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SONIC IDENTITIES / SHOUTING THE CITY

Sounds of Copenhagen Marketplaces

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In a Copenhagen newspaper called "Politivennen" (*Friend of the Police*) from 1831, we find the following description of the inner-city fish market:

> 'No properly dressed wife or husband can, except with disgust and fear, in the morning approach a wagon on the fish market, in order to buy some fish; because the wagons are surrounded by shabby-dressed men, who with hooting and screaming offer the fish for sale, fight and curse with their dear female friends, the hefty fish women, who, when the wagons arrive, flock around these, in order to get a good buy'.[1]

The scene presented to the reader conveys an impression of a place filled with noise and din. Men and women yelling and swearing as they try to persuade passers-by to buy their fish. The place is Gammel Strand (*Old Strand*), one of the oldest marketplaces in Copenhagen. For centuries, fishmongers have gathered here to sell herrings, shrimps, eels etc. to Copenhageners, using a central canal for landing the catch. The profane language, the yelling and hailing was an integrated part of the daily practices at the square and is mentioned in sources dating back to the 17th century. As a significant part of the women selling fish at Gammel Strand came from Skovshoved, a small fishing village north of Copenhagen, they became known as Skovser Women (in Danish skovserkoner). This demonitation over time became synonymous with all female fish mongers in Copenhagen.

1 *Politivennen* 1831, 823, our translation.

In 1818, a few years prior to the example above, the same newspaper published another complaint about the yelling and noise from the fishmongers. In this piece, however, another particular group of street merchants, the so-called *Amager Women*, are mentioned as an exception, as someone with "a tolerable voice":

> *'About the screams of salesmen and saleswomen, with goods.* A good old custom should be respected, but every bad custom should be abolished. It has often been deemed highly unfair that the ears of Copenhageners should be tormented by the above-mentioned music [= cries and yelling] every day, not even with the exception of Sunday during the service. The only ones among these vocal musicians who have a tolerable voice are the Amager girls, the others are generally so unpleasant that one cannot imagine anything more disharmonious.'[2]

The contrast between the depictions of the Skovser and Amager Women recur in other sources. In a newspaper report in *Aftenbladet* in 1920, we find this portrayal:

> 'The autumn fog can settle as close as it wants over the city's streets and squares, at Højbro there will always shine strong and luminous colors through. Here are gathered mighty bouquets of all the colorful flowers of autumn, while the bronze-golden foliage of the forest forms the finest setting around all these flower crowns, and behind them peep out the pleasant Amager Women, who offer all this glory and splendor.' (*Aftenbladet* the 27th of October 1920, our translation from Danish)

The scene at Gammel Strand stands in sharp contrast to this description of the adjacent flower and greenery marketplace, *Højbro Plads* (High Bridge Square). Unlike the foregrounding of noise at Gammel Strand this depiction of Højbro Plads mentions nothing directly about the sounds. Indirectly, however, the mentioning of 'autumn fog' and 'the bronze-golden foliage of the forest' creates an image of a quiet place with noiseless (perhaps silent) vendors, "the pleasant Amager Women" who "peep", but do not shout, behind the flowers they want to sell.

As time passed the Amager and Skovser Women became iconic figures incarnating the life and routines at Højbro Plads and Gammel Strand. Besides contrasting each other, they also stood out from Copenhageners belonging to the bourgeoisie. This was not only emphasized through visual tokens such as their dresses and head scarfs. They also spoke a different rural dialects remarkably distinct from

2 *Politivennen* 1818, 126, our translation.

standard Copenhagen speech, and they used street cries as a means of attracting attention and customers.

Based on a range of different sources, written as well as audio recorded, our paper presents a study of the social meaning and functions of sounds – including language, yelling and hailing – in the two adjacent marketplaces Gammel Strand and Højbro Plads.

The study focuses on the period after *Højbro Plads* was established in the 1790's, until around 1940 where most market trading had disappeared, leaving only a few traditionally dressed sellers who oriented their business towards tourists.

We believe that in order to understand the practices and routines characterizing life at Gammel Strand and Højbro Plads, we need to study the wider context in which these practices have developed. The people populating the marketplaces were part of a specific way of life that defined their movements and activities on Gammel Strand and Højbro Plads. The social meanings and perceptions of sonic territories are embedded in these contexts; thus the following two sections present an outline of, first, the history of Gammel Strand and Højbro Plads as marketplaces, and, second, a description of the fish and vegetable sellers – the Skovser and Amager Women – and their backgrounds.

From Copenhagen's western city gate ran a series of crooked, but connected streets, eastwards to the 17th century royal parade plaza, Kongens Nytorv. Over time, this passage was widened and became a central artery as a central artery known as "the Route", now Strøget. Integrated in this artery, a bit to the east, was the square *Amagertorv*. Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, wealthy burghers lived and traded here, a wealth that is still visible in the surviving historical architecture around the square despite a significant modernization in the late 19th century. It was also a quarter for selling goods, especially textiles, resounding the area's name, the 'Clothstalls Quarter' (in Danish: Klædebo Kvarter). The neighbourhood was delineated by the central canal *Slotsholm Canal*. Across the canal, the original medieval castle protecting the city had been replaced by royal palaces and administrative buildings at *Slotsholmen*, an island connected to the mainland via Højbro (High Bridge) leading to a densely build area between Gammel Strand and Amagertorv.

Market activities were already significant in this precinct when Copenhagen saw a significant growth in economy and population during the 18th century. Due to colonial trade and the royal court's presence in the city, an affluent elite would settle customarily mixed with servants, and poorer tenants also inhabiting the area. As historian Ulrik Langen points out, yelling associated with poor, uncivilized people was widespread during the 18th century. The upper and middle classes

Fig. 1.: Højbro Plads and Gammel Strand, the canal and bridge, app. 1920.
Museum of Copenhagen.

were repulsed by the women and boys, moving around 'barelegged' to sell printed ballads, news and other publications from the area's many printing houses.[3]

In 1795 a fire destroyed more than 900 houses in the city among them most of the buildings south of Amagertorv. In the following years not all were restored. Instead a new square, Højbro Plads, was created to prevent future fires and expand and improve public space. Over time, the new square would become part of the market square system in the city, specializing in flower and vegetable trade.

The spatial reorganization around Amagertorv, Højbro and Gammel Strand affected the sonic territories of the area in ways that made the link between sounds and class apparent. This is evident from various public complaints made by burghers in newspapers. For instance, in *Politivennen* in 1801, a complaint was made concerning a dog that howled each time a female fishmonger shouted out: 'If [the woman] could not be changed, then one hopes that the dog owner is thoughtful enough as to kill the dog', the offended writes. Some complaints also pointed directly to the specific marketplace, as when it was suggested that the market at Gammel Strand was removed, or at least that yelling was restricted:

3 Langen, Ulrik et al., *Grov Konfækt. Tre Vilde år med Trykkefriheden 1770-1773*, (Gyldendal 2020), I, 424.

Fig. 2: Man buying asparagus from Amager women at Højbro Plads, appr. 1910, Museum of Copenhagen.

> 'Is every man not entitled to demand such a woman's yell erased from 10 o'clock at least? – One remembers that such shouting on the corners is forbidden even during the day'.[4]

Usually, urbanism and linguistic contact result in dialect loss and obsolescence.[5] Interestingly, in the case of the Amager and Skovshoved dialects, the contrary seems to have taken place. The Amager and Skovser Women were in close daily contact with Copenhageners for centuries at the inner-city marketplaces. Still, there is vast evidence that they spoke non-standard Copenhagen dialects until at least 1900. We argue that this did not happen *despite* of urban contact, but exactly *because* of the women's daily contact with inner city Copenhageners. Arguably, dialects became a valuable semiotic element in their appearance and performance as authentic Skovshoved and Amager people alongside their traditional dress and

4 *Politivennen* (1826), 554, our translation.

5 D. Britain, 'The role of mundane mobility and contact in dialect death and dialect birth', in Schreier & Hundt, (eds.), *English as a contact language*, (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 165-181.

Fig. 3: A Skovshoved woman selling fish at Gammel Strand, app. 1920, Museum of Copenhagen.

their repute as providing some of the best groceries and seafood for Copenhageners. That is, their voices became a part of their 'brands' blending into the overall sonic identities of Gammel Strand and Højbro Plads. The women's voices featured prominently in the competition to attract customers. But they had other repercussions as well. Statements found in the memoirs of contemporaries point to a fierce atmosphere among the Skovser Women at Gammel Strand that made some potential customers avoid them. It is recalled how uncomfortable it was to walk between the lines of stalls, hearing the women shout or even mock customers that walked by without buying. For example, a woman remembers how her mother would buy fish at Adelgade, and avoid the market at Gammel Strand because '...the fish wives were too tough, even for her, who was certainly not 'lost behind a wagon" (the last sentence meaning the ability to fend for oneself) [our translation].[6]

Compared with other statements from the Skovshoved women themselves it is difficult to ignore 'class' as an important factor constituting the sonic territories of Gammel Strand as well as Højbro Plads. The Skovshoved fishmongers were poor and most likely perceived as of lower status than the Copenhagen bourgeoisie. In the memoirs of the Skovshoved women, their close-knit community stands out as

6 Ovene Andersen, memoir 1648, Copenhagen Municipal Archives, *Pensionisterindringer* 1969.

particularly important in their narratives about life at the market squares. They do not express competition among each other. On the contrary, they explain how they helped each other sell all the fish. Only then, they could shut down and return to Skovshoved in groups. Thus, the loud fierceness may also be interpreted as a way to construct and emphasize the collectivity and solidarity of the Skovshoved women as a group – despite the fact that this style may have frightened some costumers off.

The loudness and brute interactional style have broadly contributed to the semiotic demarcation of a space of consumption, which stood in stark contrast to the flower and greenery selling women at Højbro Plads, whose sounds are much less mentioned in the memoirs. When the Amager women are mentioned in general, it is for the way they, together with their commodities, formed a decorative space, often with idyllic references, as we see in the introductory quote.

Sonically this means that the ways in which the greenery and flower vendors would sell their goods might have been 'tuned' to the smaller streets, in a way being more hi-fi than the lo-fi market square shouting.[7] We know from research that sonic traditions from the narrow streets are different from the squares, or even the large plazas of the modern city, and that ordinary speech can reach through a whole street, if it is narrow enough. We would argue that the sonic territory of the flower market derives its sonic identity and pattern from this settled space of narrow streets, and that this is part of the difference to the fishmongers, originally moving around shouting. This difference, as we propose above, would then be amplified by the proximity of the two in the urban space of central Copenhagen.

Conclusion

Only a short walk separates Gammel Strand and Højbro Plads. Despite the proximity, however, the two squares appeared in the 19th and early 20th century as different territories with an invisible border between them indicated by various signs that made it easy for customers to navigate across the area. The two squares became constituted as sonic territories through their reciprocal relation, but also through their relation to other locations. The role as a 'rough' sonic space was partly defined in relation to the broader neighborhood of 'civilized' sounds. The fish and flower selling women were not locals. Their language and clothing were dependent on their places of origin at Skovshoved and Amager, in small communities of fishing and farming. They brought their dialects, yelling and visual appearance

7 Schafer, Raymond M., *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, (Rochester, Destiny Books, 1994).

Fig. 4: Vejstrup Madsen's sculpture of a Skovser Woman surrounded by Skovser women, 1949, Louis Larsen, Museum of Copenhagen.

to the squares in a rhythm so stable that, in a sense, the territory they created outlasted their own linguistic and cultural 'homeland'. Industrialization, urbanization, and gentrification changed the living conditions and the traditional ways of life in Skovshoved and Amager. The men gradually changed occupations as fishing and agriculture became less affordable. The women, nevertheless, continued to travel to the city center to sell fish and vegetables wearing their traditional attire. For a time, they were tourist attractions admired and photographed by both Danish and foreign visitors to the city. Postcards and porcelain figurines portraying the women were produced and sold as souvenirs, and in 1940, an iconic statue of a Skovshoved woman by sculptor Charles Vejstrup Madsen, was erected at the quay on Gammel Strand, signaling how the fishmongers were turning into cultural heritage about to disappear, but for some decades still encircled by living fish mongering Skovser Women.

Doris Marx was the last woman to monger fish at Gammel Strand in traditional fashion until the archaeological excavations preceding the construction of a new metro line started at the site in 2008. Doris, however, was not from Skovshoved and got her fish from wholesalers elsewhere. For a while, she made her living as a kind of distorted echo of past practices. She wore the traditional dress of the

Skovser Women but sold her fish from a stand covered by plastic tarpaulin and with the fish in styrofoam boxes.

The fish and flower markets at Gammel Strand and Højbro Plads continued to operate long after the sale of such products had moved to indoor shops and larger market halls dedicated to wholesale trade. And even long after the everyday life of people at Skovshoved and Amager had fundamentally changed. This continuation, we argue, is closely related the emergence of Højbro Plads and Gammel Strand as sonic territories during the 19th century. The combination of the architectural materiality of the area, the lifestyles and practices of the interactants at the squares together with their perceptual interpretation of each other, their voices, appearances etc. established the squares as sonic territories. We get an impression of the conditions by which sound functioned in the pre-automobile city, and how these small marketplaces became resilient to change in the first half of the twentieth century. The cultural and social difference embedded in the sounds and language of the trading women turned into an attraction for Copenhageners and tourists. This development was the product of internal as well as external changes in social semiosis, part of a broader urban transformation away from traditional market cultures towards experience economies.

Moreover, to the linguistic part of the study, these processes linked to the sonic territories may explain why the Skovshoved and Amager dialects were spoken long after one would usually expect them to have disappeared due to geographical proximity to linguistic contact with Copenhageners. The women's voices played part of a competitive environment in which their linguistic behavior became performative tokens of their brands. The women's yelling, hailing and dialects formed part of the sound semiotics, place making and territorial place claiming. The rough and tough language of the Skovser Women became a marker of authenticity with performative effects creating alertness and disturbance.

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