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### [Review of: A. Arnout (2019) Streets of Splendor: Shopping Culture and Spaces in a European Capital City (Brussels, 1830-1914)]

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Anneleen Arnout, *Streets of Splendor: Shopping Culture and Spaces in a European Capital City (Brussels, 1830-1914)* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019, 291 pp., ISBN 9780815379225).

Shopping, both as a form of leisure and as an economic activity, is increasingly losing its obviousness in our time. COVID-19 and social distancing have scared consumers from the streets and threaten to be the final push for shopkeepers already struggling with high rents and the advent of online shopping. The death of the high street, which is admittedly stronger felt in suburban and rural areas than in urban settlements, has social and cultural consequences as well. Less business means fewer eyes on the streets and decreasing social control. The looming triumph of online retailing also results in shopping being increasingly seen as an individual activity, something you do solitarily behind a computer screen rather than with family members or a group of friends. The current misery is vividly contrasted by the consumer landscapes of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, when the Industrial Revolution and rapid urban growth brought the central streets of Western cities to life. This is the narrative of Anneleen Arnout's *Streets of Splendor*, the published version of her PhD thesis (2015, KU Leuven) on the spatial and cultural aspects of shopping in central Brussels during the modern period.

In her introduction, Arnout is quick to point out that the streets of Brussels have always been busy and that the division between pre-modern and modern times is not as stark as often presumed. Rather than viewing nineteenth-century innovations in the city's shopping landscape as a linear movement from traditional to modern, she investigates older and newer forms of retailing in co-existence. Thus, the reader is presented with a wide array of shopping typologies, from open-air markets to arcades, department stores and the spaces in between, such as streets and pavements. However, according to Arnout, shopping landscapes consist of more than just spatial elements; they are also the social, economic and cultural environments in which people interact with retailers and each other. With this interdisciplinary and comprehensive approach, Arnout places herself firmly in the field of urban history, which is grounded in comparison and the integration of different academic disciplines into a coherent whole. In line with the thinking of French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre, she is mostly interested in the interaction between urban space and its users. While Arnout is definitely not the first urban historian to operationalise the work of Lefebvre, she is one of the few to fruitfully apply his distinction between urban space as a physical space, its official representation by the powers that be, and how it is used in everyday life.

From this spatial approach, Arnout examines the quantitative and geographic changes in Brussels' shopping landscape, its urban and commercial sites and their mutual relations, and how contemporaries actually experienced urban modernity. The latter research focus is inspired by the work of David Harvey and Marshall Berman, two other household names in the field of urban history. Brussels seems a logical case study due to its relatively small size and the municipal ambitions to transform the city into the representative capital of a new nation state, as well as its absence in a historiography traditionally centred around Paris and London. Of course, the author's work location and knowledge of the Dutch and French languages will have played a role here as well. In her introduction, Arnout is refreshingly honest about the alternative, mostly economic approaches to her topic and the sources and methodology she eventually chose to work with, which concern a balanced mix of newspaper research, consultation of commercial directories, data modelling and the use of Geographic Information System technologies.

The book is chronologically and thematically ordered, taking the reader on an urban safari through nineteenth-century Brussels. On her way, Arnout lives up to her promise to illuminate both spaces and the actors within them. The reader gets to understand why shopkeepers in the Rue de Madeleine began to make use of shop windows to lure customers in, how international department stores such as Tietz and Au Bon Marché arrived in the streets of Brussels, and how they supplemented rather than threatened the existing shopping landscape. By doing so, she also sheds a new light on the ways in which public and private partners worked together to redevelop working-class districts into spectacles of bourgeois consumption. Here, to give the victims of these sanitation efforts a voice, the book has to rely on fictional accounts such as novels – a makeshift solution that is understandable given the lack of primary sources detailing the experiences of the lower classes. Besides class, Arnout gives ample attention to shopping as a gendered practice, for example by investigating how arcades were advertised as places where women could go shopping alone, or how the same locations invited homosexual men to solicit each other for prostitution. While discussing these locations, the author never fails to integrate her narrative into a broader historiography and concurring developments in other Western European cities. Thus, her study not only speaks to those interested in the history of Brussels, but also to those looking for an empirical investigation of nineteenth-century urban modernity. With its strive to rationalise streetscapes and enhance the circulation of people, goods and capital, the transformation of Brussels in this era was indeed an utterly modern undertaking.

*Streets of Splendor* is a welcome addition to a growing body of literature on the nineteenth-century history of Dutch and Belgian cities, and sits well amongst other recent studies by younger colleagues such as Tymen Peverelli and Anne Petterson, and more senior scholars such as Jan-Hein Furnée and Clé Lesger. As with any other monograph, a few minor flaws should be

mentioned here as well. While Arnout has assembled an impressive amount of data and visual imagery, her publisher made little effort to print these in legible maps and drawings. It is about time reputed publishing houses such as Routledge begin treating their authors with more respect, in particular when considering their selling prices and often haphazard editorial work. Arnout's writing style is playful and engaging, although her wordplay and wit – as exemplified by the double meanings and alliterations in her chapter titles – can be a bit much for the more serious reader. At the same time, this eloquence demonstrates that she might have more in store for us, also because her research topic could easily be reworked into a popular book and deserves an even broader audience.

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