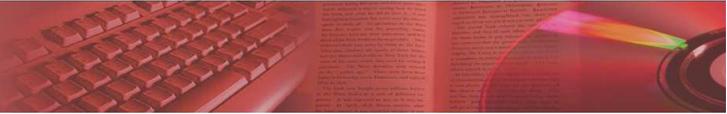


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



James G. Mansell. *The Age of Noise in Britain: Hearing Modernity*. Studies in Sensory History Series. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016. viii + 232 pp. \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-08218-4; \$95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-04067-2.

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On October 23, 1940, the *Daily Mirror* published a photo of a woman wearing elegant earrings constructed from jewelry that had earplugs attached—devices that could be plugged in instantly. The text below the photo suggested that the earrings might help women ensure not to lose the earplugs. Such plugs had been mass distributed by the British Ministry of Home Security in the early weeks of the German air raids, and were meant to help the population stay calm amid the deafening noise of sirens, airplanes, and exploding bombs. They were designed to prevent Adolf Hitler and his generals to accomplish what they aimed at: to create a nervous breakdown among the British population and win the war. But the earplugs also reflected one of the ways of “hearing modernity” that had their roots in the interwar years and returned in the British response to the noise made by the enemy.

The example of the plug-in earrings is one out of many remarkable and entertaining stories in James G. Mansell’s *The Age of Noise in Britain: Hearing Modernity*. They add up to the book’s wonderful readability. But the monograph is especially excellent for its carefully researched and smoothly presented argument. It is not just about the history of noise in the United Kingdom between 1914 and 1945 but also about how the experts speaking and writing about the age of noise in Britain co-constituted modernity. And it convincingly shows how many of them similarly contributed to a type of discourse influential to this day: that of the adaptable self, the self-managing individual capable of coping with the sensory transitions of his or her time, so adaptable, in fact, that even the sounds of World War II should not keep British

citizens from carrying on with their everyday lives.

The book, so Mansell is eager to underline, is not about the British soundscape but about ways of hearing. More precisely: it is about the medical men, writers, theologians, psychologists, engineers, and filmmakers who carved out three ways of hearing in the pamphlets, research reports, newspaper articles, and documentaries they published. Each cluster of experts, Mansell claims, nurtured its own notion of the hearing self while competing with each other for political and societal influence.

The first in line were those who considered noise as a sign of a crisis in civilization. Among them was the eminent hospital physician Sir Thomas Horder. He had members of the royal family among his patients, but also established the Anti-Noise League in 1933. For him, his medical peers, and the fiction writers supporting their cause, the roar of motorized traffic, transport, telephones, and typewriters lacked the soothing rhythm of natural sound and music. Instead, the chaos of noise did much to contribute to the urban overload of sensory stimuli—an overload that threatened the nervous system and might lead to neurasthenia, a body drained of energy. Reducing needless noise and creating opportunities for quiet retreat were the solutions preferred by this group of experts. At first, they centered their concerns in particular on protecting intellectuals. Yet once they realized that their political influence would remain slight if they presented brain workers as the sole victims of noise, they started picturing the entire population as being under the threat of neurasthenia. This diagnostic label, so Mansell insightfully reminds his readers, was already on the de-

cline in the early twentieth century, due to the rise of psychoanalysis. That medical men like Lord Horder still considered the notion of neurasthenia useful is because it enabled them to focus on the somatic causes of noise sensitivity, in line with their expertise. This paradigm was to be successfully contested by industrial psychologists, a new group of professionals in search for a place in the sun. They turned the medical claims upside down. In their view, noise sensitivity was not a state of mind caused by the physiological condition of overstrained nerves but a sign of mental problems.

Before Mansell explains how the psychologists came to this conclusion, he unravels the hearing conceptions of another group: theosophists, and theosophy-inspired artists. It is an original choice to bring this circle of people onto the scene of noise debates; so far historians have largely kept them at bay in this context. Mansell follows scholars like cultural historian Wouter Hanegraaff in situating those who believed in the magical force of sound vibrations into the heart of modernity, be it an alternative modernity. Disenchantment of the world was just one side of the coin of modernity, re-enchantment its flipside. Once man “had received proper spiritual training,” theosophists claimed, he could “transcend the earthly realm of physical and emotional matter and be united with ‘the Great Mind in the Kosmos’” (p. 70). Violinist, ethnomusicologist, music therapist, and theosophist Maud MacCarthy, for instance, sought to counteract the bad vibrations of noise by the good vibrations of spiritual microtone music.

Although the inclinations of the theosophists seem to be squarely opposite to those of the rationalist psychologists, engineers, and filmmakers that are central stage in Mansell’s subsequent chapter, these groups also had something in common: the idea that individuals were able to manage themselves in dealing with noise. Psychologists like Frederic Bartlett departed from the neurasthenia paradigm because empirical investigations of factory work tended to show that noise had little effect on workers’ efficiency. Different from intellectuals, these workers quickly adapted to noise, especially when the noise proved to be in sync with the rhythm of their labor. Only the mentally vulnerable, Bartlett concluded by observing his clients, had difficulty standing noise. A quiet home, however, was widely understood to benefit all, and acoustical engineers therefore drew on science to create sonically rational flats by using, for instance, floating floors. Even filmmakers normalized noise by presenting the rhythm of machines and everyday work as the collective rhythm of the nation.

All three discourses kept resounding in World War II, although Mansell presents considerable less evidence for the wartime relevance of the good vibrations approach than for that of the adaptive individual going for noise control (hence the earplugs) or of the retreat from nerve-shattering noise. Traditional noise abatement campaigns came to an end, but Lord Horder and his associates started a campaign to have civil defense workers recuperate in the countryside. What makes this chapter particularly illuminating, however, are its claims about the orchestration of sound for national survival. The government banned the use of horns and sirens for every activity but warning for air raids. Even the church bells were temporarily silenced; ringing these was to signal to all that the Germans had launched a ground war on the British isle.

Mansell has written a great book that deserves a wide audience. Rather than treating modernity as the canvas on which the noise abatement campaigners and experts smashed their paint, he shows how they weaved the tapestry of modernity itself through their claims and interventions. This modernity was not a monochrome. On the contrary, its threads had different tones as well as textures. One of these threads, the neurasthenic one, would become thinner over time; the rest was there to stay, with long-lasting effects. The book’s focus on Britain—beautifully illustrated on the cover by visualizing the London skyline in terms of sound level graphics—helps to create depth. All main characters and organizations have been impeccably contextualized, and each wider trend is exemplarily embedded in well-selected, recent literature. Mansell patiently weaves his argument into a rich historical narrative, with a sense of humor that never falls into the trap of mocking his historical characters. Although he deliberately rests his case on the voices of auditory experts, the voices of their subjects of intervention become occasionally audible as well, for instance, through answers to the questions of the social survey organization Mass-Observation, envy evoking sources historians working on the United Kingdom have at their disposal. It shows that citizens disliked flats, soundproof or not, and that the Brits carried on during the war, but without earplugs. Sonic rationality may not have been on everybody’s mind immediately. Adaptability, Mansell suggests nonetheless, would become a dominant cultural norm.

With the exception of his discussion on the long-lasting effects of adaptable selfhood, Mansell carefully avoids going beyond the geographical and temporal limits of his study, leaving international comparison largely

to others. Of course, modernity has been made in many places, and so has noise. Competition between professionals around this issue may have been less vehement than in Britain. In the Netherlands, for instance, engineers took the lead in noise abatement in a remarkable coalition with spokesmen for motorists. At local levels, chief police officers—nearly absent in Mansell’s narrative—could be key figures in noise discourses, as they were in New York or Paris, for instance. Historically diversified legal frameworks set constraints for interventions. Even discourses that seem to have died down in the United Kingdom may pop up again elsewhere. Last spring, an important Dutch prize for essays, the Jan Hanlo Prize Small 2017, was awarded to a writer who attributed the cultural demise of reading to the rise of noise. Lord Horder would have applauded it.

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