and a focused study of a concrete group, such as that to which Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Hueffer (later Ford), and G. K. Chesterton belonged, dining at the Mont Blanc restaurant and contributing to the *English Review* in its earliest years (1908–09). The argument echoes literary spatialists such as Franco Moretti who claim that space and place should move from the background to the foreground in literary readings.<sup>1</sup> For Pye, 'aural impressions' contained in novels and other texts are not 'incidental to a reader's engagement with a narrative'. Instead, they 'invite a direct engagement with the city's "auditory dimension" (soundscape)'. According to her 'impressions' like these 'provide a means through which not only to explore the aurality of modern urban experience but also to reference some of the socio-cultural factors by which it was informed' (xiii).

Questions of the definition of a city assert themselves. Big data digital humanities research into Victorian and modernist London literature shows that the details of experience in the massively expanding city are largely ignored in a corpus whose toponyms are overwhelmingly those of the West End of London plus a few inner western districts which writers tended to live in and frequent (see Heuser, Moretti, and Steiner (2016)). Until the last chapter, Pye's examples, correspondingly, tend to be of sounds heard centrally in Westminster and slightly further out in residential areas like Kensington and Notting Hill. Margaret Harkness's attentive East End writing gets coverage, but there is only one mention of Arthur Morrison, and none of Thomas Burke or 'Cockney School' writers of the 1890s such as William Pett Ridge and Clarence Rook, who wrote about inner South London in a comic tone of voice. Turning to another attentive listener, the soundscape of George Gissing's 1880s novels of inner and central London is not distinguished from that of his 1890s suburbanites. In other words, London is equated here with its most magnetic and widely known sections, depicted by writers seeking an audience not mostly of Londoners, but positioned throughout the British Empire and beyond.

The book is structured via four sections with one chapter in each section. The section headings mark out 'time', 'social progress', 'popular culture', and 'space' as the fields covered by sections 1 to 4 respectively. But these four aspects are in fact present in all four chapters, almost equally. The introduction contrasts the 'clearly discernible' sounds of early modern London with those of the nineteenth century (xvi). But the sheer variety of the evidence Pye presents in the four main chapters of the book, taken from a fairly short period of time, points to the radically multiple nature of the urban soundscape and, perhaps, its ability to change shape many times within a much shorter span of time than that of centuries. Relations of loud and soft, rapid and slow, voice and music, distant and far, intermittent and constant, could have near limitless variation. We would expect shouts, creaks, bells, neighing, hooves on cobbles in the eighteenth-century city, perhaps, but also variations across space as well as time. At a given moment, great variety could have been detected not just Clapham and Hampstead and the City but also between different neighbourhoods of any larger area, with the specific sounds subject to rapid change.

The introduction references historical and theoretical works on sound by S. Murray Schafer (*Soundscape* (1994)), Raymond Chapman (*The Treatment of Sounds in Language and Literature* (1984)), Sam Halliday (*Sonic Modernity* (2013)), Angela Frattola ('Developing an Ear for the Modernist Novel' (2009)), Bruce R. Smith (*The Acoustic World of Early Modern England* (1999)), Barry Truax (*Acoustic Communication* (2001)) and Steven Connor ('The Modern Auditory Eye' (1997)), Jacques Attali (*Noise* (1985)), John Picker (*Victorian Soundscapes* (2003)), James G. Mansell ('Sounds Modern' (2008)), Michael Bull and Les Back (eds, *The Auditory Culture Reader* (2003)), and James Hendy (*Noise* (2014)). Here is a splendid theory and methodology literature. But among these writers, only Connor is referenced in the book's conclusion (153). Unfortunately no systematic evaluation of these varying approaches to the cultural and urban history of sound in modernity using the case study of London 1880–1918 is attempted in the book, which on the whole moves between multiple examples that are connected somewhat loosely.

## **Newsboys and Demagogues**

Chapter 1 is built around close but contextualizing readings of two novels, Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) and Ford's *A Man Could Stand Up* (1926). A vivid sense of late-Victorian London's soundscape is conveyed, particularly the newsboys yelling the latest in the most blood-curdling terms possible, which frequently angered urban contemporaries (12–16). Using a richly environmental approach, Pye positions the key setting of Conrad's novel, Verloc's shop, inside a city filled with human voices amplified only by the volume at which they could shout. This is related to a topography of 'auditory contrasts' in which 'legitimate noises of news and commerce' blended with 'the sound of sedition to be heard in the parks, on street corners, and in quiet bystreets' (17). Pye's account of 'these aural news headlines, their force and impact', which she presents as a relic of an old urban public environment, very noisy with human voices, gives a new sense of

the street in the period. Micro-temporal uncertainty intervenes, though. The section on *The Secret Agent* (9–19) moves to and fro between 1907, its date of publication, and its temporal setting a couple of decades earlier. Interweaving these with the Greenwich Outrage of 1894 which inspired Conrad's plot, and afterlives of the novel such as a 1920s stage adaptation, Pye leaves the reader wondering about the extent to which the soundscape altered over this forty-year span. After all, she begins the section with the statement that 'the number of people buying a newspaper for private consumption [...] nearly quadrupled between 1880 and 1914' (11), strong proof of changing patterns in aurality and literacy, to paraphrase Walter Ong. Fiction such as Conrad's, of course, blends fairly direct reportage with tall tales and acts of mythmaking. As a transmission of a remembered London — that in which Conrad arrived in as a young, foreign sailor during the 1880s — *The Secret Agent* is an early stage in one key twentieth-century construction of Victorian London based on memories of the 1880s and 1890s: as foggy, gas-lit, and filled with horse-drawn vehicles and cobbles.

Chapter 1 continues by helpfully relating the sounds of Armistice Day in the London of 1918 to fears of working-class rowdiness. Times have changed since the 'more anarchic and cosmopolitan' era recalled by Conrad in *The Secret Agent*. In the new era, following the silence of church bells and street cries during World War One and the spread of new technology such as the telephone with its demand of an 'instant response' (29), any sort of large-scale popular noise alarms the chattering — or scribbling — classes. Overall, the chapter shows how these two esteemed novels are webbed into the sound world of the era, but does not step beyond this demonstration to a fuller new reading of either.

Chapter 2 has oratory at its centre. Like the newsboys' cries, this urban sound became less insistent after it gained widespread indoor rivals like cinema talkies and the wireless heard at home. Pye asks how 'popular oratory and the noise of social protest' influenced 'writers' representation of the later Victorian city' (42). She is certainly right to point out the role of 'the platform' in late Victorian urban life for people of almost every social class, including secular and religious, political and merely entertaining 'lectures, debates and sermons'. Not quite proven, perhaps, is the hypothesis advanced in this chapter that in 1880 to 1920 'the city was being culturally reconfigured as a less anarchic and more orderly imperial centre' (43). Recent scholarship suggests that the same statement could describe 1820–60 or even 1970–2010 (see Dart (2012) and Groes (2011)) equally well.

Still, the chapter contains engaging and thoughtful reading of a trio of sizeable 1880s social novels, Gissing's *Demos* (1886), Henry James's *The Princess Casamassima* (1885–86), and Walter Besant's *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* (1882). The varying experienced qualities of public speakers, including their individualized styles, gets valuable attention. Such speakers' audiences were trained listeners of a different sort from later publics, accustomed to extended speeches. The conflicted protagonist of *Demos*, Richard Mutimer, gets nuanced and sympathetic attention: 'For all his moral flaws, and his compromised engagement with the socialist cause, the educated and socially aspirant Mutimer personifies the potential of democracy, and with that of a civilized existence' otherwise denied to 1880s working-class Londoners (66). This has little to do with

sound, though. And overall, Gissing is too often stereotyped as a gloomy 'middle-class' 'social "observer"' (58).

### **Machine Music and the Flight to the Suburbs**

Chapter 3, entitled "'Can It Be Stopped?' — London and the Popular Tone' begins with a memorable discussion of the sound of the mechanical 'coin-operated harmonicon', a street instrument 'designed to represent instruments in an orchestra or band' (73). The eponymous protagonist of H. G. Wells's novel *Kipps* (1905) is embarrassed by the blaring sound this instrument makes. Pye enables readers to grasp how such technologies as these, the 'new musical machines' of the 1890s, may have proved short-lived but must have had a ferocious power when new as emblems of modernity.

From here, Pye searches out sounds of the period classifiable as those of 'popular culture'. True, an idea of 'popular music' did exist at this time. In George Gissing's 1893 short story 'The Muse of the Halls', a young singer urges her suitor, an aspiring composer, to 'write popular music'.<sup>2</sup> She wants him to pen hit songs for the music hall stage, as opposed to sophisticated and challenging modern music for elite audiences. But none of the writers Pye quotes (75–80) actually uses the word 'popular' to classify musical culture of one sort as opposed to another. The distinction between 'popular' and 'elite' culture that we recognize today was perhaps more a creation of the interwar decades and those immediately after the Second World War, that adopted by elite cultural critics but that also of the recorded music industry and its promotional work on the radio. Pye's temporal focus is on the moments immediately before these came into being. As Pye knows, the spectrum of musical events in Edwardian London contained those variously 'associated with different social classes' (80), ranging between the Covent Garden opera house at one end, and the street music of the East End at the other (80–81). She recognizes a widespread 'overlap of musical genres', especially in territories on the 'borderland between the social spaces of the classical concert and the music hall', demonstrated for example in Conrad's story 'The Return' (81). Music halls and barrel organs in the streets played tunes by Verdi (82), thus collapsing the distinction between 'high' opera and the sounds enjoyed by ordinary people. Comparison is natural with the 'platform culture' of Chapter 2, which was both meticulously structured hierarchically in social class terms, and shared by all social classes.

The novel of Gissing's which comes into focus here (85–86) is appropriately *Thyrza* (1887), whose title character is a talented young singer with a working-class London background. Pye makes the point that musical venues are presented by Gissing in a way 'informed by observations about social class' (84) but does not mention Gissing's repeated use of street music to capture the spirit or atmosphere of the working-class streets as something mysterious to better-off citizens who are outsiders there. Examples include hymn-singing by a whole family of degraded beggars, the violin treasured by an elderly man unable to get work and pawned just before his death by suicide and, quite often quoted or anthologized, the 'music of the obscure ways' suggested as a key to the world of poorer Londoners. Again,

Pye displays expert knowledge of the works of Conrad and Ford. A particularly worthwhile aspect of Chapter 3 is the account given in it of these writers' personal experience of the music hall, over an extended period (87–95). As in other chapters, the flow of argument through the chapter could have been improved, though. Repeated oscillations between the 1880s and the 1910s are insufficiently explained. There is a mass of useful material here which could be quarried by other researchers into the city as environment in modernity. Alongside this material, slightly under-organized though it is, are sharp insights, for instance that Conrad's artistic prose, particularly later in his career, transmits something close to 'the sound of popular culture' contained in music hall badinage (95).

Chapter 4 tackles silence in relation to the physical expansion of London during the period covered. As well as being promoted as healthful and respectable, suburbs were experienced as extremely quiet in comparison with the more crowded and walkable city of the earlier nineteenth century, and of the slums and industrial areas which continued to encircle London's core until the second half of the twentieth century. While this quiet was part of the desirability of the suburbs to those who could afford them, it was also, Pye claims, an 'auditory equivalent' of a perception that London's streets were visually 'grey and uniform' (105).

This is a particularly wide-ranging chapter, moving as it does in its first pages alone from familiar names such as Chesterton, H.G. Wells, and Richard Jefferies to Hall Caine, better known in later periods for being disparaged, and obscure figures such as William Delisle Hay, author of the 1880 '[c]atastrophe novel' *The Doom of the Great City* (1880) (106–8). Again, unfortunately, the reader's path through the mass of material presented remains indistinct. Discussion of Jefferies (both reportage and highly imaginative writing) is followed by sections on Chesterton's alternative reality novel *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904) and Conan Doyle's realist comedy of manners *Beyond the City* (1892). No explicit comparison, however, is offered between the sonic conditions proposed in books which set out to describe London as it is, and others which imagine or extrapolate an alternative to what it is. A shift to the very non-silent London Underground in a chapter ostensibly about the silence of the outer suburbs sounds rather intrusive here. Moreover, readers gain little topographic sense of the distinction between the sort of suburb Chesterton grew up in (Kensington, undoubtedly inner not outer London by the early twentieth century), the very edges of London's built up area which fascinated Jefferies, and the rather fluffily wealthy outer suburbia of Doyle's novel.

## **Conclusion**

Pye has valuably gathered a great range of materials providing evidence of sounds falling into many different categories. Sources drawn on go well beyond the authors, mainly male and mainly canonical, who occupy the centre of her four chapters. There are stabs at a systematic topography of sound. An example is the treatment of Tottenham Court Road in Chapter 1 as the boundary between a more and a less modern London (19). But these are weakened by the equation — still widespread in work on literary London — of the city as a whole with its most-

visited, world famous portions, above all the West End and its immediate surroundings. The very valuable evidence contained in the book lacks coherent organization, though. There is neither a real effort to determine what literary texts could mean to historians of the senses (including a much deeper questioning of them as sources), nor an engagement with the lively discipline of literary urban studies within which many of these matters are now being debated. Abrasive relationships between different histories — the aesthetic with the technological, municipal and demographic, for instance — need explicit attention, if a study like this is going to contribute more than a lot of interesting quotations and fragments.

As a final note, the physical inadequacies of this book in hardback form have to be mentioned. It is unacceptable that academic books costing nearly £75 a copy should start falling apart as soon as a reader begins opening and closing them with any frequency, but that is what happened with the review copy of this book I had. Palgrave Macmillan is owned by the highly profitable academic publishing giant Springer Nature. Before the Springer takeover, Palgrave books were physically better produced (e.g. Groes (2011)). Just now, such giant enterprises, which seek profits for shareholders, keep their place on university libraries' shopping lists via sheer clout. But their publishing model is being challenged by others in which peer-reviewed academic publications appear open-source, at no cost to the reader. Work such as Pye's is not threatened by such a possible future, which would improve the chance which scholars of Victorian and twentieth-century London have of sharing knowledge about the sounds of the city and their representation in writing. These caveats aside, Pye's book overall demonstrates both the problems and the advantages of a critical paradigm valuing breadth over depth.

## References

1. See Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 70.
2. George Gissing, 'The Muse of the Halls', *Gissing Journal*, 42.3 (2006 [1893]), 1–13 (p. 3).

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