

Conference Proceedings:

Sound, Language and the Making of Urban Space

Venue: University and Museum of Copenhagen,
August 24-25 2023



THE CINEMATIC CITY AND BEYOND

Reel Cities – Urban Cinematic Soundscapes

Palle Schantz Lauridsen

Reel Cities – Urban Cinematic Soundscapes

Palle Schantz Lauridsen

The author is an Associate Professor at the Department of Nordic Studies and Linguistics, University of Copenhagen. His current research centers on early Danish television from industrial, political, cultural, and everyday perspectives. He gained his Danish higher doctoral degree (dr.phil) in 2020 for a dissertation on *Sherlock Holmes in Danish Media Cultures*. As part of the project called *Urbanity & Aesthetics* at the UCPH (1995-1998), he edited the anthologies *Filmbyer* (“Cinematic Cities”) and *Byens konkyliesang* (on cities and soundscapes).

Introduction

Let me begin by focusing on two words with the same pronunciation, the pair of homophones *real/reel*. The sounds /rɪəl/ spelled with two e’s, *reel*, is a noun which here refers to the obsolete object of a reel of film. On the other hand, the same sounds when spelled with ‘ea’, *real*, is an adjective stressing that something or somebody is factual.

Cinematic soundscapes – including *urban* cinematic soundscapes – consist of double-e *reel* sounds, and soundscapes at the movies are always the result of aesthetic and technological choices based on discursive traditions and on a particular use of the hardware at hand. Without focusing on the matter in this context, it is important, just to keep the record straight, to bear in mind that microphones, cables, amplifiers, and loudspeakers are not innocent transducers of sound. Thus, urban soundscapes and cinematic urban soundscapes are not, and can never be, the same.

Among a multitude of possibilities, I have chosen to present short analyses of scenes from three Danish films depicting different aspects of the representation of urbanity in the Danish capital of Copenhagen: one from the silent era, one from the beginning of the sound era, and a relatively recent one.



Fig 1. The Proclamation of Frederik VIII. Screenshot from the movie *Kong Frederik VIII's Proklamation* by P. Elfelt (1906).¹

The Proclamation of Frederik VIII (1906)

My first example is silent. It was shot on January 30, 1906, from a window at the royal castle in Copenhagen at the proclamation of a new Danish king, Frederik VIII, during the so called 'silent era' of cinema.

When watching the film today, it appears to be silent, without sound, but the old films were silent only to the extent that sound, including music, was not part of the cinematic discourse. Sound and music were, however, always a part of the cinematic institution.² And, as we shall see, sound and music are extremely important in the representation of urban cinematic soundscapes.

In the small film, we see a variety of sound-producing objects, and newspaper reports from the proclamation do mention a lot of auditory events.³ Watching the film today, we may feel the – uncanny – lack of sound: we can see things moving silently and people moving their lips, but no words escape them though for example,

1 P. Elfelt, *Kong Frederik VIII's Proklamation* (København, 1906), <https://www.dfi.dk/viden-om-film/filmdatabasen/film/kong-frederik-viiis-proklamation>, accessed october 16, 2023.

2 C. Metz, *Langage et cinéma* (Paris, 1971), 210.

3 *Politiken*, 31. Jan 1906, col. 4a.

according to press reports, the newly proclaimed king leads the crowd in giving several cheers for the country. The 1-minute film was first shown to Copenhagen audiences in the movie theatre Kosmorama on February 4, 1906, most likely with some musical accompaniment such as perhaps the national anthem.

Danmark (1935)

The next example is from the sound era, i.e. from the period beginning around 1930 when sound became an integrated part of the filmic discourse. In 1935, Danish architect, writer, debater, and cultural activist Poul Henningsen was commissioned by the foreign ministry to make a film about Denmark. The film takes off in the northern most part of our country, Skagen, and ends in Copenhagen. The film was heavily criticized among other things for its original jazzy score.

But how does Copenhagen sound in this film? The short answer is that it makes no sound at all. In the movie, we never hear a single real sound from the city, only non-diegetic music and singing. (Fig. 2a and 2b, p. 5)⁴

Analysing the closing sequence of the movie,⁵ the finale from Copenhagen, one notes many sights still familiar to locals – church towers and domes, statues, and royal castles. These structures of power are immobile – and silent – but they are filmed with a moving camera which shares the characteristic of mobility with the central characters of the sequence, the anonymous cyclists. You see them in general traffic and superimposed on imagery of the silent architectural structures of power. One might say that the cyclists represent living democracy as opposed to the motionless buildings of power. The accompanying lyrics are about youth, tempo, sunshine, cycling, and the city. A female jazz trio sings about ‘trafikens bølgehav’ (‘the sea of waves of traffic’), even encouraging the listener to think of it, the sea of waves of traffic, as a ‘solbad’ (‘sunbath’). The lyrics thus endows urban cycling with an air of nature. The listener is further encouraged to just follow the floating rhythm of the traffic, to enjoy that everything floats (a modern take on Heraclitus!), and to understand that ‘hvilen ligger i rytmen’ (‘relaxation lies in the rhythm’).

We see lots of bicycles and bicycle bells, but they remain silent, and composer Bernhard Christensen does not take the obvious course of integrating bicycle bells in his orchestration in a sort of *musique concrète*, concrete music. But he does something similar.

4 P. Henningsen, *Danmark* (1935) <https://www.dfi.dk/viden-om-film/filmdatabasen/film/danmark-1> accessed 16 October 2023.

5 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wIomBYa8v0>, accessed 16 October 2023.



Fig 2a and 2b. Cyclists dominate the depiction of Copenhagen in the end of the movie. They are often superimposed onto constructions of power. Here the equestrian statue of King Frederik V by Saly (1771) at Amalienborg Courtyard. Screenshots from the movie *Danmark* by P. Henningsen (1935).



Fig 3. The score T. Laub: Vægtersangen [The Watchman's Song] composed for the carillon of the Copenhagen Town Hall clock tower.

Walking around the inner city of Copenhagen, you will hear church bells and other bells, including, most prominently, the carillon of the clock tower of Copenhagen Town Hall. According to the exact time – a quarter past, half past, a quarter to, full hour – the bells play two, four, six bars (the full hour includes all six bars *and* the striking of the hour) of a tune using four tones of a medieval, Doric scale to echo the historicist architecture of the town hall.

Composed by Danish composer Thomas Laub, the tune bears the title *Vægtersangen* (The Watchman's Song).⁶ It has been used as a signal of time and as an auditory station identification from the very earliest days of Danish Radio almost a hundred years ago. It was thus well known when Poul Henningsen shot his film – and still is. Every Dane knows the small tune. If you listen carefully to a little piece of Christensen's score for the Denmark-film, you will hear an echo of the first three bars as the moving camera catches a glimpse of the Town Hall tower.⁷

This small observation leads to a more general conclusion. French theorist and composer Michel Chion has pointed out, maybe controversially, that however different cities *look*, 'the sound of cities everywhere is the same.' He continues: 'Not just because of the car traffic, but also because what constitutes the identity of a city – primarily its silent architecture – cannot be heard.'⁸ On this general level of analysis, Chion can be said to describe what R. Murray Schaefer called the *keynote sound* of any modern city. For Schaefer, keynote sounds are 'those which are heard by a particular society continuously or frequently enough to form a background against which other sounds are perceived',⁹ and he explicitly mentions the internal combustion engine as the keynote sound of the modern city. As a contrast to keynote sounds, Schaefer defines a *sound signal* as 'any sound to which attention is particularly directed',¹⁰ and furthermore he labels the concept of *sound mark* as describing 'a community sound which is unique or possesses qualities which make

6 <http://wayback-01.kb.dk/wayback/20100902125604/http://www2.kb.dk/kb/dept/nbo/ma/fokus/raadhus.htm> accessed 16 October 2023.

7 <https://seismograf.org/dmt/60/06/den-rytmiske-udfordring-bernhard-christensen-80-aar> accessed 13 Jun 2023.

8 M. Chion, 'Byens lyde og byens musik', P.S. Lauridsen (ed.), *Byens konkyliesang* (Hellerup, 1999), 38. My translation, PSL.

9 R. Murray Schaefer, *Our Sonic Environment and the Soundscape. The Tuning of the World*. 2nd edition (Rochester, Vermont 1994), 289.

10 Op.cit., 290.

it specially regarded or noticed by the people in that community'.¹¹ The actual sounding of bicycle bells can be thought of as a sound signal whereas the actual chiming of the Town Hall bells is a sound mark of Copenhagen. Keeping in mind that Schaefer analyses the sounds and soundscapes of the real world, including real cities, whereas Chion is interested in cinematic sounds and their relation to the moving images, some differences occur. In order to distinguish specific cities and their basically similar keynote sounds, film sound editors over the years have had to use sound signals and sound marks to create auditory signifiers to match the visual multiplicity of urban life. The sirens of ambulances, fire engines, and police cars are standards as is the honking of the motor horns. One might suspect that these sounds are more frequent in urban cinematic soundscapes than they are in the real world soundscapes they represent. Amplifying actual sound marks, some cinematic cities have been provided with *signature sounds* in the same way that they – in films and touristic material etc. – have been assigned metonymical visual shorthand signs of the 'The-Eiffel-Tower-equals-Paris'-category. Quoting the Copenhagen sound mark of the bells, the small tune weaved into the fabric of the jazzy swing music transforms it into a signature sound.

Pusher (1996)

Fast forwarding 60 years, we jump from documentary to fiction, from Poul Henningsen's *Denmark* to Nikolaj Winding Refn's *Pusher*. We move from syncopated swing to heavy metal, from the smiling, healthy cyclists on the *move* in 1935 to a pusher on the *run* and in big trouble in the urban jungle of Copenhagen in the middle of the 1990's.

How does this urban jungle sound? If it wasn't for the musical soundtrack, it would be a very quiet place. In the film, there are several car scenes dominated by dialogue and street scenes in quiet environments. The relatively quiet Copenhagen soundscape of *Pusher* simply doesn't correspond to the action-packed and violent world of Frank, the desperado pusher. So, when the action gets going, the 'natural soundscape' does not supply an acoustic equivalent to his world, experiences, and feelings. How then, does the film acoustically transmit Frank's feeling of desperation in these situations? How does it acoustically transpose the discreteness of the actual city sounds into a soundtrack that equals the dynamics of the visuals? The answer is: by letting go of the real soundscape and replacing it with music.

11 Ibid.



Fig. 4: Screenshot from the movie *Pusher* by Nicolas Winding Refn. Balboa/Nordisk Film. Frank, the title character, on the run in a quiet Copenhagen neighbourhood. The heavy metal music underscoring the scene by far outmatches the actual sound of the location as a depiction of Frank's state of mind – and that of the audience.

Let us analyse an iconic scene in the film.¹² We find the main character Frank in the back seat of a car selling 200 grams of heroin. We hear the muffled motor sound combined with the closely miked sound of the rattling of the paper bag containing the heroin. Suddenly the sound of squealing tires, a swiftly moving camera and the honking of horns supersedes the sonic environment of the car. The police have stopped the car. Frank swiftly jumps out and starts running. As he does so, the diegetic sound gradually disappears, leaving the soundtrack to fast paced heavy metal music with energetic drumming, parallel riffs on guitar and bass, and a lot of distortion. The sounds of the city simply do not seem to be sufficient to transpose the dynamics of the action and the desperation of the main character. You cannot hear the traffic, you cannot hear the sound of the running feet, you cannot even hear Frank screaming as he runs. And if someone – like I have done – seeks out the location of the scene and listens to the real soundscape of the place, dominated as it is by rather noiseless modern traffic, it is easy to understand why the real sound of the city in no way matches the drama of the scene.

12 N.W. Refn, *Pusher* (1996), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3n7a3b8M2Po> accessed Oct 2023.

Conclusion

Non-diegetic music is, of course, not part of any real urban soundscape. Not dealing, however, with actual urban soundscapes, but with cinematic depictions of visual and auditive urban life, my examples show the difference between the two underlining that in sound film music takes on a pivotal importance in the dramatic representation of urban modernity. With the exception of signal sounds and sound marks, actual urban soundscapes consist of relatively non-distinct and quiet keynote sounds. Substituting these real sounds with non-diegetic music as was the case in my two sound film examples simply helps directors tell their stories and helps audiences understand the meaning of the film and experience the emotions of the characters.

How to cite:

Palle Schantz Lauridsen: "Reel Cities – Urban Cinematic Soundscapes" in Parby, Jakob Ingemann (ed.): *Conference Proceedings: Sound, Language and the Making of Urban Space*, August 24-25, Copenhagen 2023. University of Copenhagen and Museum of Copenhagen, 2024.

Reel Cities – Urban Cinematic Soundscapes

©2024 Palle Schantz Lauridsen

In Conference Proceedings: Sound, Language and the Making of Urban Space
University and Museum of Copenhagen, August 24-25 2023

Editor: Jakob Ingemann Parby, Museum of Copenhagen

Design & Layout: Anna Falcon, www.annafalcon.dk

Cover Design: Elias Friborg Lewinsky

The conference and the proceedings were funded by The Velux Foundation