Nicolas Kenny, *The Feel of the City: Experience of Urban Transformation* (University of Toronto Press, 2014)

The subject of the modern city and the experiences of urbanites that dwell within it has long been a subject of critical attention. However, as Nicolas Kenny’s text *The Feel of the City* argues, ‘Large, diverse, and powerfully attractive, cities like Paris and New York garner such extensive scholarly attention that they are widely seen as the archetypes of urban modernity’ (4). This, Kenny says, has obscured the fact that ‘most city people tended to live in places like the lesser-known cities’ (4) of Montreal and Brussels, which become the subjects of interrogation in his work. Kenny’s text is a valuable addition to the voluminous existing scholarship on the urban experience of modernity in part because of this illuminating and suggestive reading of Montreal and Brussels as more indicative of the urban experience of the average city-dweller of modernity, whereas much urban studies work focuses on the modern metropolises and world cities constituting the London-New York-Paris triad. Drawing from a litany of sources and documents, Kenny’s text documents the experiences of citizens in Montreal and Brussels in impressive detail.

In addition to opening up these underexplored centres of urban experience, Kenny’s text also challenges the way in which tradition notions of urban subjectivity have been discussed. Kenny’s primary impulse is to explore the way in which ‘sensorial experience and bodily practices’ (4) are constituted in the urban environments of Montreal and Brussels. This thesis rests on the argument that ‘the body played a fundamental role in mediating the relationship between city dwellers and urban environments, propelling the tangible physicality of streets and buildings into the realm of individual consciousness and public discourse’ (4). By contending ‘that the individual body and the shared space of the city were mutually constitutive’ (5), Kenny’s work draws upon and wrestles with an impressive array of theorists of modernity (including Marshall Berman, Georg Simmel, and Michel de Certeau) to ‘build on understandings of the modern urban experience that tend either to understate the body’s vitality or discorporate it from the material environment in which its workings and significance were rooted’ (11). Specifically, Kenny’s text focuses on the sights, sounds, smells and haptic sensorial experiences that an urban dweller experienced in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Montreal and Brussels.

Rather than focusing on settling the argument of whether language mediates experience or whether experience produces linguistic representation, Kenny ‘spans the busy crossroads of corporeal practices and their representations, arguing that the two are inextricably linked in the experience of the modern city’ (18). This, Kenny argues, aligns his study with historian Martin Jay’s declaration that experience stands, ‘at the nodal point of the intersection between public language and private subjectivity, between expressible commonalities and the ineffability of the individual interior’ (19). In this way, Kenny draws from an impressive and wide-ranging group of sources and ‘draws heavily on sources frequently glossed over in urban history scholarship, especially in Montreal and Brussels, but that offer insights into urban dwellers’ intimate musings about their environment’ (20). These sources include administrative records, travel guides and hygiene manuals in addition to more commonly analysed sources such as novels, newspapers and magazines.

As with many studies of modernity and the modern, Kenny’s project seeks to establish temporal boundaries around his study. For Kenny’s text, modernity begins to shape the cities of Montreal and Brussels around 1880. This is because the 1880s marked the beginning of ‘economic recovery from a global recession in renewed industrial and urban growth that continued until the outbreak of the First World War’ (22). The study’s periodization comes to a close in 1914, as
German forces initially occupy Brussels in August of 1914. However, for Kenny ‘these dates serve as markers that situate the link between urban environments and human interiorities within a period of particular social and cultural agitation, rather than as flat delineators of precise events’ (22). Kenny’s work identifies the tumultuous changes that occur during this period and their effects on the citizenry of these transforming modern cities.

The first chapter of the work provides a historical background for the material and environmental changes in both Montreal and Brussels. The second chapter of the work serves as the most impressive in its chronicling of discourses produced on the city in the time period covered. Particular to this section is the development of the ‘panorama’ as ‘a powerful rhetorical tool with which urban elites reinforced the rationalist project of modernity and inscribed upon the urban landscape the image of order and prosperity they wished it to incarnate’ (42). The chapter then moves to a discussion of the industrial periphery and the way in which these areas were in fundamental tension with the ‘image of order and prosperity’ of the urban elites. The final three chapters shift into an examination of the workplace (Chapter Three), the home (Chapter Four), and the streets (Chapter Five) to ‘tell the story of how the inhabitants of modern cities felt, moved through, and appropriated their environments’ (22-3). The Feel of the City is an engaging examination of the understudied urban centres of Montreal and Brussels, and appeals to not only readers interested in urban studies, city planning, and sociology, but also readers in the humanities through its examination of the subjective experience of the modern city.

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