

Paris and the Parasite

Noise, Health, and Politics in the Media City

Macs Smith



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For my mother, who taught me that a healthy body doesn't mean anything, that love is what matters

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1 Introduction

In February of 2016, the municipal government of Paris published a “Plan de prévention du bruit dans l’environnement,” or Plan for the Prevention of Noise in the Environment (PPBE). The document opens with two observations: first, that polls have shown growing levels of concern about noise among Parisians; and second, that noise represents “the second-most-important environmental influence on human health after air pollution.”¹ The document lays out a five-year plan consisting of 39 measures to quiet the soundscape of the city. The PPBE acknowledges that the line between sound and noise is fuzzy. Noise is subjective. It is one person’s experience of a sound “at a given moment.” Music coming through the wall from my neighbor’s apartment is sound if I’m in a mood to listen to it, and noise if I’m not. Traffic, birdsong, and voices in the street might be perceived as pleasant signs of a vibrant city, or they might not. There is nothing in the soundwaves themselves that can tell us how a sound will be perceived by a listener. Parisians might be increasingly worried about noise, but what each of them thinks of as noise might be different. By stating this, the PPBE undermines its premise right from the start. If there is no objective definition for noise, then what is there to regulate? If the meaning of “noise” can change for a given person from moment to moment, then the government seems to be taking on the task of imposing a normative aesthetic standard on the urban soundscape and policing citizens’ personal experience of it.

The PPBE dodges this trap by turning to the International Organization for Standardization, which defines noise according to the “sensation” it produces. That word can be interpreted physiologically as well as emotionally, opening up the possibility of an objective definition of noise based not on the listener’s mood or artistic tastes but on the effect the sound has on



Figure 1.1

Noise map of Paris created by Bruitparif (www.bruitparif.fr)

their body. A sound can therefore be defined as noise if it harms the listener's body in a detectable way.

With this definition in hand, the PPBE proceeds to argue that noise is a health issue and, indeed, that Paris is experiencing a public health crisis. Noise, the report states, raises stress levels, worsens cardiovascular health, and interrupts sleep, leading to a host of secondary health issues. Playing up the “environmental” part of its title, the PPBE repeatedly ties noise to air pollution, saying that vehicles that emit less CO₂ also emit less noise, and comparing the quiet of green spaces and parks to the clean air the trees provide. Readers are led to assume that reducing noise in the city will also indirectly benefit their lungs. In interviews conducted after the release of the report, Célia Blauel, the *adjointe* to the mayor in charge of the environment, cited the statistic that 10,000 deaths in Paris per year are caused by noise. “Beyond questions of comfort and quality of life,” she said, “the acoustic environment constitutes a public health concern.”²

Public health is not the only reason to care about urban noise. Noise also has a sociopolitical dimension, according to the PPBE. It is “an important factor in social segregation” as the rich buy homes in quiet neighborhoods while the poor are exposed to harmful soundscapes, disadvantaging them for life. How the government proposes to manage noise likewise directly concerns the social politics of the city. Many of the suggested interventions center around the commute, and in particular how residents of the *banlieue*, Paris’s suburbs, get into and out of the city center. Reducing automobile traffic may reduce noise, but for people who rely on cars to access the city center, a reduction in traffic is a threat to what Henri Lefebvre calls their “right to the city.”³ This side of things is all the more fraught given the historic power and wealth imbalance between the center of Paris and the suburbs. The *boulevard périphérique*, Paris’s ring road, features prominently in the PPBE. Because it marks the limits of Paris proper, lying in the footprint of the city’s last defensive walls, the *périphérique* is a symbol of the difficult relationship between central Paris and the *banlieue*. The PPBE’s proposals to quiet the highway, for instance by burying it underground, constitute symbolic renegotiations of the boundaries of the city. How the city proposes to manage noise thus opens questions of who is allowed into the city and who has a right to its resources.

I am not going to discuss the merits of the policies put forth in the PPBE. My interest lies instead with the discourses it deploys. The document begins with a question about the soundscape of the city, about what sounds are desirable and what constitutes noise. That quickly becomes a question about urban hygiene and about the sociopolitics of the city. The discursive overlap of noise, hygiene, and the sociopolitical that we see in the PPBE is exemplary of the pattern Michel Serres identifies in *The Parasite*. The word “parasite” in French (*le parasite*) has four meanings. The first is a vestigial meaning taken from the original Ancient Greek usage: a poor person allowed to eat at a rich man’s feast, an unwelcome guest (from *para-sitos*, to eat alongside). The second is a sociopolitical meaning: the mooch who lives off another person’s labor. The third is the biological sense of an organism that lives in and off a host organism. And finally, there is a mediatic sense: noise or interference in mediation. Serres sees these four definitions as deeply connected. To use one is to activate them all. We see this in the PPBE, where a discussion of acoustic noise—a mediatic parasite—cannot help bringing into relief two other kinds of parasite: the biological and

the social. Serres argues that all of the various meanings of “parasite” are expressions of a single conceptual framework: the desire for order. A parasite is simply that which threatens the order of a system. The unwelcome guest disturbs the boundaries of the home, the mooch upsets the economic system, the organismal parasite erodes the bodily integrity of its host, and noise disrupts clarity in communication, thereby undermining the premise that rational thinking produces clear ideas and ordered systems of thought.

Serres’s overarching argument is that Western modernity is founded on the privileging of order and the concomitant pathologization of anything that threatens it. Western modernity is anti-parasitic. It identifies parasites and purges them to create well-organized, efficient, high-fidelity systems. A parasite is always defined in relation to a host, so if Western modernity is anti-parasitic, it is also pro-host. It creates the conditions for rational and autonomous subjects, the owners of the property and knowledge from which the parasites are banished. This project is flawed, Serres writes, because parasites can never be purged from a system: “There are channels, and thus there must be noise. No channel without noise.”⁴ The argument is as austere as the second law of thermodynamics. There is no system immune to entropy. As Serres sees it, Western modernity is thus built on a mendacious promise, a kind of epistemological Ponzi scheme where debts are passed on but never paid, where parasites are continually displaced but never eradicated, where hosts think they’ve been made whole but never truly are.

My argument over the course of this book will be that Parisian urbanism and urban politics are dominated by just such anti-parasitism. The pathologization of acoustic noise that we find in the PPBE is but a recent example of a long-standing project to rid the city of its parasites. In this project, the politics of media overlap in complex ways with biopolitics and sociopolitics. Sometimes, as we will see, concerns about epidemic disease are used to justify interventions in media or politics; sometimes a social group is depicted as diseased outsiders or a cacophonous rabble whose demands don’t make sense; sometimes mediatic clarity is presented as an unproblematic virtue, preempting debate about the social and political side effects of its pursuit. Consistent with Serres’s argument, the eradication of Paris’s parasites has never been realized and can never be realized—it is an unending dialectic. Through the identification and pathologization of endless parasites, the city’s hosts are constituted and reconstituted. This is a violent process, and I will contend that its stakes need to be critically reevaluated.

Serres primarily associates anti-parasitism with the modern period, which for him roughly begins with the writings of Descartes in the seventeenth century, but he offers examples of hosts attempting to expel parasites going back to the origins of civilization. Anti-parasitism as an ideology is exemplified by certain systems of thought, but the gesture to expel parasites from a place or system can be found almost anywhere. The relationship between host and parasite is present at the founding of the first city; it is present in the basic principles of architecture. To speak about a city and its parasites is thus to speak about the city and parasites. I will consider the larger philosophical implications of my questions over the course of this book, and especially in the final chapter, "Underground." For the most part, however, I will restrict myself to a specific historical period. I will focus on Paris from the nineteenth century to today. At the end of the eighteenth century, France saw the emergence of the science of hygienics and the concept of public health. These ideas were immediately applied to cities, and played a major role in shaping the nascent field of urban planning. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these concepts gradually became intertwined with thinking about new media and new technologies, leading to the informatic urbanist rhetoric we see today. While parasites of different kinds have played a role in Paris since its foundation, only since the nineteenth century do we find the full discursive nexus identified by Serres—the fusion of social, biological, and mediatic forms of anti-parasitism—applied to Paris in a comprehensive way.

This argument will build on a growing body of research that lies at the intersection of urbanism and media. In 1988, Friedrich Kittler published his essay "The City Is a Medium." In it he defines media as technologies that "record, transmit, and process information," and he argues that the city is just such a technology.⁵ The city is a complex of communication systems whose information takes the form of data, goods, and bodies. Building on observations made by Lewis Mumford in the 1960s, he argues that walls and streets are channels comparable to the circuits of a computer. Kittler's notion of the city as medium has nourished two branches of urban studies. Researchers like Manuel Castells (*The Informational City*, 1989), Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin (*Telecommunications and the City*, 1995; Graham also edited *The Cybercities Reader*, 2004), M. Christine Boyer (*CyberCities*, 1996), and William J. Mitchell (who produced a trilogy on urbanism and virtuality) seized on the computational metaphor for the city. They built

on the comparison between the city and the circuit board, and argued that cities have undergone a revolution brought on by new telepresence technologies and virtual reality.

The second research area Kittler's argument fed into was less interested in the computer or the digital and more interested in the mediatic. In the 1990s, scholars like Beatriz Colomina and Anthony Vidler examined how architecture and urbanism are intertwined with other media. In Colomina's *Privacy and Publicity* (1994), she shows how Le Corbusier and Adolf Loos engaged with photography, film, and home media in their reconceptualization of domestic architecture. In *The Architectural Uncanny* (1992), Vidler demonstrates how architecture, just like film, television, and literature, can mediate a concept like the uncanny. The book culminates in the essay "Transparency," in which Vidler compares the architectural façade to a screen. In the twenty-first century there has been an explosion of research in this area. Works include Scott McQuire's *The Media City* (2008) and *Geomedia* (2016); Simone Tosoni, Matteo Tarantino, and Chiara Giaccardi's edited volume *Media and the City*, and Myria Georgiou's monograph of the same name, both released in 2013; Shannon Mattern's *Deep Mapping the Media City* (2015) and *Code + Clay . . . Data + Dirt: Five Thousand Years of Urban Media* (2017); Martijn de Waal's *The City as Interface: How Digital Media Are Changing the City* (2014); and de Waal and Michiel de Lange's *The Hackable City: Digital Media and Collaborative City-Making in the Network Society* (2019). McQuire summarizes the core critical conceit of this area of scholarship thus: "Acceptance of the heightened role of media in the production of contemporary experience demands the critical embrace of McLuhan's insight that media constitute an *environment*. [. . .] Moving through the world at large now involves the ongoing negotiation of, and participation in, diverse media flows. Neither home nor street nor city can now be thought apart from the media apparatus which redistributes the scale and speed of social interaction in their domains."⁶ Focusing on mediation instead of computing or some other fixed technological metaphor leads to a more fluid understanding of the city. Media shift constantly in response to other media, to the messages that pass through them, and to the uses people put them to. Media are inherently relational. They channel information from one person to another, from one place to another, from one system to another. To study media is to study the kinds of people they connect and the kinds of messages they communicate.⁷

Paris and the Parasite builds on this second area of scholarship—and is in many ways critical of the first, for reasons I will explain shortly. I will work on the premise that the city is a media system. Now, the breadth of writing on the media city can create terminological confusion. The term *media* is difficult to define, and different authors understand it in different ways. Some use the term to refer to Information and Communications Technologies like the telephone, television, and computer; others, like de Waal, to refer more specifically to so-called “new media” like the smartphone and digital platforms. Yet others, like Georgiou, use it to refer to “the media,” meaning the industries that produce newspapers, television, films, and music. McQuire and Mattern use it in a more copious sense: any technology or system that carries and transforms information. As the title of Mattern’s book suggests, clay can be a medium just as much as computer code. I will be using the term in this last sense. I am interested both in the phenomenon of screens being attached to walls, and in the wall itself in its limestone materiality as a media environment. I understand the city to be composed of many layers of channels, and imbricated with an array of other media like writing, painting, film, photography, and the computer. I also understand the media city to mean that the city is always mediated, that there is no direct knowledge of the city that does not pass through mediation, that there is no city prior to or outside of mediation. In “Apartment,” I will discuss Michael Haneke’s 2005 film *Caché*. In the first shot of that film, the audience sees the façade of a house in the 13th arrondissement of Paris. Several minutes go by without any action. Gradually the spectator discovers that he or she is watching not the house, but a taped recording of the house. When we thought we were looking at the city itself, we were actually seeing a mediated version of it.⁸ This I take to be a general principle.

Thus, when I speak of the mediatic parasites of the city, I will not just be referring to the acoustic noise targeted in the PPBE or the interference on the telephone lines. The mediatic parasites of the city include the friction in the city’s communication of bodies and goods from one point in space to another, the ambiguity in the speech and texts that are channeled through the city’s forums and writing surfaces, and the unexpected meanings that emerge out of encounters between the urban media system and its users. Noise is not only passive either. Serres underscores the agency and, indeed, the power of the parasite who deliberately alters messages as they

pass through a channel. Noise can be something an actor introduces to a system, either as a dissident move or to suppress dissidence.

I shall call the approach to urbanism that seeks to eliminate noise from the networks of the media city “informatic urbanism.” This is an urbanism that conceives the media city along the lines of Claude Shannon’s theory of communication, in which an emitter has a concept, encodes it in a message, and passes the message through a channel, where it encounters noise before arriving at a receiver, who deciphers the message to obtain the concept. In this theory of information, value is placed on the fidelity of transmission, on the concept arriving at its destination the same as it was when it left the emitter. Noise is the enemy. Mark Nunes defines the “ideology of informatic control” as the “[dream] of an error-free world of 100 percent efficiency, accuracy, and predictability.”⁹

We can see an example of informatic urbanism in the Paris municipal government’s recent push to transform Paris into a smart city. On May 26, 2015, the mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, presented “Paris Intelligente et Durable: Perspectives 2020 et au-delà” (“A Smart and Sustainable Paris: 2020 and Beyond”) to the city council. Whereas the PPBE focused on acoustic noise control, this document offered a broader five-year plan to cover Hidalgo’s first term as mayor. In it she lays out a number of initiatives designed to make Paris into a smart city, or *ville intelligente*. Smart Paris is an intensely mediatic city. The government will embrace new technologies, transition the city’s bureaucracy to digital interfaces, invest in data analytics, install tracking devices to monitor urban infrastructure, convert office space into start-up incubators to make Paris a center for the tech and new media industries, make technology available to a larger percentage of the population, and create online platforms for participatory democracy. The city is clearly thought of as a network through which information constantly circulates. The new initiatives, it is promised, will render that circulation ever more efficient. The installation of tracking devices in buildings will “enable the detection of malfunctions and the mobilization of users to reduce waste.” Digital technologies will be “designed to simplify processes.” The city will not just be connected, but “hyperconnected.” Error and noise will be virtually eliminated, and citizens will enter an informatic utopia where all information is available on demand, anywhere and “at a moment’s notice.” This is informatic urbanism.

“Paris Intelligente et Durable” also shows how informatic urbanism plays into larger anti-parasitic ideologies. Like the PPBE, the plans to make Paris a smart city connect the desire to eliminate error from the city-as-information-processor to biopolitical and sociopolitical discourses. The document speaks of the need to cleanse the environment, and promises that this cleaner and more efficient Paris will bring health benefits to the whole population. The authors note the challenges posed by economic precarity and social exclusion, which likewise bear on public health, as “social and territorial inequality generates environmental and sanitary inequality.” The three kinds of parasitism—mediatic, biological, and social—are all in play. Error has to be purged from the city’s networks and disease and pollution from its body, and this will transform who is excluded from the urban community and who has access to its resources.

Many scholars have been critical of the smart city because of the authoritarian overtones of its promise of total surveillance and control, and because it locates too much power in private tech companies that are not accountable to the public. Some, like Mattern, have extended that critique to informatic urbanism in general. But even in criticism of informatic urbanism, the noise of the urban media system is seldom acknowledged, and almost never on its own terms. In de Lange and de Waal’s *The Hackable City*, various modes of interference with the efficient functioning of the media city are discussed, but they are described not as forms of entropy but as an alternate kind of organization. They do not inhibit, much less break down, the informatic city; they offer “a new paradigm for smart cities, urban informatics and urban governance.”¹⁰ Informatic urbanism persists, but in a modified form. De Lange and de Waal’s text is a good demonstration of the stakes of writing about the noise of the urban media system. The erasure of noise is a core ideology of informatic urbanism; by failing to listen to noise on its own terms, one accepts or reproduces the premises of informatic urbanism. The critic remains trapped within what Michel Foucault would call informatic urbanism’s discursive field; consequently, even in the act of critiquing it, the critic reproduces it. To truly step outside of informatic urbanism and examine its values, fault lines, and power structures, one has to be attentive to noise. “Error,” as Nunes puts it, “reveals not only a system’s failure, but its operational logic.”¹¹ Attention to noise is the starting point for genuine critique of informatic urbanism, and for conceptualizing alternatives to it.

The smart city is often presented as a rupture with previous modes of city planning, but informatic urbanism and the rhetoric of connectivity and efficiency that it deploys are not new at all. They have, as I will show, characterized Paris's engagement with other media from the nineteenth century to today.¹² What is at issue with informatic urbanism is not simply the recent phenomenon of city planners borrowing technologies and metaphors from computing. The problematics raised by informatic urbanism and the pathologization of noise concern the basic precepts of urbanism. Addressing them thus requires a new thinking of the city rather than a return to predigital approaches to urbanism.

While theorists of the media city have largely neglected noise, scholars working in other areas have been increasingly attentive to it in recent years. The emergence of sound studies has brought new attention to the acoustic noise of the city. Two recent texts particularly worth mentioning are Aimée Boutin's *City of Noise* and Ross Chambers's *Atmospherics of the City*, both published in 2015. Both books focus on the acoustic noise of Paris in the nineteenth century. At times both texts fall into the trap I mention above: of not reckoning with noise on its own terms. Boutin's text, though it traces the emergence of noise as a particular category of sound, frequently conflates sound and noise, and her task of reconstituting the soundscape of nineteenth-century Paris leads her to resolve cacophonous noise into its component sounds. She recovers the sound of the city at the expense of its noisiness. Chambers argues that Charles Baudelaire's poetry and his "fetish aesthetics" were shaped by his alertness to the noisiness of the city. Chambers's argument is especially relevant to mine in the way he connects the noisiness of the city to the noisiness of Baudelaire's poetry. His idea that a literary aesthetics offers a way to study noise as noise is an idea I shall discuss in "Underground."

Moving away from acoustic noise to noise in the informatic sense, there has been a growing interest of late in the parasites of media systems and the intersections between media and biology. This is unsurprising, given the spread through popular culture of terms like the computer virus, viral media, and the meme. Researchers like Jussi Parikka (*Digital Contagions*, 2007, and *Insect Media*, 2010), Tony Sampson (*Virality*, 2012), and Luciana Parisi (*Contagious Architecture*, 2013) have embraced Serres's notion that anomalies are fundamental to system function, and that we cannot study systems without studying their failures.

Work in this area, in asking why biological metaphors have such currency in digital cultures, at times crosses over into what Eugene Thacker calls biomedica, a media theory of biology in which the living organism is understood as a communication channel, an information processor, and a repository of coded messages. These texts do not treat biology as a simple metaphor for the digital. Life and technology are not neatly separable, much less opposed. Parikka adopts the Deleuzian concept of the assemblage. “An assemblage,” he writes, is not “a collection of already existing elements (technology taking the animal as its model for example).” It is “more akin to becoming than expressing a solid being (the becoming animal of technology, the becoming technical of the insect).” An assemblage can take biological or technical forms depending on the context, meaning that “questions of naturalness or artificiality are bracketed, and the focus is placed on the nonrepresentational environment and the machinic assemblage in which the entities act.”¹³ This idea helps to explain how anti-parasitism traverses the mediatic and biological: the parasite is not a metaphor but an assemblage that can take biological, technical, or social forms depending on the context.

An important feature of work in this area is that it often challenges the negative connotations carried by terms like virus. Tony Sampson argues that virality is the connective tissue of society rather than a threat to its survival. A similar reevaluation of the language of disease, and of disease itself, has been undertaken in research that straddles biology and political philosophy. Three prominent authors in this domain are Ed Cohen (*A Body Worth Defending*, 2009), Roberto Esposito (*Immunitas*, 2011), and Alfred Tauber (*Immunity*, 2017). They show how political concepts shape biological theories, and how those theories in turn naturalize political ideologies. All three apply ecological thinking to the human body, challenging the negative connotations of terms like *parasite* and arguing for a less hierarchical understanding of the human body’s relationship to nonhuman organisms.

Both media theoretical work on biology and techne, and research on immunity and the boundaries of the human, are closely connected to the philosophical field of the posthuman. Thinkers like Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti have questioned the ontological boundary between the human and nonhuman, and with it the anthropocentric—and often androcentric—foundations of culture and politics. *Paris and the Parasite*, by critically examining the violent processes that lead some bodies—whether

human or nonhuman—to be pathologized and excluded from the city, likewise calls into question the anthropocentrism of urbanism. While there are some points of divergence between this book and other works on the posthuman (discussed in “Underground”), this work can be read as a post-humanism of the city.

In summary, *Paris and the Parasite* takes the reassessment of parasites that is ongoing across media theory, biology, and philosophy, and applies it to the media city. It does this to one city in particular, and it is necessary to explain why I have chosen to do that. Most existing work on the media city focuses on multiple cities. Scholars borrow Saskia Sassen’s notion of the “global city.” Sassen coined the term to describe the nodes of the modern global network of goods, capital, and tourism. Such cities are, she argues, more like each other than they are like the countries surrounding them. The global city and the media city are interconnected concepts in her argument, and this has led scholars of the media city to treat it as a global phenomenon. There are, obviously, good reasons behind this approach. Few technologies are rolled out in one city alone. One of the most important effects of media like the telegraph, television, and internet is that they connect cities in new ways, allowing a resident of Paris to be virtually present in London or Tokyo. Focusing on a single city in isolation makes it difficult to account for that dimension of the media city.

However, the international, comparative approach also has its limitations. By treating the media city as transnational, researchers forgo rigorous historicization. Focusing on global trends, researchers can often miss how local cultures and traditions clash with globally deployed technologies to produce unique local media environments. Approaching the media city globally can at times serve as a hermeneutic shortcut: when a given technology or practice cannot be found in one city, the author can discuss it in the context of another city without unpacking what it was about Paris or Berlin that led it not to adopt that technology. As a result, work in this field can overstate the homogeneity of contemporary metropolises and can argue, sometimes despite promises to the contrary, for what Graham calls a technological determinism wherein media technologies frictionlessly impose their own logics on urban life wherever they are deployed. By focusing on one city, I hope to avoid that trap.

Why Paris and not London, New York, or Hong Kong? Paris, as Walter Benjamin put it, was the capital of the nineteenth century, owing to its

role as an incubator for the development and urban integration of new technologies of transport, communication, and exchange. These days, the title is often invoked backhandedly, implying that Paris is not the capital of the twenty-first century. Contemporary Paris is often accused of being a museum city, obsessed with the preservation of its past to the detriment of its present and future. For these reasons, it seems an inapt subject for a study focused at least in part on the integration of new media and digital technology into urban life. And yet, today's Paris is a much more complicated machine than these stereotypes give it credit for. Setting aside the impossible task of guessing which cities will be the centers of the current century, Paris is one of the cities that has most eagerly taken on the challenges posed by new technological and mediatic paradigms. As detailed in the planning documents described above, Paris's planners have placed media at the heart of a radical rethinking of how cities should be structured and how life within them should look. That Paris should be one of the philosophical centers for new ways of thinking the city is not hindered by its attention to its past. While the "smart city" is usually portrayed as a rupture in the history of the city, this portrayal, as I have suggested, fails to account for the ways in which cities mediated long before the silicon chip ever came to market. Paris's legacy as a center for urbanist innovation throughout the nineteenth century, and its planners' continued reflection on that legacy, make it a particularly enlightening case study for understanding how mediatic changes currently taking place in the city will reshape community.

Paris is, moreover, a quintessential media city in the sense that few cities have been as mediated in books, film, photography, and art. In "The Eiffel Tower," Roland Barthes describes Paris as "an object virtually prepared,"¹⁴ present to the entire world, but as an image. This is true of all cities. There is no city that we can have immediate knowledge of. We always encounter places in mediated forms. But artists' preoccupation with Paris means that there is an especially rich corpus for thinking the mediaticity of this urban space.

Focusing on Paris—and, by extension, the French context—is further motivated by my interest in the parasite. There is a certain amount of linguistic specificity to this term. "Parasite" is not used for noise in every language. Serres acknowledges that some of his analysis relies on wordplay that would not be possible in English. That is not entirely true, as the word is used in a mediatic sense in English-language speech act theory, a fact

which did not escape the attention of Jacques Derrida, as discussed in the final chapter of this book. English, moreover, offers numerous examples of words that traverse the biological and the mediatic: the computer virus and viral media, the meme, noise (which comes from the same root as nausea). Serres's argument that the same pathologizing gesture traverses biology, mediation, and the social holds even outside of the French language. With that said, the parasite and related subjects like hospitality, communicational clarity, and the integrity of the body have been particularly prominent in French philosophy. And many of the philosophers who have written on these subjects were influenced by having lived in Paris. When, for instance, Derrida wrote about urban politics, his audience was global but his examples were mostly taken from Paris. When he tried to collaborate with an architect to intervene in the urban landscape, he did so in Paris. Focusing on this city thus gives an additional layer of cohesiveness to my study.

This is a book in the vein of Reyner Banham's *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* or Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour's *Learning from Las Vegas*. It is a case study of one city whose arguments and observations concern architecture, urbanism, and urban politics more generally. It explores what Paris and its parasites can tell us about cities in general, about the city as *polis*, the space upon which democratic politics is founded. Just as Paris itself, through its virtual and mediatized extensions, stretches beyond the geographic boundaries of Île-de-France, *Paris and the Parasite* will, I hope, deepen and complicate reflections on media and urbanism around the world.

The book is divided into six chapters. I think of the structure as a heat map. Each chapter is named for a media environment of the city, but each one's contents radiate out into its neighbors, reflecting the connectivity of the modern, networked city and Marshall McLuhan's dictum that the content of any medium is another medium. This structure also encourages disorderly reading, consistent with my criticism of informatics. The chapters are built around close readings of cultural texts—literature, film, architecture, photography, political demonstrations, aesthetic practices that make use of the city. These texts are a mixture of canonical and obscure, classic and contemporary. My corpus is not intended to be exhaustive but to offer stimulating new perspectives on Paris.

Following this Introduction, the next three chapters move from private space to public, performing the book's deconstruction of the hegemonic

hermeticism of contemporary Paris. In chapter 2, "Apartment," I discuss the emergence of hygiene and public health in France at the end of the eighteenth century, and their effects on domestic architecture and urban planning. In the nineteenth century, hygiene became a bigger issue in domestic space. Toilets and baths increased in size and prominence, and new features were added to the home in response to the latest hygienic theories. This was also the period when domestic space became interiorized in Paris. The home was increasingly closed off to the outside world. This trend was connected to hygienic thinking: it reflected a growing suspicion of community as a vector of contagion. Isolation from one's neighbors and the outside world was necessary to protect one's health.

Through close readings of theoretical writings by Le Corbusier, I show how, in the twentieth century, the biological anti-parasitism of public health thinking became wedded to a mediatic anti-parasitism. Le Corbusier conceptualized the home as a media environment. He modeled elements of his designs on photography and cinema, and promoted the integration of media technologies like the telephone, gramophone, and television into domestic space. Le Corbusier applied informatic thinking to these technologies and to the home itself, defending a vision of domestic space as a silent space of private contemplation and machinic efficiency. He connected these values directly to the health of the resident. Indeed, Le Corbusier embraced hygienic thinking to an extreme degree. He was involved with France's eugenics movement in the 1930s and 1940s. I draw attention to the anti-semitism of Le Corbusier's private writings, as well as the rigid elitism of his urbanism, as examples of social anti-parasitism. These three kinds of anti-parasitism are inextricable from one another in Le Corbusier's thought, and were influential among Paris's urban planners in the decades following the Second World War. The chapter concludes with a close reading of Haneke's *Caché*, in which media are deployed as a defensive fortification around a bourgeois family's private space. The film shows how the parasites of those media counteract the hermeticism of the home. The banished other of the city, the social parasite cast out of the protagonist's family space, returns through mediatic interference.

Chapter 3, "Wall," moves from the building's interior to its membrane. It centers on the media environment of the façade, and in particular on the question of its visibility or transparency. The chapter is framed around Brassai's observation that in the mid-twentieth century the walls of Paris

were “discovered” by modern artists. Why did walls need to be discovered? In what way were they invisible? In the nineteenth century, Victor Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris* promoted the idea of the building as narrative medium. This text influenced architects like Henri Labrouste, who referenced Hugo in his Sainte-Geneviève Library in Paris. But Hugo’s text is striking for its absence of references to the façade itself, with the author more focused on other media like sculpture, painting, and music. Hugo’s text thus offers one way of understanding the blindness Brassai describes.

Twentieth-century architectural theorists offer another way of understanding it. For proponents of the modern style, the building façade was all too visible, and it was necessary to make it disappear. They promoted a logic of what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin call immediacy, whereby the façade becomes an invisible conduit to the building’s volume. Le Corbusier warned architects not to let the walls of their buildings be invaded by “parasites” that would break the illusion of immediacy. I connect this warning to Serres’s account of how parasites in communication draw attention to the channel itself. In Brassai’s case, the parasites that alert artists to the mediaticity of the wall are graffiti drawings. The chapter proceeds to survey contemporary Parisian street art, laying out the various ways in which these artistic interventions act as parasites, and how they parasite one another. I look closely at the pioneering French artists Invader and Blek le Rat, both of whom invoke explicitly parasitic themes and imagery.

In chapter 4, “Street,” I consider the relationship between the street and cartography. In the 1950s and 1960s the avant-garde group Situationist International theorized the *dérive*, or drifting, as a way of combating what they saw as the growing atomization and industrial utilitarianism of Paris. Members of the group would wander the city’s streets at random to identify the subconscious forces governing their everyday movements. Participants would craft collages of maps in response to their experiences in the street. With the *dérive* as its point of departure, the chapter examines two recent examples of aestheticized urban exploration with cartographic elements: Jacques Réda’s *Le Méridien de Paris* and Philippe Vasset’s *Un livre blanc*. These books explore what the map cannot represent of the built environment. They draw out the parasites that plague the media environment of cartography. Vasset’s book embodies Jacques Rancière’s idea that politics is an intervention in the distribution of the sensible. Politics is an act by which those excluded from democratic society are enfranchised by being made

visible. Correcting the map, eliminating its parasites, thus has an important democratic dimension.

The chapter then looks at the extreme sport of parkour, which originated in the suburbs of Paris. Parkour is a spectacular and transgressive mode of urban exploration in which practitioners use their athletic ability to chart new paths through the city. Parkour is often filmed, with the results posted on sites like YouTube. Globally practiced, it seems to accomplish the situationist dream of enlisting the masses in a *dérive*. Parkour brings together the body, media, and the boundaries of the city and, unsurprisingly, it is intersected by an especially rich variety of parasitic discourses. It has been described as viral media and a meme, terms that underscore the contagious nature of its transmission through digital networks. It is commonly represented in popular culture as pathogenic, and doctors have warned of the dangers it poses to the health of practitioners. Thanks to its *banlieue* origins, parkour is frequently associated with social parasites and has sometimes been read as a metaphorical expression of young *banlieusards'* yearning for social mobility. At the same time, parkour generates strikingly hygienic and even eugenic discourses. The practice was inspired by *Hébertisme*, a mode of obstacle course training adopted by the French military during World War I, beloved by French eugenicists in the 1930s, and enshrined as a national training method under Vichy. Elements of *Hébertisme's* fascist legacy continue to be detectable in the ways some parkour practitioners speak about their activity today. Parkour's status as an inheritor to the antihegemonic urban exploration practices of the situationists is further undermined by participants' reliance on digital technologies implicated in what Shoshana Zuboff calls surveillance capitalism.¹⁵ This raises important questions about the relationship between the movement of bodies through city streets and the representation of those streets in cartographic media. The chapter concludes with a brief analysis of the *Charlie Hebdo* terror attack of January 2015, which prompted the French government to seize new powers of surveillance, and of the *marche républicaine* that took place in the aftermath of the attack, the largest demonstration in the streets of Paris in French history. While these events led to the expansion of the surveillance state in France, they are both replete with examples of its failure. They demonstrate the intractability of parasites, the impossibility of eliminating noise from mediation, and the irreconcilability of the street and the map.

In chapter 5, “Bodies,” the media environment in question is not an architectural typology. Instead I focus on the body as a site of negotiation between host and parasite. The chapter begins with a discussion of immunity, and how political ideologies about the autonomy of the individual subject fused with biological theories about the limits of the body over the course of the nineteenth century. I then look at two alternative theories of the body as both biological and political site from the turn of the twentieth century: the sociological theories of Gabriel Tarde and the philosophical poetry and novels of Jules Romains. Both thinkers promoted collectivism rather than the individualism of their contemporaries. Tarde and Romains’s writings are notable for their ambivalent attitude to noise, which they see as a key trigger for collectivization. They evince a proto-ecological thinking of the body that problematizes the hierarchy of host and parasite.

In the second half of the chapter I consider the synecdochal relationship between voice and body. This means returning to Rancière, who argues that for a group to become politically actualized its members must produce a unified voice. The group must suppress noise and speak clearly so that it can be listened to by the wider democratic community. *Nuit Debout*, a 2016 protest movement sparked by labor reforms, is an example of a movement that was fastidious in its desire to speak clearly. Despite this, many commentators described the movement as confused or mute, and its demonstrations were repeatedly thrown into chaos by parasitic interventions by *casseurs*, hooligans, and black bloc groups. Drawing attention to the ways in which authoritarian governments have weaponized noise in the past decade to effectively silence dissident movements—and again to Serres’s dictum that it is impossible to eliminate parasites from a channel—I argue that the democratic expectation that groups speak clearly represents an impossible demand that fosters political stasis.

In chapter 6, “Underground,” I ask if there is any way out of anti-parasitism. Maurice Blanchot argues that the literary is distinguished from other modes of meaning-making by its refusal to differentiate between meaning and noise.¹⁶ Literary space is space where everything signifies, where nothing is classified as a parasite. This argument has been developed in different ways by Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida. I ask if literacy can serve as a conceptual framework for an urbanism that does not distinguish between hosts and parasites. Two case studies are used to explore this question. The first is Rachid Boudjedra’s novel *Topographie idéale pour une*

agression caractérisée (Ideal Topography for an Assault), about an illiterate migrant who wanders through the Paris metro because he cannot read the signs of the city. This novel shows both the ethical stakes of creating a city that does not pathologize its parasites and the dangers of an overly simplistic application of literary concepts to urbanism. The second is the failed collaboration between Derrida and Peter Eisenman at the Parisian park of La Villette. Derrida and Eisenman were commissioned to design a garden. In their conversations, we see Derrida trying to apply deconstruction—a hermeneutic that is often unfairly caricatured as being exclusively literary and linguistic in application—to the medium of architecture. The chapter concludes with a discussion of recent architectural interventions in Paris that demonstrate a more open and hospitable attitude to the parasites of the city.

What is at stake in *Paris and the Parasite* is more than a city's attitude to car horns and late-night parties. What is at stake is ultimately how we understand collective life. Thinking through the relationship between Paris and its parasites means reconsidering the status of the individual; how an individual becomes a group; what the limits of the body are and what kinds of relationships ought to exist among bodies; what the unit of communication is, if there is one, and if communication is ultimately possible. These questions concern the core assumptions of Western democratic politics: the sanctity of the voice, the equivalence of the voice and the individual, the right to property, the naturalness of boundaries. One of the originalities of McLuhan's media theory was his observation that media are not simply tools we use, they are environments we inhabit. This is especially true of the city. While the lexicon of parasitism is ubiquitous in many media domains, in the city the questions posed by parasitism find startlingly simple, ethical formulations. Who eats? Who is welcome here? Who can share my home?

§

I would like to close this Introduction with an image. My dominant framework for understanding an approach to media in which parasites are not pathologized will be literary, but one could also look at the question through the lens of music. This image comes from the end of Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro's 1991 film *Delicatessen*. The film is set in a ruined Haussmannian apartment building that has, after some apocalyptic event, been cut off from the rest of the city. The building is ruled over by a butcher who lures

victims in with promises of lodging and work before killing them. He grinds their bodies into meat and sells it to the neighbors. Jeunet and Caro depict a world of pure self-preservation, where individuals bar the doors to their homes to keep themselves safe. Shared spaces like the staircase are hostile—“it happens at night in the staircase,” the butcher’s daughter, Julie, says of the murders, “that’s why no one goes out.” But this is also a world in which survival—or at least eating well, to use Derrida’s term—depends on sacrifice. Human sacrifice. The assimilation of the other’s body.

The main character, played by Dominique Pinon, is a circus clown turned maintenance worker who upsets the system. His job requires him to pass in and out of the other residents’ private spaces. His humor and innocence provoke a resurgence of conviviality in the building. This has revolutionary consequences. At the film’s surreal climax, the butcher’s daughter and an army of vegetarian mole people rise up from the dark underground networks of the city and upset the balance of power in the apartment. The sewer system is weaponized and water gushes through the building, forcing open doors and sucking all of the residents and their belongings out into the staircase. The site of nocturnal human sacrifices is restored as a shared space.

In the final shot of the film, two small boys who live in the building climb up onto the roof and pretend to play home appliances as instruments. The camera pans to the left, and behind a thick layer of smog we see the two protagonists atop the roof as well, playing a duet on the cello and saw. The scene quotes an earlier sequence in which the butcher’s daughter practices her cello to a metronome. Jeunet and Caro edit her playing to match the rhythms of a variety of everyday noises produced elsewhere in the building. Sounds cross the boundaries of the apartment that the characters refuse to cross. The metronome syncs up with the squeaky springs of the bed on which her father is making love, the rhythmic scratch of a paint roller on the ceiling of the lobby, a bike pump being compressed, a rug beater, water from a leak dripping into a bucket, knitting needles, a drill. Periodically the residents look up from their activities, wondering what all the noise is. They react with annoyance and appear to keep time with one another out of a sense of compulsion. There is no joy in this collective musicality. They would rather work at their own speed.

In the final shot, after the boundaries of the building have washed away, Jeunet and Caro again show us the musicality of everyday objects. The smog begins to dissipate, and the film closes under a bright sky. Whatever



Figure 1.2

Final shot of *Delicatessen*, dir. Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro, prod. Claudie Ossard

apocalyptic pollution has hung over the city is starting to disappear as the characters harmonize. The film anticipates the PPBE's promise that a noiseless city will be an environmentally clean one. But what is notable here is that if this sequence is without noise, it is not because of a change in the building's soundscape. The tools used to produce music at the end of the film are essentially the same as those used in the first musical sequence. The noiselessness comes from a change in the characters' attitude. It comes from a newfound refusal to hierarchize between the properly musical instrument and the noise-producing tool. Jeunet and Caro equivocate between the whisk and the cello, and their characters take pleasure in the harmonies possible between them. They are happy to be implicated in a shared rhythm rather than resentful of it. They listen differently.

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