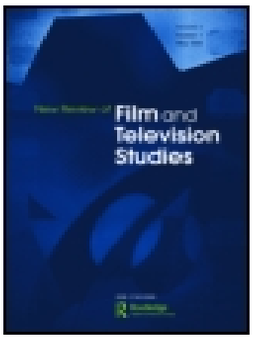
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Sonic modernities: capitalism, noise, and the city essay film

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ABSTRACT

Oculocentric perspectives are often dominant in descriptions of the city essay film. Whether flâneurial, observational, lyrical or visionary, the gaze is often placed at the centre of the filmic perception of the city, which is itself conceived of as a sight, image, or palimpsest. In this article, I reflect on the centrality of noise to modernity, and of capitalism to urban sound. In doing so, I pursue a dual goal: to foreground a sound-based understanding of the city through the essay film; and to ask how sound can help us understand the city essay film as a critique at once of the metropolis' entanglement with capitalism and of the cinema's historical contribution to the creation of the city as spectacle. A workable definition of the city essay film as an object of theory is attained via an engagement with urban and sound studies, and the discussion of sound design and sound discourse in *Many Undulating Things* (2019), a geopolitical essay by Bo Wang and Pan Lu about Hong Kong.

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The sustained attention that, since its inception, the essay film has devoted to the city has not gone unnoticed by critics, so much so that terms like 'city essay film' and 'architectural essay film' have become widely used and accepted. Albeit overlapping, not least in terms of their film corpora of reference, the two are not synonymous. Acknowledging the overabundance of essay films that 'specifically focus on urban or architectural design subject matter' (Haralambidou 2015, 237) – from *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) by Dziga Vertov (which, incidentally, is often credited as one of the very first essay films) to *Toute la mémoire du monde* (1956) by Alain Resnais, from *London* (1994) by Patrick Keiller to *Los Angeles Plays Itself* (2003) by Thom Andersen – Penelope Haralambidou introduced the term 'architectural essay film' and proposed to treat it as a distinct, 'hybrid genre that lies at the boundaries between architectural design, theory and film' (236), with a focus on how 'recent moving image design explorations in architecture' (237)

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border with essayistic filmmaking. The expression 'city essay film', on the other hand, tends to be used as a somewhat less specific category, as a subgenre of the essay film comprising work that may encompass a critique of architecture but also extend to broader aspects of urban social and cultural history and life. The category is frequently linked to the figure of the *flâneur* (unsurprisingly, given the relevance for the genre of Walter Benjamin's essayistic urban studies). Michael Pattison (2016) does just that in an attempt to explain the great number of essay films devoted to cities:

> Essay films seem especially suited to the urban, precisely because they encompass a mode of cinematic expression inclined toward the wandering philosopher (the meandering *flâneur*), a subjective polemic and a feisty oppositional politics. Consider Tokyo as experienced through Marker (*Sans Soleil*, 1982), New York through Akerman (*News from Home*, 1976), Helsinki through Von Bagh (*Helsinki Forever*, 2008), Birmingham and London through Akomfrah (*Handsworth Songs*, 1986), Bucharest through Farocki and Ujica (*Videograms of a Revolution*, 1992), Los Angeles through Andersen (*Los Angeles Plays Itself*, 2003/2014) or London through Keiller (*London*, 1994).

Opening a roundtable for the journal *Mediapolis*, Krstić (2018) has remarked how a number of different styles and traditions beyond that of the flâneur have been explored by city essay films:

> Peter von Bagh's *Helsinki Forever* (2008), for instance, evokes the montage cinema of the Soviets, and Esfir Shub's archival compilation strategies in particular, rather than [Chantal] Ackerman's [*sic*] and [Jonas] Mekas's flâneurial gaze or [Jean-Luc] Godard's philosophical renderings. [. . .] Guy Maddins's angry, poetic and almost nightmarish vision of his native city in *My Winnipeg* (2008), on the other hand, draws from surrealism and David Lynch as much as it does from classical essay films like *2 or 3 Things I Know About Her*.

Oculocentric perspectives are dominant in all of these models. Whether flâneurial, observational, lyrical, or visionary, the gaze is placed at the centre of the filmic perception of the city, which is itself conceived of as a sight, image, or palimpsest to be observed, explored, and mapped. Yet, the city is as much a soundscape as it is a cityscape, if not more so. In 1970, Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Henri Roger – under the moniker of Groupe Dziga Vertov – opened their radical agitprop essay film *British Sounds* (aka *See You at Mao*) with a slow, ten-minute-long tracking shot of the assembly line at the British Motor Car Company in Cowley, Oxford, the overwhelming screeches of the factory competing for auditory prominence with a male voiceover calmly reading from sources including the *Communist Manifesto*. With this sequence, *British Sounds* highlighted two points with forceful clarity: first, the centrality of noise to modernity; second, the centrality of capitalism to urban sound. In this article, I will engage with, and flesh out, both points. In doing so, I pursue a dual goal. The first is to foreground

a sound-based understanding of the city through the essay film; the second is to ask how sound can help us answer the question: What is the basis of the city essay film's engagement with the urban? My argument as it will be developed in this article implies an understanding of the city essay film as a critique at once of the metropolis' entanglement with capitalism and of the cinema's historical contribution to the creation of the city as spectacle. Accordingly, I will reflect on sound in relation to the evolution of specific urban modernities. As the sonic manifestations of capitalism mutate, contemporary architecture censors sonorities, and new digital technologies erase noise, I will turn to *Many Undulating Things* (2019) by Bo Wang and Pan Lu, in which sound design and sound discourse are central to the film's essayistic critique of the city as image.

Before doing so, it will be necessary to set the parameters of the discussion by tackling the question of the connections between urban sound and modernity from a perspective that draws on sound studies. This excursus is necessary, because interdisciplinary tools are required when discussing interdisciplinary genres such as the city essay film and the architectural essay film.

Sound is the city: from Fordist uproar to hushed globalization

Modernity was a period of escalation of both urban noise and sound awareness. In her study of nineteenth-century Paris, Boutin (2015), arguing for 'an aural rather than a visual conception of modernity' (3), has used the accounts of foreign tourists, visiting scholars, and migrants from the French provinces to demonstrate the centrality of street noise, particularly peddlers' cries, to the experience of the modern city. As Boutin has written, '[u]rban renewal in nineteenth-century Paris did not mark the beginning of a period of diminution of sound, but rather it was a time of increasing awareness of, and emphasis on, noise' (3). Others have 'suggested that the distinction between sound and noise changed in tandem with the emergence of modern mass society and in the nineteenth century with the growing bourgeois fear of the crowd' (Garrioch 2003, 6), thus highlighting not only how '[s]ocial structure manifests itself in sound' (Wissmann 2016, 37), but also that issues of class are at the core of the perception and definition of urban noise. As Boutin confirms, again in the context of nineteenth-century Paris, '[w]ith their newfound sense of entitlement to quieter private interiors, many bourgeois listeners railed against the encroachment of street noise, especially the soaring voices of small-scale itinerant tradesmen and peddlers' (5). These remarks show how intimately connected urban noise is to the class system. In his pioneering contribution on soundscape, Schafer (1977) imputed to social power structures the failure, in the early phases of the Industrial Revolution, to recognize the toxicity of industrial noise, vis-à-vis the frequent

use of noise-abatement legislation against the rowdy human voice: 'the industrialists held power and they were granted dispensation to make Noise by means of the steam engine and the blast furnace, just as previously the monks had been free to make Noise on the church bell' (76). Human cries aside, it was indeed technology and new forms of work that increasingly came to shape the modern city's soundscape. The 'economic noise' that characterized the modern city included sounds from craft production that were also commonplace before the nineteenth century. It was, however, the introduction of the steam engine and the evolution of both transport and industry that caused the sounds of vehicles and production to become pervasive. The train and the motor car added their piercing screeches to the urban cacophony, while novel forms of production came to replace the rhythmic sonorities of manufacturing with alienating noise: 'The factory concentrated the noise of machinery, obliterating the song and sociability of traditional craft production and adding to the sensory deprivation that Marx claimed had animalized and alienated the industrial proletariat' (Bailey 1996, 58).

Considering the West's recent industrial past and its post-industrial present, capitalism has shaped the soundscape of the city in all its phases – Fordist, Keynesian, and global. What interests me in particular here is how different phases of capitalism may be said to produce variations in the urban soundscape. While urban noise progressively escalated throughout modernity, peaking with Fordism, the following phase is one of (relative) sound decrease. *British Sounds* was made on the cusp of the transformation of the Western city from Fordist centre of industrial production, organized around the factory as its economic, cultural, and political fulcrum, to the Keynesian city of consumption, shaped by the rapid growth of the car industry and of roads, and epitomized by the disorder of urban sprawl, the proliferation of commercial centres and transnational companies, and the escalation of the peripheries. Characterized by speed and production first, then increasingly by traffic and overpopulation, the soundscapes of both the Fordist and Keynesian cities were dominated by noise. At the end of the 1970s, ten years after the release of *British Sounds*, the Keynesian city declines, once again as a result of technological development. A watershed date for this process is 1969, the year of the birth in the United States of the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network or ARPANET, the first network of electronic communication of data, and the prelude to the development of the Internet. The impact of the new interconnected technology on the city and its soundscape was momentous. Thanks to these new technologies, work becomes increasingly immaterial. Financial capital, once deep-rooted in the city, begins to travel on networks that are independent of it. The factory, previously located in the urban centre, can be moved elsewhere, and the workforce needs not be concentrated in the city. Cities no longer produce

things, 'except, first and foremost, for the production of the city itself, of its offices, of its systems of transport, of its residential fabric' (Bertuglia and Vaio 2019, 161; my trans.). The city, in other words, becomes the only product that the city produces.

Thus, at the end of the 1980s, the global city was born from the ashes of the Keynesian city. The transnationalization of flows, in the face of the reduction of the powers of the Western nation-state, shapes a new geopolitics, in which cities are less connected to their territory than to a transnational network of cities. Within this network, global cities are those that concentrate financial functions of the higher order and are capable of controlling other cities. Indeed, Castells (1996) sees contemporary world cities as aggregated together in a singular 'global city', a network of urban centres that extends throughout the globe as the nervous system of the new economy. The 'local city', of course – the level at which we still inhabit and experience individual cities – continues to coexist with the 'global city', thus creating a tension between the physical space and the space of flows. This tension is also sonic, with traffic still dominating urban soundscapes, but also with an increase of quiet electric means of private and public transport, and a reduction in the noise of industry and manufacturing. At the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, then, we wondered whether a reduction in traffic noise would continue even after the total silence of urban lockdowns, so conspicuous to be registered by world seismographers, on account of the widespread normalization of practices of remote working and studying. The coexistence of the local and the global city continues to create new granularities of urban sound.

Sounding the global city: Bo Wang and Pan Lu's *Many Undulating Things*

A city essay film that also includes a focus on architecture, *Many Undulating Things* explores Hong Kong as world city and as city-world: a multicultural, hybrid, global megalopolis in which space reveals time, and time is a function of space. The film patiently sorts through the overpowering visual and auditory cacophony of the global city, thus progressively illuminating the architectural, historical, and social complexities of Hong Kong's many layers – from the overcrowded Chinese housing at the city's lower level to the European-style mid-level residences, from the port in the foreground to the skyscrapers in the background, from the exclusive Peak, a favourite tourist site, to the underground city of ghosts. Tracking through space and time the ripples of imperialism, colonialism, and modernization, and disassembling the city into its constitutive elements of water, air, metal, and earth, *Many Undulating Things* carries out a geopolitical critique that shows how our materialities are always ideologically, economically, and historically

inflected. The four elements correspond to four chapters into which the film is subdivided. The film itself uses the term 'chapter', which, drawn from a literary vocabulary, suggests a narrative linearity that is not in evidence in the film. The four chapters are more like modules, to borrow an architectural term; they are, indeed, semi-autonomous components, at once independent and deeply connected through networks of internal references, repetitions, and resonances. This type of organization defies the linearity of the filmic medium, and creates a depth that raises questions on the 'volume' of both urban and filmic space. My analysis will aim to show how this questioning is central to the city essay film's commitment to urban critique, and how sound contributes to it.

The modular structure of *Many Undulating Things* may be said to be generated by the challenge of reading the complexities of a global city such as Hong Kong, with its nearly 7.5 million inhabitants from many ethnic backgrounds packed in a territory of just over 1,000 square kilometres, with its historical background as a former colony of the British Empire transferred to China in 1997, and a prime financial centre and commercial port. Characterized by profound social inequalities and ethnic segregation, its complexities and contradictions have exploded in the protests started in June 2019. The first chapter, 'Water Demon', argues that water is relevant to Hong Kong in a number of ways. Firstly, the sea historically brought waves of colonists, immigrants, refugees, and now tourists. These flows of people are compared by the narrator to sea waves 'ripped apart on the shore', which then 'splash into the malls'. In the narrator's speech, the waves also become sound waves – those of the robotic announcements and warning sirens of the port, still a primary economic activity in Hong Kong. The episode explores the world of logistics, with the cargo ships and the loading and unloading of containers now almost entirely mechanized. While fewer people are employed, some human bodies are still required to link together the automated phases of work. As the narrator comments, the 'modernist dream of extending human bodies with machines has been reversed', with human bodies now being an extension of machines. If the port, as seen from the sea, is dominated by immense cranes, the skyscrapers in its background are progressively 'moving away', towards the malls at their back, observes the narrator, with workers turning into consumers. The harbour reveals the city's history. The cargo is historically linked to the military, given the USA's need to standardize cargo handling to transport troops and supplies across the Pacific to Vietnam. Archival news reporting of boats of Vietnamese refugees rejected by Hong Kong remind us that each war produces ripples of forced displacement. Back in the present, another use of water is foregrounded, starting with the image and sound of a fountain that decorates the entrance of a luxury hotel (Figure 1), appearing after a scene in which tourists are seen superstitiously touching a statue of the



Figure 1. The use of water features as a sound wall protecting the affluent. *Many Undulating Things* (Bo Wang and Pan Lu, 2019). Screenshot.

God of Wealth. The ideological meanings of water features such as this fountain are clarified as we visit the Lily, an affluent residential building designed by Norman Foster and overlooking Repulse Bay, whose 'design concept was very much "water"', as we hear the manager explain; from the vantage point of its soundproof windows, a breath-taking view of the sea can be enjoyed. The building's water features and skylight pool produce a rippling, soothing effect, so creating an '*audioanalgesic*' (Schafer 1977, 93) sound wall which is an 'acoustic demonstration of power', to use an expression of Wissmann (2016, 136). The sequence's sound design erases the outside and clearly foregrounds the cascading water.

The second chapter, 'Night Air', focuses on three main clusters of ideas and histories: the concept of miasma, seen in relation to the European colonization, with its belief in its cultural superiority and deep-seated fears of impurity and contagion; the history of segregation and the layered vertical development of Hong Kong, with the Chinese housing contained within the city's lower level, the mid-level preserved for the Europeans, with its better access to sunshine and ventilation, and the Peak, with its purer, lighter air; and the creation of the Zoological and Botanical Gardens in 1864, one of a network of Imperial botanical gardens sending specimens back to Kew Gardens in London. If the narrator of the first module came across as a Markerian traveller observing the city and its practices, the narrator of 'Night Air' resembles a historian, who collects data and works through dates, historical figures, and events. A diverse archive is drawn on, including still photography, a Hollywood film set in Hong Kong but shot in California (*Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing*, Henry King, 1955), original British Pathé

footage, and contemporary interviews. While waves, the flows of tourists, and the mechanized work in the port were the defining sounds of the first chapter, the second is characterized by the whirring of fans, by fountains and hissing sprinklers creating ultrafine mists, and chemistry-lab spinning funnels extracting liquids – all together conjuring the 'sound' of impure, noxious air. The sound design often exaggerates the noise of these machines, which are used to evoke not only humidity but also images of European colonization and imperialism. The electronic noise music that introduces the excerpt on the botanic gardens, then, compounds the somewhat sinister character of this chapter's soundscape, which is furthermore punctuated by the noise of trains, conjuring movements to and from the colonies.

Trains, indeed, are heard in each of the four chapters.

The flows of people, plants, goods, and money generated by imperialism and commerce are further explored in the third chapter, 'Ferro-Vitreous', which identifies in iron and glass the primary matter of modernization, the development of the city, and its deep imbrication with labour and consumption. From the sealed glass boxes first created to transport plant samples from and between colonies, to the greenhouse-like Crystal Palace designed by gardener/architect Joseph Paxton for the Great Exhibition of London of 1851, the narrator, here speaking as a Benjaminian historian/essayist, takes us to the urban arcades, 'fantasies of enclosed utopias' that epitomize the modern city, and then to their contemporary outcome: the mall. The chapter thus charts the evolution of urban economic systems, from the modern ferro-vitreous colonial/industrial city of the passages all the way to the spaces of the underground economy of global Hong Kong. Having opened with the noise of manual work, produced by a welder crafting a miniature greenhouse, and having evoked the noise of trains and crowds, the music of the society of the spectacle, the Muzak of consumption, as well as the electronic noise of screens of surveillance and control, the chapter finally comes to its most distinctive sound: that of the muted sonorities of the new economy. A strikingly hushed sound image of the global flows of commodities, counterfeit goods, international communications, money and currency exchange is created in post-production, by muffling the physical noise of people, movement, and commerce, emphasizing the electronic beeps of money calculators and diallers, and superimposing a whispering voiceover.

The last chapter, 'Land', more closely explores the architectural structures of the city, from the inhumane housing cages where low-income earners are forced to live, to the multi-storey public housing, to the shopping malls. Sound discourse is prominent in this section. The lower-level cage-homes are associated with the hubbub of the traffic, sirens, television screens, but also deep breathing and coughing due to the ill-health of the low-income inhabitants. We see some construction work with excavators moving earth mounds. The off-screen voice of an academic argues that the land shortage

in Hong Kong, which is responsible for the city's vertical development, is a myth created by the British rulers to promote land speculation. The narrator now speaks like a city dweller, who complains about hearing all kinds of sounds when he lies down to sleep. The sounds – drums, vibrations, voices – are described as either the result of the poor construction standards of public housing, or of the ghosts that inhabit the city (the site used to be a graveyard under Japanese occupation), or even of tinnitus, a malfunction of the middle ear that affects the narrator's balance. The tinnitus is associated with dizziness and flashes of displacement, hints of a symbolic condition compounded by the city and its history. The narrator eventually realizes the voices he hears are those of the mall's escalators, each with its distinctive noise, and which he compares to the arms of an octopus-like monster drawing people into the temple of consumption and controlling the whole city (Figure 2). Everything in the mall is about encouraging consumers to move along and avoid wasting precious shopping time by sitting down, meeting friends, or watching people. Where once was a musical fountain, which worked as an attraction and meeting point, there now is an empty, white, glossy space that restlessly pushes the flows onward. What is left is the rhythmic sound of rubber and metal of the escalator, the monster transforming people into consumers.

In an article on the sounds of globalization, Meier-Dallach (2007) reflects on what has become of urban noise in this new era from the acoustic vantage point offered by the global Swiss city of Zürich. Drawing on Adam Smith's political-economic theory, which divided the annual produce of a nation into three orders – the produce of those who live by land rent, of those who live by



Figure 2. Sounding the city's noise. *Many Undulating Things*. Screenshot.

wages, and of those who live by profit – Meier-Dallach divides the sound of the city into the same three categories. The sounds of the land and of work in Zürich, he observes, are a mix produced by the soil and tectonics, the climate and weather, the system of transportation, the movement and activity of people – scraps of conversation, traffic, the iron of trams and railroad trains, the Föhn wind, the rattling of shopping bags. Many of these sounds are typical of Western cities, but they are also site-specific; as Meier-Dallach remarks: 'If you know Vienna, Moscow or Paris, it's clear – this day is only available in Zürich' (12; my trans.). But the sounds of the luxury and profit zones of the Swiss city are very different; these are not affected by land or work. Zürich as a global banking and financial centre does not produce noise. Flows of money, bonds, and shares circulate through the city silently, unlike pre-globalization money, which was silvered, heavier, and sonorous; as Meier-Dallach writes: 'The sounds of activities and of working with money have become quiet, sometimes incredibly quiet. [. . .] You can feel it inside the perimeter of the banks, even before the automatic glass doors open. The money society loves silence' (13; my trans.).

In the opening sequence of *Many Undulating Things*, shot at night from the water, and framing at once the boating traffic and the skyscrapers in the background, while listening to an audio mixing of sea waves, boat engines, loudspeaker communications, passengers, tourists, and city noise, one has the distinct impression that this day is only available in Hong Kong. Like those in Zürich, the sounds of Hong Kong foregrounded in *Many Undulating Things* can be seen as deriving from the activities of those who live by land rent (the government), those who live by wages (the dwellers), and those who live by profit (the money society). The land here produces most distinctly water sounds, some of which are mechanical, as the hot humidity is countered by fans, water sprinklers, and air conditioners. Water sounds are never 'natural' or innocent in the film. They are voices from the past, like the waves of the port, listening to which, as the narrator remarks, 'you feel time' – a history of imperialism, colonization, slavery, war, and migrations; or else they are the result of economic and ethnic segregation, like the song of the water bridled by the rich, which masks the rowdiness rising up from the city's underbelly. The water features used in architecture as acoustic design, however, must be gentle and soothing, not overbearing, which is why the musical fountain has disappeared from Hong Kong's public spaces. The musical fountain is the opposite of Muzak; where Muzak is calming, inconspicuous, and occupies a sonic background, the musical fountain is attention-grabbing, thrilling, and ecstatic, and, as such, it has been removed from the mall, where flows must be smoothly regulated. We hear the noise of work, then, coming from the port, with its automated cranes, radio communications, clanking metal, running engines, and beeping electronic devices – the choreographed

symphony of the 'technical sublime'; from the tourism and hospitality industry, such as the rattling of cutlery and shuffling of chairs made by waiters setting elegant hotel breakfast tables; from construction work; and from manufacturing, though on a diminutive scale – the doll-size greenhouse created by the contemporary Hong Kong artisan is but a miniaturised image of the huge Crystal Palace of 1850s London. The sounds of the profit zones of the global city, however, are hushed. The silent flow of global money that comes into the city is compared to the waves that enter the port and are trapped by the mountain. Interestingly, the film does not show the banks and centres of high finance; rather, it affords us a sight (and sound) of the underground but equally globalized economy of the so-called grey market and parallel importation/exportation, feeding on the movements of people and of counterfeit or cheaply produced or unauthorized goods (Figure 3). The relevant sequences, which have already been described, are set in the 17-storeys-tall Chungking Mansion building where Wong Kar-Wai shot *Chungking Express*. Completed in 1961, and formerly mostly occupied by Chinese residents, Chungking Mansion is located in the heart of Hong Kong's most expensive district, but is known as a sort of Third-World enclave, and hosts many low-budget hotels, shops and services such as money changing, as well as around 4,000 residents. It is, as Bo Wang described it, 'a low-end globalization hub that connects cheap Chinese goods with [the] global south' (personal communication, 11 May 2019). A whole world in a building, the sequences in Chungking Mansion point to the interconnected economic status of the global city, which extends beyond high finance and banking services. They show us that the legal and illegal



Figure 3. Recording the hushed sounds of the grey economy in Chungking Mansion. *Many Undulating Things*. Screenshot.

flows of capital, goods, and humans are its characterizing feature. From the perspective of a sound critique, then, they intimate that noise is linked not only to class, but to ethnicity too. In a city like Hong Kong, built on the principle of ethnic segregation, Chungking Mansion is a microcosm of linguistic diversity, the multicultural underbelly that is the obverse of the commonplace English of the affluent elites who live behind a sound wall.

In their different ways, then, both Meier-Dallach's analysis of the soundscape of Zürich and *Many Undulating Things*' sound discourse on Hong Kong may be said to elucidate how it is possible that '[c]oncepts like globalization are understood to be hearable in relation to world or global cities' (Wissmann 2016, 43). They both suggest that urban sound is a matter of class (and ethnicity); and that each phase of capitalist modernity produces its own soundscape, with a descending arc from the noisiest Fordist soundscape to the silences of the global city. Ultimately, they suggest that sound is not a by-product of urban modernity but, rather, that urban modernity *is* sound.

Thus far, my analysis of *Many Undulating Things* has aimed to show how the city essay film can use sound to critique specific urban modernities. What remains to do is to ask how thinking about sound can help us to better understand the city essay film as an object of theory.

Volume: challenging flatness

In an article on Chinese films of the 1990s and urban noise, Pollacchi (2008) looks at the example of Wang Bing's nine-hour-long documentary *West of the Tracks* (*Tie xi qu*, 2001), which charts the decommissioning of an industrial area in the Tiexi district over a three-year period. Pollacchi argues that industrial noise 'provides the continuum against which the whole work unfolds', and notices that each of the film's three episodes ends in silence, thus 'marking the success of the dismantling process' (198). Pollacchi connects the emphasis on sound in *West of the Tracks* and other urban Chinese films of the 1990s with the spread of digital filmmaking technology and the enhanced possibilities of location shooting it affords. If digital technology can help filmmakers to record sound live, and reproduce it, the digital age is, however, also one of noise restriction and, indeed, noise suppression. Digital tools are increasingly used to correct and clear all noise, intended both in terms of unwanted sonorities and as 'image noise'. The same suppression of noise is at work in contemporary architecture. As Dawson (1988) has written, '[b]uildings become more airtight and soundtight while the outside environment of ever increasing walls and concrete is a declining haven for sound quality' (170). For Pallasmaa (2012), then, with modernity and postmodernity architecture has lost touch with all human senses bar vision. For Pallasmaa, sound is not only reduced but indeed literally censored in our cities:

> Every city has its echo which depends on the pattern and scale of its streets and the prevailing architectural styles and materials. The echo of a Renaissance city differs from that of a Baroque city. But our cities have lost their echo altogether. The wide, open spaces of contemporary streets do not return sound, and the interior of today's buildings echoes are absorbed and censored. The programmed recorded music of shopping malls and public spaces eliminates the possibility of grasping the acoustic volume of space. Our ears have been blinded. (51)

While Pallasmaa describes this as a regrettable state of the contemporary city resulting from the primacy of the ocular due to a certain evolution of modernity – a primacy that has turned architecture into an image – here I wish to draw out the unspoken political undertext of his observations. Commercial sounds are a key element of the urban soundscape, as we have seen, starting with Boutin's study of nineteenth-century Paris. Replacing the peddlers' cries in the nineteenth-century city, and infinitely less brash and more subdued, decorous, and suave, background music or Muzak is the unmissable sonic accompaniment of our present-day retail experience. Muzak has been known since the early 1920s to have a positive, 'audioanalgesic' impact on consumers by acting on their emotional states, thus providing a 'relaxed background to profit' (Schafer 1977, 97). With his remark on 'programmed recorded music', Pallasmaa laments not so much the consumerist manipulation produced by these artificial soundscapes, however, but the impossibility for the visitor of 'grasping the acoustic volume of space'. Returning to my case study, I want to inject the politics back into Pallasmaa's observations, while learning from his discussion of the flatness of contemporary architecture, of the city as surface and spectacle, and of the impossibility of grasping the contemporary city's acoustic volume.

As we saw, for Pallasmaa the oculocentrism of our culture has determined the predominance of the visual, from the modernist dominion of 'frontal perspectival perception' (29) to a contemporary architecture 'aiming at a striking and memorable visual image' (30). The consequence is that, '[i]n our culture of pictures, the gaze itself flattens into a picture and loses its plasticity. Instead of experiencing our being in the world, we behold it from outside as spectators of images projected on the surface of the retina' (30). The political outcome of this argument is implied in Pallasmaa's observation that '[i]mages are converted into endless commodities manufactured to postpone boredom; humans in turn are commodified, consuming themselves nonchalantly without having the courage or even the possibility of confronting their very existential reality' (34). Pallasmaa's words provide an ideal commentary to the opening sequences of *Many Undulating Things*. Views of Hong Kong's skyscrapers from the sea are paired to the narrator's voiceover, who observes that the modern city is sometimes reminiscent of 'sleazy, dark sci-fi films', although, he corrects himself, 'maybe it's the other

way [around]', for it is the films that attempt to imitate the city. This somewhat understated remark is, in fact, crucial; coming early in the first chapter, it programmatically attracts our attention to the role of the cinema in creating the city as image. This involvement has strong ideological implications. While we watch the city as if it were a film, continues the narrator, later we discover that we 'were never a part of it' – as spectators and consumers, rather than citizens.

In a closely following sequence, we witness a large-scale show of lights and projections taking place in the harbour. The image of a wall is perforated by a mock laser beam, revealing the silhouette of a 16 mm film projector, followed by a moving film strip made up of individual frames picturing historic images of the city. These are replaced by the moving image of a train that crosses the film strip. The sequences hint at the historical development of Hong Kong, while also generally alluding to ideas of progress, movement, mechanisation, migration, and modernity. Accompanied by loud music – an example of active use of sound in a public space, reminding us that in the city our ears 'are constantly being sabotaged and indoctrinated' (Lanza as quoted in Wissmann 2016, 65) – these images suggest the ecstatic flatness of the cityscape, admired by awestruck spectators as a translucent surface that reconfigures the city as spectacle and commodity. Its image, in turn, is infinitely replicated by the spectators' digital mobile devices, in an ideal development from the cinema to the post-medium condition of the image today (Figure 4). A fitting description of the transformation of the twenty-first-century city into a digital, immaterial image can be found in the already mentioned article by Pollacchi (2008), where she notices how 'the

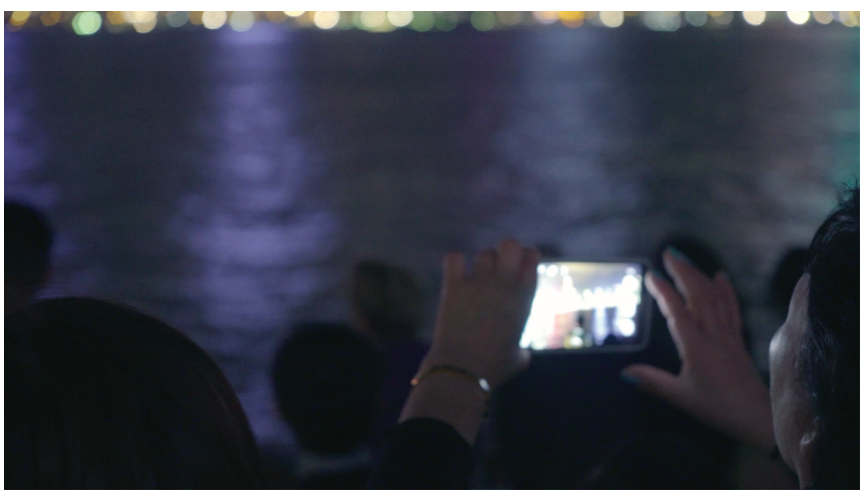


Figure 4. The city as image and its multiplication through digital devices. *Many Undulating Things*. Screenshot.

overwhelming and intertwined flow of images and noise – often echoing from public to private spaces, from mass scale (advertisements, street-signs and so forth) to individual scale (mobile phones, i-Pods and so on) – is necessarily captured by any sort of visual technology' (193).

The opening section of *Many Undulating Things*, then, produces a critique not only of the city as spectacle but also, more precisely, of the city as filmic spectacle, that is to say, of the profound imbrication of the cinema and urban modernity. The show in the port unwittingly but unquestionably gestures at the cinema's historical entanglement in processes of modernization, industrialization, and colonialism, through its contribution to the spread of a capitalist imaginary of global mobility and flows, exoticism and conquest, urbanization and mechanization (Figure 5). From a sound perspective, then, cinema participated in the twentieth-century phenomenon of *schizophonia* – 'the split between an original sound and its electroacoustical transmission or reproduction' (Schafer 1977, 90) – and, thus, to the territorial expansion of post-industrial sounds, which 'complemented the imperialistic ambitions of the Western nations' (91).

In order to critique the city, then, an essay film must all at once critique the cinema as productive of the image of the city. *Many Undulating Things* does so not only through the sequences I just described, but also by incorporating several iconic images from film history celebrating modernity, the machine, and the urban – from those of trains entering stations to an excerpt of *Man with a Movie Camera*. The dissection by the narrator of a Hollywood drama-romance

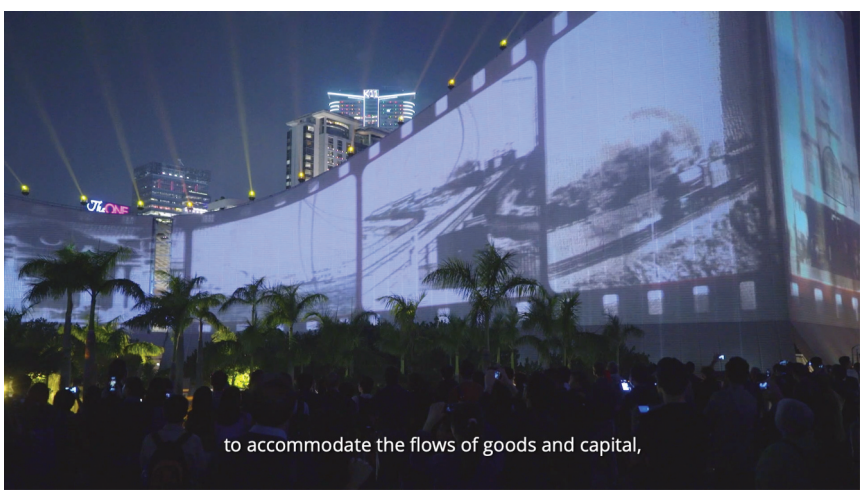


Figure 5. Cinema's imbrication in capitalism and urban modernity: the spectacle of lights, projections and music in the port. *Many Undulating Things*. Screenshot.

such as *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing*, with its colonialist overtones, then clearly historicises the role of the medium within imperialistic endeavours, and is paralleled by the critical inclusion of factual, documentary, and commercial film productions, for instance British Pathé footage of 'exotic' Far East gardens, but also *Design for Dreaming*, a 1956 promotional film for General Motors. Fashioned like a Hollywood musical, *Design for Dreaming* presents New York as a flat image, and celebrates modernity as a dream of consumption.

In his critique of architecture as image, Pallasmaa lamented that, in 'the layered contemporary urban transparency, we cannot halt the flow of images for analytic observation' (36). A workable definition of the city essay film, I suggest, is that it engages with an analytic observation of urban phenomena that defies urban transparency and the flatness of the image of the city as spectacle. What my analysis of *Many Undulating Things* aimed to reveal about the city essay film, then, is that its commitment to critiquing the city as surface necessarily also brings it to confront the cinema's own entanglement in that ideology. This implies a need, which is political and formal all at once, to disrupt the flatness of the image and the linearity of film. Sound, with its occupancy of space and production of depth, both sensory and argumentative, is one of the key tools by which the city essay film can do so. As Alter (2018) writes: 'Vision may have become completely colonized and transformed in second nature, but sound retains the possibility for a different sort of expression' (26). More specifically with reference to the city essay film, *Many Undulating Things* uses both live-recorded and post-produced sound to highlight meanings that are critical and disruptive of both the flatness of the urban spectacle and the hegemonic sound discourse in the city. At the same time, sound in this film works against the linearity of narrative cinema and its production of an ideological image of the city as spectacle. *Many Undulating Things* is thus revealing of the convergence of form and politics in the essay film, when this applies itself to grasping and shaping the urban acoustic volume in all its resounding critical depths.

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