

*The Crowd* uses “sound-suspense images”—a technique unique to the late silent period—to critically represent the urban noisecape. This essay details the technological, ideological, and aesthetic developments that made these images possible, and it considers the codification of Hollywood sound practices that soon made them obsolete.

## The Roar of *The Crowd*: Urban Noise and Anti-Noise in Silent Cinema

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**A**s Jonathan Sterne notes in his history of recorded sound, “In modern life sound becomes a problem: an object to be contemplated” (9). Once an undifferentiated aspect of the human environment, man-made sound, with increasing industrialization and urbanization, increased exponentially, detaching itself from the general ambience and becoming something to be noticed, inveighed against, and, ultimately, regulated. This essay examines how one film in particular, King Vidor’s *The Crowd*, released in 1928, contemplates this problem with extraordinary creativity, seizing the opportunity presented by a particular constellation of technological, ideological, and stylistic norms unique to late silent cinema to critically represent the modern urban noisecape.

Vidor, whose career spanned more than forty years, is generally considered one of the most innovative Hollywood directors of the silent and early sound periods. Among his better-known films are the anti-war melodrama *The Big Parade*; *Hallelujah!*, a musical with an all-black cast; and *The Fountainhead*, an adaptation of Ayn Rand’s

novel. Vidor was nominated for Best Director at the first Academy Awards for his work on *The Crowd*, which has long been considered one of the masterpieces of American silent cinema. It is a film that rivals those of German directors Fritz Lang and F. W. Murnau in scale and ambition. Vidor's use of street photography, expressionistic sets, and, above all, a more naturalistic acting style were all highly influential. *The Crowd* is a portrait of an "average" working-class couple, John and Mary, and their struggles to maintain a dignified existence against the anonymous and alienating forces of urban mass society. Among the many adversities they face, one in particular, the intrusiveness and destructiveness of urban noise, is my sole concern here. The scenes in Vidor's film that are analyzed below reflect many of the key concerns and strategies of the anti-noise movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the goals of which were to publicize problems associated with urban noise and to lobby for legislative remedies. The American silent cinema's engagement with anti-noise movements dates back to at least 1909 and D.W. Griffith's *Schneider's Anti-Noise Crusade*. What sets *The Crowd* apart is the way in which Vidor used then-current cinematic techniques, in particular editing, to create a critical picture of urban noise and its effects, something that would paradoxically become nearly impossible two or three years later, with the codification of Hollywood sound practices. This becomes apparent with the comparison of *The Crowd* to Vidor's next urban film, *Street Scene*, from 1931.

The late silent period (from roughly 1925 to 1928) was that unique moment when filmmakers like Vidor could create critical visual representations of urban noise using what, for lack of a standard term, I will call *sound images*, motion picture images of an object making sound or the effect of sound. Bracketing this narrow window of opportunity are series of technological, ideological, and aesthetic developments. Preceding *The Crowd* were changes in theatre design and exhibition practices, along with the progressive articulation of a highly developed visual narrative style, all of which made possible Vidor's sophisticated use of sound images in this film. Subsequent to this brief period, the widespread introduction of synchronized sound and the ideology and aesthetics of sound recording swiftly led to a rigid hierarchy of sounds that privileged the voice and limited any sound inessential to the narrative, especially those sounds considered background noise (Crafton 355). By comparing *The Crowd* with *Schneider's Anti-Noise Crusade* and *Street Scene*, in the context of contemporary debates about the deleterious effects of urban noise and, in the case of the latter film, the proper use of sound recording technologies in film, I argue that *The Crowd* represents a high point in the American cinema's engagement with the modern noisescap and that, more significantly, this high point could only have existed in the period immediately prior to the coming of the "talkies."

**W**hile complaints about noise have no doubt existed for as long as humans have lived in relative proximity to each other, “the urban inhabitants of early-twentieth-century America perceived that they lived in an era unprecedentedly loud” (Thompson 6). The American modernist composer Charles Ives, who in 1906 included representations of street noise in his composition “Central Park in the Dark,” fled New York for suburban Connecticut six years later, declaring the city a “hell hole” because of its din (Thompson 134). Nor were Americans the only ones so affected by the elevated volume of urban noise. As the Berlin Dadaist Richard Huelsenbeck wrote of his return from Switzerland at the end of World War I: “In January 1917 I returned to Germany, the face of which had meanwhile undergone a fantastic change. I felt as though I had left a smug fat idyll for a street full of electric signs, shouting hawkers, and auto horns” (380).

There are two main phases to the anti-noise movements in both Europe and the United States. The first extends from roughly 1906 to 1914, and the second from around 1920 to 1930 (Smilor, “Cacophony” 25). That there are two distinct periods has less to do with the movements accomplishing their aims than with their being interrupted by the social cataclysms of World War I and the Great Depression, events that led to the tabling of any progressive reforms that might have been seen as anti-industrial. While these two distinct periods share many of the same concerns, especially regarding the health effects of noise, they are also distinguished by different approaches to the problem. The first movement characterized the excess of noise in terms of personal responsibility and used laws regulating behaviour to create what Karin Bijstervold terms a “noise etiquette” (51). Frequent targets of these laws were gramophone and pet owners, barkers, newsboys, peddlers, and nickelodeons and stores that used loudspeakers to hail customers in the street. According to historian Raymond W. Smilor, who coined the phrase “noise pollution,” the second movement was more scientific in nature and resulted in the first attempts to survey sound, as well as the first major initiatives to abate the noise produced by machinery, especially that of transport (“Cacophony” 33).

The popular press of the early twentieth century was full of references to urban noise as a violent intrusion into the domestic sphere and a violation of the individual “right” to silence. In such a discursive environment, it is not at all surprising that a similar rhetoric found its way into contemporary movie reviews. Mordaunt Hall, chief film reviewer for *The New York Times* during the twenties and thirties, referred to acoustic events foregrounded in early sound films as “sound intrusions” (Crafton 356). In 1906, Mrs. Julia Barnett Rice of New York, a middle class mother of six, founded the first American anti-noise organization, the Society for the Suppression

of Unnecessary Noise in New York City, and was able to attract the assistance of such public luminaries as Mark Twain to advance her cause (Smilor, "Cacophony" 31). Her first major success was the establishment of quiet zones, first around children's hospitals and then around schools (Thompson 126). If this first period of the anti-noise movement was characterized by an attack on personal behaviour, it also focused its efforts on protecting the defenceless, efforts that had widespread popular support.

One scene in *The Crowd* effectively taps into the vast reservoir of sympathy for sick children as victims of urban noise that resulted from the work of Rice and others. After being hit by a truck, the couple's young daughter lies dying in her bed while John leans out the window futilely hushing the street below. An escalating series of sound events—from noisy gum chewing to passing newsboys to police whistles to fire truck sirens—draws the father outside, where he stands amidst the flow of traffic vainly attempting to stop the stream of noise that invades his house and, the film suggests, precipitates his daughter's death. There is little ambiguity to this image of the noise of the city penetrating the domestic. Noise is pure threat, and the city, through which the masses ebb and flow according to its mechanical rhythms, is coldly indifferent to the daughter's fate.

During the second period of the anti-noise movement, the experts took over from the middle-class reformers as leaders of the movement. One particularly important event was the invention of the audiometer by the Bell Labs in 1925 (Smilor, "Cacophony" 34). This instrument was used to conduct the first surveys of noise in London, New York, and Chicago between 1926 and 1930 (Bijstervold 52). By 1928, the year *The Crowd* was released, the word *decibel* was already beginning to appear in common parlance, which suggests that the film's original audience would have been familiar with attempts to measure and regulate noise (Smilor, "Cacophony" 34). Smilor concludes one of his studies as follows: "The fight against noise that sprang up in the early 1900s attracted widespread popular support because it gave people the opportunity to express their anxiety over machine technology, to test their ability to control their physical surrounding and to lessen their apprehension in coping with a new environment" ("Cacophony" 36). According to Miriam Hansen, cinema in the early twentieth century performed a social function similar to that which Smilor attributes to the anti-noise movements. It provided a means for the public to work through their apprehensions about the new social environment created by modernity: "For the cinema was not only part and promoter of technological, industrial capitalist modernity; it was also the single most inclusive public horizon in which the liberating impulses and the pathologies of modernity were reflected, rejected or disavowed, transmuted or negotiated, and it made this new mass public visible to itself and to

society” (12). Given this congruence, it is hardly surprising that the American cinema would turn to the urban noisecape as a subject soon after the emergence of the first anti-noise movement.

Griffith’s film *Schneider’s Anti-Noise Crusade* explicitly satirizes the first anti-noise movement in the context of a German-American, middle-class household. In the beginning of the film, we see Schneider in his bedroom, preparing to write a toast for the annual banquet of the Liederkranz Society to which he belongs. No sooner does he sit down to write than he is interrupted by the arrival of a woman and her son, who bring a parrot in a cage. The remainder of the film is structured around a series of comic episodes in which the boy distracts Schneider by playing a trombone, rattling the parrot’s cage, and singing along with a gramophone. It concludes when Schneider, hearing robbers in the house, catches them red-handed attempting to steal all three of the offending noisemakers (trombone, parrot, and gramophone). When the robbers offer to hand them over, Schneider pays them instead to haul off their load, and he finally enjoys the peace and quiet he had been denied. Although the recent plot synopsis in *The Griffith Project* does not mention the allusion to the anti-noise movement made by the title, it does correctly note that “the film is all about sound” (Usai 72). Of principal interest to Eileen Bowser, the author of this synopsis, is (in keeping with many early-cinema historians’ focus on the sound in the theatre) what cannot be seen in the film, the presumably madcap musical accompaniment the film might have received. I, on the other hand, am more interested in what can be seen in the film: an illustration of the anti-noise ideology and, most importantly, a series of sound images integral to the very structure of the film.

*Schneider’s Anti-Noise Crusade* was made during the first period of the anti-noise movement and fully reflects its emphasis on personal responsibility as well as the belief that excess noise resulted from lapses in etiquette. When the boy arrives at the house, he first hugs Schneider, then goes directly to a bedroom, where he pulls a comforter off the bed, uses it to wipe the dust of the street off his shoes, and then leaves it on the floor, later standing on it. Only after he has been pointedly characterized as lacking manners does he proceed to take a trombone down from the wall and blow into it. Finally, with each interruption of Schneider’s attempt to write the toast, there is the depiction of sound’s intrusiveness, which, as we have already seen, dominated the discourse about its ill effects.

The shot following the trombone blowing is repeated after each noise event in the film. Schneider, making elaborate gestures of grandiloquence, puts pen to page only to stop and cover his ears. We return to the boy’s room, where he is still playing the trombone. Rushing in, Schneider tears the instrument from his hands and hangs

it back on the wall. With each repetition of this sequence of shots Schneider becomes more frustrated and violent. Bowser notes that in this film “there are a lot of shots for a split-reel film of this period, 25 of them in all, and several sets are used. [. . .] The action travels fast and freely between the sets” (Usai 72). She then goes on to speculate as to the accompaniment. But it is not any potential accompaniment that allows the action to move so freely between sets, and thus spaces; it is the representation of sound in the film itself. Sound’s ability to penetrate spaces, even into the most private retreats, such as Mr. and Mrs. Schneider’s bedroom, is what unifies the action in this film made entirely of tableau-like static shots. We see the boy blow the trombone; we see Schneider look up; then we see Schneider enter the boy’s room. Although the exact spatial relations between these two rooms, or any of the other rooms in the film, are never made clear, the representation of sound establishes their approximate contiguity through what Bernard Perron has termed “the transi-sounds of parallel editing” (79). In his analysis of a similar use of represented sound in the 1908 film *The Physician of the Castle*, he writes: “Through its spatial range, which exceeds visible information, all the attention given to the localization of sound makes it possible to bridge the gaps separating diegetic spaces. Most of all it permits the realization of intelligible transitions between these spaces. [. . .] The sound event sets up the terms of the parallelism. This is a clue given to the audience so that they can understand the film and fill in the gaps between shots or scenes” (83). Perron makes a convincing case that the representation of sound onscreen was instrumental in lending spatial and temporal coherence to early narrative films.

However sophisticated Griffith’s use of sound events to establish temporal and spatial continuity may be, in 1909 *The Crowd*’s use of sound images would have been unthinkable. The transi-sound linking scenes and spaces had not yet been elaborated into Vidor’s more sophisticated sound image, which could also advance the narrative and, most importantly, present a sound event as an object of audience contemplation. In order for this elaboration to be realized, three developments in cinematic production and exhibition had to take place: further elaboration of visual narration, changes in exhibition practices in response to critical and audience reactions to live sound effects, and changes in theatre design.

**A**fter analyzing a large number of screenplays from the early silent era, Isabelle Reynaud concluded that more than half featured significant sound events (besides human speech) that advanced the narrative (70). She writes that “instead of doing away with sound completely, the early cinema writers and filmmakers found a chorus of strategies to make sound be *heard inside* the story and seen on film” (70). Reynaud’s

wording emphasizes the potential synesthetic effect of visual representations of sound that were described by, among others, Rudolf Arnheim (33). Her claim that the fact “that the *mise-en-scène* often relied on sound information as a motivation for action opens up a whole new way of perceiving the so-called silent cinema” (70) closely parallels my own approach here, in that it emphasizes the function of sound in the visible text over the audible accompaniment. As filmmakers became more assured in the visual representation of sound, they were able to exert a greater degree of control over the audience’s interpretation of these sound events, despite the extreme contingency of the accompaniment. This was the first of the three changes anticipating Vidor’s use of the sound image.

The second change was in musical and sound-effects accompaniment in the theatre. Beginning around 1909, film magazines in England, the United States, and elsewhere began to be filled with complaints about the sound effects generated by musicians and specialists working traps, or sound-effect machines. According to Stephen Bottomore, “Many commentators and audiences appreciated the addition of sound effects to film shows, but a growing antagonism also developed to the practice: some people simply criticized the inappropriateness of some of the effects and the lack of skill of the operators, while others suggested that sound effects had no place at all accompanying films” (129). There was also a class dimension to this critique of sound effects, as middle-class critics associated all noise in the cinema with what they considered the more unattractive elements of the fairground and similar plebeian entertainments. Bottomore cites a 1906 review of a showing of *The Story of the Kelly Gang* from a Melbourne newspaper: “There is a deal too much racket in connection with the show—sometimes you can’t see the picture for the noise of horses, trains, gunshots and wild cries, but all the same it’s the sort of bellowdrama that the lower disorders crave” (131). He also cites a fascinating description of a New York audience’s reaction to a 1908 screening of Edison’s *Crossing the Plains in ’49*: “The din and racket intended to represent rifle shots was strongly objected to by the audience, and cries of ‘cut it out,’ ‘stop the noise,’ and ‘keep still’ were shouted from different parts of the house” (132). Twenty-two years later, King Vidor would elicit a very similar reaction with one of his first sound films, *Billy the Kid* (released in 1930). According to Donald Crafton, contemporary reviews record that “gunshots and painful screams shocked viewers with the sounds of violence” (368). Hall’s review in *The New York Times* notes “more reports of gunfire are heard here than in any other film” (“New” 25). It could well be that this experience chastened Vidor and had a dampening effect on his experimentation with urban sounds in *Street Scene*, which he made the next year. However, as we shall see, the relatively unobtrusive representation of noise in that later film was

already determined in advance by the ideology and aesthetics of sound. Returning to the silent cinema, Bottomore notes that the use of sound effects and imitative music reached their climax in the years directly preceding World War I, and although they continued well into the 1920s, they were used less and less frequently (129). By the time *The Crowd* was released, early sound films like F.W. Murnau's *Sunrise*, with its fully synchronized musical score nearly devoid of sound effects, had already set the prestigious standard for sound accompaniment.

The final change anticipating *The Crowd* was in the design of theatres themselves. Many of the earliest nickelodeons relied on loudspeakers and barkers to attract audiences, but such practices were outlawed in many communities during the first anti-noise movement. Gradually the emphasis on theatre design came to centre on the shutting out of external noise (Lastra 99). Ticket booths were moved from the foyer to the outside of the building, and with the failure of regulations to dampen urban noise, acousticians retreated from the street and devoted more of their attention to creating private escapes from the noise by soundproofing interior spaces (Thompson 119). Theatres and other public buildings became retreats from urban noise. Whereas sound had previously been used to hail passersby, by the mid-1920s spectacular light displays increasingly served the same function. Light, according to David Nasaw, had become a "central metaphor for the delights of modern life in the American city" (274). "Lights symbolized the new safety, decency and welcoming warmth of the city after dark" (276). Theatre marquees stretched over the sidewalk out to the street, providing brilliantly lit shelter to passing pedestrians, and the neon signs, attached to the corners of movie palaces and sometimes extending up past the roofs, could be seen for blocks, if not miles, by pedestrians and commuters alike. Searchlights also announced a premiere or other special movie event.

This move from sound to light to attract cinema audiences parallels a similar move from sound in the auditorium to the sound image in the film itself. Both movements partake of a more general response to urban noise that the German social psychologist Willy Hellpack described in 1902 as "visualization" (Bijstervold 48). As Karen Bijstervold recounts, Hellpack described a railroad station near his home by writing that "many 'toxicating' aural signals [. . .] had been replaced by 'sober and unobtrusive' inscriptions" (48–49). Perhaps no spot in the United States indulged in such a seductive display of lights in place of noise as did Coney Island. That amusement park had been practically an obsession with early-twentieth-century reformers for a number of reasons, not the least of which was its din. In 1907 barkers were banned from Coney Island in an early effort to transform its aural, and thereby its social, environment (Thompson 124). The lights of Coney Island, a spectacular subject for night-time

photography, figure prominently in *The Crowd*, for it is at that park that the protagonists fall in love. Mordaunt Hall devotes considerable space in his review of the film to this episode: “In fact, Coney Island never looked so interesting as it does in this chapter. You realize why people go there and the fun they derive from its queer entertainments. Mr. Vidor’s bits of this amusement spot give all the pleasure with none of the discomforts. You see the antics of some of the island’s multitudes, and when Mr. Vidor turns to other scenes you will perhaps be glad that you are sitting in a comfortable theater seat and not holding a strap on a subway train” (“Life’s” 14). Presumably one of the discomforts Vidor spares the audience is the sound of Coney Island, and it is precisely this lack of sound, as much as the absence of the press of human bodies, that lets the elitist Hall appreciate the amusement park’s allures. Similarly, in a key innovation of this film, the visual representation of sound in the sound image, combined with its acoustical absence, gives the spectator the distance necessary to critically contemplate the horrific effects of urban noise.

**T**he silent images of Coney Island, rendered in beautiful night-time photography, present an idealized image of the modern urban environment that wards off its potential to assault the audience members’ senses as effectively as do the sound-proofed walls of the theatre in which they are sitting. Placed at the beginning of the film, these images lull spectators into an unwary state from which they will be shocked by later images that depend for their effect on their ability to reference urban din. These images function for the spectator like synesthetic analogues to the narrative tragedies that befall the protagonists. To illustrate Vidor’s most sophisticated use of sound images, I will describe in detail one sequence from among the many that imply sound in the film. There are a range of sound images in the film, from the most clichéd (e.g., the insert of a ringing electric doorbell, so common in silent films that Buñuel and Dali, in *Un chien andalou*, parodied it by replacing it with two hands shaking a cocktail mixer) to extended, complex passages of implied sound, such as the one in which the daughter lies dying. What separates the scene described below from such purely functional sound images as a doorbell ringing is its complexity. While representing sound’s ability to penetrate the domestic space, it simultaneously advances the story and forces the audience to contemplate the intrusiveness of urban noise. As such, this scene marks a high-point in the development of the sound image, one from which Vidor would be forced to retreat in his later sound film *Street Scene*.

A significant turning point in the film is John and Mary’s first Christmas together, which begins with minor irritations, escalates with the awkward visit of her family, and concludes with John coming home late at night after getting drunk with

his friend Bert and a couple of girls. The scene begins with a sound image that foreshadows the impending disasters. After a title ironically announcing “Christmas Eve—Home Sweet Home,” there is a shot of John in a chair leaning back against the wall playing his ukelele and singing. To his right, the bathroom door comes unlatched and opens, forcing him to stop playing and close it. This bathroom door, along with a leaky toilet and a broken Murphy bed, is among the constant irritants depicted in their cramped and dingy apartment. After opening three times on its own, the bathroom door finally stays shut. Then John stops playing a fourth time, looks over to his left, and puts the ukelele into his lap with a look of disgust. The next shot is of an elevated train passing only a couple of yards from a window in their apartment. Vidor then cuts back to a shot of John as he waits for the train to pass before resuming playing.

This scene hinges upon what could be called a sound-suspense image. The way it is played and edited elicits the curiosity of the audience as to what is now interrupting John from his left. The three repetitions of the bathroom door are comically frustrating, and just as this problem is resolved another as yet undefined one arises. The hard cut to the shot of the train comes as a shock; the magnitude of its force and noise are so much greater than the bathroom door’s. With the recognition of the train comes a synesthetic memory of the train sound in the spectator’s mind—not a train sound itself but the feeling of a train sound, its grating and vibrations. This scene would lose its power if a sound effect introduced the train before the audience saw it. Therefore, a sound-suspense image such as this could only exist in the silent cinema, and only in the late silent cinema. Had Griffith created a sound-suspense image in *Schneider’s Anti-Noise Crusade* by simply reversing two of the shots (e.g., by showing Schneider’s reaction, then cutting to the boy playing the trombone), he would have added some variation to the repetition at the heart of the film. But in doing so, important visual cues needed for the sound accompaniment in the theatre would have gone missing. Unless the accompanist knew the film extremely well, which its producers could not assume, he or she would not know, for instance, that it was a trombone disturbing Mr. Schneider and would not know what sound to mimic during the shot of Schneider interrupting his work. The mismatch between sound and image that might have resulted would only confuse the audience, and such confusion would not have been worth the risk, as *Schneider’s Anti-Noise Crusade* seeks merely to amuse its audience with gentle satire and outrageous performance. The sound-suspense image as used by Vidor, however, delivers a shock and is thus more useful for the critical presentation of an unpleasant and disruptive noise. For all of these reasons, the sound-suspense image was not available in Griffith’s ever-growing repertoire of editing strategies. His film is of the earlier period of the transi-sound, whereas Vidor’s is from

a later period, during which spatial relationships are clearly established by a system of characters' gazes, as we see in the ukelele scene described above.

In his 1911 film *Lonedale Operator*, Griffith comes closer to creating a sound-suspense image than he does in *Schneider's Anti-Noise Crusade*. In this film, a young woman's ailing father, a telegraph operator, leaves her in charge of a train station. A train arrives delivering a payroll, and while she accepts it two hoboes climb onto the platform from underneath one of the cars. Moments later, when she is in the office with the money, we see her look up with alarm and listen intently at the window. This shot is followed by an exterior one of the two hoboes sneaking up to the window. Although their intention to rob the station is definitively revealed only with this shot, we have already seen them get off the train, hide behind a trestle, then climb back onto the platform. As a result, we can guess that what she hears are the two men lurking outside, and perhaps we can also guess what the men are saying. Their revelation functions more to confirm the audience's suspicions than to shock viewers in the manner of the cut to the train in *The Crowd*.

Determining whether sound-suspense images appear in other films of the period would of course require a careful and systematic review of thousands of films. In all likelihood, it was not Vidor's invention. But simple as it is, it is the perfect technique, given the codes of editing and the exhibition practices of the time, to use cinema's synesthetic effects for critiquing the intrusive and inescapable urban noisescape.

Filmmakers wanting to make realistic sync-sound films set in modern urban environments during the early sound period faced the problem of how to deal with disturbing but common noises like the screeching of brakes on trains, sirens, auto horns, and the general din of machinery that were necessary for the realistic representation of the modern soundscape. This problem was especially pressing for those filmmakers who might wish to critique the effects of noise, as Vidor did in *The Crowd*. Compounding this problem was an aesthetic assumption that Rick Altman has labelled "the reproductive fallacy"—that is, the idea that recorded sound is a reproduction of the actual sound rather than a representation of it (39). Hungarian theorist Béla Balázs wrote that there was "no difference in dimension and reality between the original and the recorded and reproduced sound" (124). As late as 1974, Jean Louis Baudry continued to maintain that "one does not hear an image of the sounds but the sounds themselves" (211). Some film critics described the coming of recorded sound much as previous critics had written about photography in its early days, as if the microphone could actually fulfill Vertov's desire to be able to photograph sound. In his article "On the Possibilities of Sound Cinema," Ippolit Sokolov wrote, "The

sound movie camera will least of all film 'life caught unawares.' The unorganized and accidental sounds of our streets and buildings would become a genuine cacophony, a literally caterwauling concert" (qtd. in Kahn 143). Sokolov's fears of a chaos of sound events echoes Baudelaire's distaste for the riot of meaningless details he thought photography reproduced.

While the reproductive fallacy held sway among many film theorists and critics until fairly recently, technicians working in the early sound cinema were more influenced by the ideology of recorded sound that had already developed in other media. Sterne notes that only around 1750 was the study of acoustic phenomena expanded to encompass more than just certain idealized manifestations of sound, such as the voice and music (2). From the start, recorded sound seems to have reverted to this early-modern, idealist approach to sound. Amy Lawrence argues that an ideology of the voice in sound recording was already in place before the invention of cinema. "It is recording [. . .] that forms the pre-history of sound film's acoustic dimension, and it is in the history of sound recording that the ideology of the voice, later transferred to cinema, evolved" (3). Lawrence suggests that this ideology was transmitted *tout court* into film, while Lastra asserts that "while the 'coming of sound' may seem like a clear-cut instance of adapting a well-defined technology to a similarly stable artistic form, such is decidedly not the case. Not only were technology and representational form in flux, but each helped to define or constitute the other in the process of mutual interaction" (92). Lastra's more flexible approach to the integration of sound and film seems more plausible than Lawrence's absolute approach, and yet the actual use of sound, as it rapidly developed into a set of conventions, proved anything but flexible, as Lastra describes it. By his account, sound in both the silent and later periods was merely the continuation of a "pervasive pressure that encouraged producers and exhibitors to subordinate both filmic and extra-filmic elements to an overarching narrative effect, and thereby unify and regularize cinema" (97). Sound effects, whether produced live for silent films or on the sound track, were resistant to such integration, as they only occasionally served an explicitly narrative purpose. From the beginning, sounds were recorded separately, and mixers were charged with eliminating "undesirable, even though natural, noises" (Lastra 204). The end result of such manipulations was that "the sonic background, described again and again as the very essence of sonic realism, is now effectively reduced to a generic loop that repeats endlessly, in the service of the dialogue track" (Lastra 210). And in the case of *Street Scene*, even that background loop is missing much of the time.

*Street Scene* belongs to a group of early sound films Thompson describes very accurately in her *Soundscape of Modernity*: "Numerous early sound films took place

in and celebrated the urban environment, and they often included montages of city noises in which car horns, police whistles, trolley bells, subways and shouting newsboys were all heard. Sounds that city-dwellers were seeking to escape in real life were vicariously enjoyed when experienced within the artificial—and highly controlled—setting of a sound motion picture theater, and the noises themselves were artificially created and controlled by sound engineers in the studio” (280). As a historian of architecture, Thompson is careful to point out the controlled environment in which the films were shown and the possible effect it had on reception. She is also correct to point out that in the early sound films (with some notable exceptions, like Rouben Mamoulian’s *Applause*), the sounds of the city were segregated from the story and dialogue and placed in audiovisual montages. Sound effects of urban noise, if represented at all, served as spectacle, not as narrative. Even this use of sound was sometimes condemned by critics. An anonymous *New York Times* reviewer of the 1929 film *Street Girl* commended the film for “neatly avoiding the brooding cacophony of sound for sound’s sake” (“Love and an Orchestra” 23). According to Donald Crafton, between 1930 and 1931 the “modulated” soundtrack was developed, and a brief period of sound experimentation came to an end: “Sounds were being consolidated into the unostentatious presence which critics had been espousing for a year or so. The new modulated soundtrack constructed a heterogeneous sensory environment, but one always dominated by the voice” (355). *Street Scene* is clearly a product of this period of consolidation, and though there are some tentative attempts to aurally represent urban noise as had been done visually in *The Crowd*, with the exception of a gunshot, noise remains mere “colour,” entirely segregated from the narrative. The privileging of human speech dominates throughout. As much as the film may now seem to be a step backward from *The Crowd*, it must have been fairly bold for its time in its depiction of urban noise. According to Hall’s review, “Sometimes the noise is a trifle too real for comfort” (“When” 25). In an interview with Vidor, film historians Nancy Dowd and David Shepard note that the film has “a tremendously expressive soundtrack of city noise,” and Vidor himself emphasizes how consciously and creatively his crew attempted to use sound (Vidor 122).

*Street Scene*, based on a popular play by Elmer Rice, takes place on a single city block in New York. Most of the action occurs on the stairs of an apartment house, which was a set constructed on a Los Angeles soundstage. There are occasional reverse-angle shots of the street and a few long shots of buildings that were filmed on location in New York. In one early scene, a conversation between two neighbours is interrupted by a banging sound; they look to their right, and there is a cut to a shot of the janitor dragging two trashcans up a stairwell. The shot continues until he has

them in place on the sidewalk. This noise seems at first to interrupt the characters, but it actually serves more as punctuation, or a transition to the next scene, a chance to take the camera away from the stoop where so much of the film takes place.

Although most of the film takes place outdoors on the sidewalk, the actors sound as if they are on a soundstage (which they were), for there are no sounds of the city mixed in, except when we get reverse-angle shots of the street. When the lover of a married woman first stops to chat under the watchful gaze of the nosy neighbours, we are finally treated to a view of the opposite side of the street. During this shot several cars pass in the background and we hear them. The car sounds continue briefly into the next shot of the stairs and then disappear completely. Once the cars are no longer onscreen, emerging sound conventions permitted their noise to gradually disappear. For the reviewer in *Variety*, “where the picture is able to build appropriate atmosphere is in the occasional perspective of the streets” (“Street Scene”)—an opinion that contrasts with Hall’s. However, the sound-suspense image Vidor employs in *The Crowd* to shock the audience with urban noise could not have been used in this film. Conventions of realism would have prohibited Vidor from showing a character’s reaction to a noise that only appears on the soundtrack when the object producing it is shown, even if the new “noise etiquette” of sound cinema did not forbid the representation of grating, jarring noises.

There are three montages of city life in *Street Scene*, and only one of them is a true audiovisual montage as described by Thompson. The film begins with a sequence of shots establishing the location, the time of day, and the oppressive heat. It is accompanied by a score and is without sound effects. Another such montage appears near the middle of the film and acts as a divider between what were probably acts in the original play. The one audiovisual montage of city noise occurs just before the murder upon which the plot hinges. Diegetic music from one apartment combines with the sounds of street vendors to create a portrait of the neighbourhood’s soundscape. But again the sounds of transport are largely missing, and the cries of the peddlers have a mournful musical quality in keeping with the overall foreboding mood of the scene. These are not the “out-of-control voices” of various ethnicities that Hollywood producers feared putting in films (Crafton 455). Peddlers, with their non-standard American English, had often been targets of anti-noise activists who were motivated as much by nativism as abhorrence for the noise they made (Vaillant 259). Legally, their speech was treated as noise. In *Street Scene*, the peddlers’ speech is handled as noise too, but more as music, one of noise’s idealized forms. Within the technological and aesthetic constraints that govern the use of sound in *Street Scene*, a critique of “nerve-wracking” urban noise would not be as effective as it was in *The Crowd*.

Béla Balázs predicted that the sound film would “teach us to analyze even chaotic noise with our ear and read the score of life’s symphony” (116). By the time he wrote this, the moment in which the cinema could best represent the chaos of noise and its effects, the late silent cinema, had already passed. As a medium of popular entertainment, cinema is compelled to make any social problems it presents palatable to a mass audience. When it came to the problem of urban noise, which was so much a preoccupation of the popular media in the first third of the twentieth century, the silent cinema had the advantage of being able to suggest disturbing noises very familiar to the audience without having to risk repelling the audience with realistic representation. Because of cinema’s synesthetic effect, the shock of a sound-suspense image could be just as effective as a sudden blast of noise, even had the latter been permitted under the emerging sound-cinema conventions. As a means of critiquing urban noise, such sound images were perhaps more effective than sound itself, relying as they do on an intellectual rather than a sensual response. And the sound image had one other benefit for a noise-weary urban audience: as Douglas Kahn wryly notes, “the historical incidence of synesthesia among the arts has produced its own form of noise-abatement” (116).

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