

# Het geluid van gisteren : waarom Amsterdam vroeger ook niet stil was

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# The sound of yesterday: Why Amsterdam wasn't particularly silent in the past

## Summary

This dissertation deals with sound as part of everyday life in the city by zooming in on the case of Amsterdam. The sounds covered in the argument presented here may have been produced deliberately or not; they may have received attention or were largely ignored; and they perhaps triggered uproar or fierce debates, if not concrete actions. My motivation for this focus on urban sound in all its diversity is the following paradoxical situation: although the common view holds that modern cities have increasingly grown noisier due to the expansion, industrialization and technologization of society, (Hendy, 2013, pp. xii-xiii) we still know very little about past sounds in cities or the role of sounds and noise in the everyday life of city residents. At the same time, the very notion that cities have grown noisier all the time assumes a comparative basis in the past. The ongoing emergence of new sources of sound, as well as our limited memory of vanished sources of sound, may seem to justify the claim that life used to be quieter in the old days. As this dissertation will demonstrate, however, it is not enough to pay attention exclusively to sources of sound in order to make claims about the appreciation of sound, be it in the past or the present.

The roots of this study of the urban sounds of Amsterdam can be found in the renewed attention for the role of sounds in our everyday surroundings since the 1970s, when composer and environmental activist Raymond Murray Schafer introduced the concept of 'soundscape'. As such this dissertation belongs to the interdisciplinary field of Sound Studies, which investigates the production and the consumption of music, sound, noise and silence, and the interrelated changes in the course of time and in divergent societies.

My argument in this dissertation starts from a definition of the concept of 'soundscape', which refers both to a world outside of us – all the sounds that permanently surround us – and to the ways in which human beings actively perceive that outside world and give meaning to it. In other words, this study seeks to map the interconnection between the urban sounds produced in a particular era and the meaning attributed to these sounds in daily life. Thereby I have also tried to identify the mechanisms that explain why some sounds receive attention and are potentially declared undesirable (or characterized as noise), while other, seemingly similar sounds are ignored.

To gain insight into the ways and degree in which sounds have played a role in daily life in Amsterdam, I analyzed texts belonging to various nonfiction genres in which the authors address the sounds of this city. Specifically I selected relevant parts from newspaper articles, municipal reports, letters to the editor, travel accounts, published memoirs and unpublished diaries that somehow touch on the city's everyday functioning. Because not all sounds produced in the city are covered in these texts, I also used secondary literature on activities and material aspects of everyday life in Amsterdam. This made it possible to trace which sounds residents or visitors of the city *could* have heard.

This study concentrates on three historical periods of everyday life in Amsterdam of which it is known that many changes occurred with respect to sound: the periods 1875-1895, 1918-1940 and 1940-1945. The final quarter of the nineteenth century was a period in which Amsterdam was marked by rapid population growth, industrialization and technologization; in many ways its urban sounds will have been those of a decidedly 'modern' city. Although initially this trend of expansion and development was sustained during the interwar period (the 1920s and 1930s), the role of sound and noise in discussions about urban life grew much larger at this time. Finally, the Second World War also presents an interesting case-study because the city suddenly had to deal with a host of altogether new sounds, radically altered meanings of sounds as well as the disappearance of familiar sounds.

Another factor in selecting these three periods pertains to the analytical framework applied, which highlights three angles or perspectives: the ecology of sound, the semiotics of sound and the politics of sound. I provide a systematic analysis of each period based on these analytical categories, but I also use my discussion of each of the periods to develop one of these categories in more detail. This tripartite framework allows us to gain a better understanding of the complex and changeable relationship between sound, the meanings of sound and interventions in sound. As regards the sounds of people's everyday living environment, which I refer to as the 'ecology of sound', the focus has been on which contemporary urban sounds were in fact mentioned in texts from the period at hand, which other sources of sound were present as well, and which changes occurred in the nature, number and volume of those sounds. The second dimension of my analytical frame, the 'semiotics of sound', emphasizes the role of the meanings of sound by addressing how urban sounds were discussed and which meanings were attached to it in contemporary texts. The third perspective, the 'politics of sound', focuses on sound as an element of political and social issues. This focus comprises questions about the role of sounds aimed at attracting attention to particular views or situations in some period, or whether particular interventions were proposed and/or implemented to fight the nuisance of urban sounds. Finally, based on the answers to the abovementioned questions and the contemporary discourse about sound – that is, the ways in which sounds and their meanings were described, represented and interpreted – I discuss the interconnection of the sounds produced in the

period at hand, the sounds that received attention or were ignored, and the sounds that triggered particular interventions.

Although this dissertation belongs to the field of Sound Studies, its concerns also cover 'the livability of cities', a theme which receives increasing attention within the field of Urban History. This theme is also center-stage in so-called 'Urban Labs', which in their research of historical and future cities cut across disciplinary boundaries and existing professional practices to pay attention to a large variety of aspects of urban life, including sensory experiences. My study about sound as part of everyday urban life may contribute to this varied work by serving as a supplement to the primarily visual information on urban materiality, while also revealing how auditory 'materiality' has been largely determined by and negotiated in social and cultural processes.

In the period 1875-1895, my first case-study, Amsterdam faced a strong growth of its population, of trade and business, and of new modes of industry, some of which increasingly embraced production processes powered by steam engines. This beefed up business activity also meant more traffic circulation, that is, more pedestrians, handcarts and horse-drawn trucks, trams and carriages on the streets, and occasionally one would even see – and hear – a steam ship on one of the city's waterways. Initially, most of this urban activity took place in what today is the inner city, the area confined by the outer circular canal (the *singelgracht*). This is also where that largest stock of houses was found, even though this confined area could barely accommodate the growing number of urban residents. Large groups of residents lived squeezed together in one-room apartments, which sometimes also doubled as work space. Where this was not the case, people needed to have a job nearby, in a shop or workplace they could easily reach afoot, for there were no bicycles yet, and commuting by tram was too expensive for the average worker.

Against the backdrop of all sorts of bustling activity and the rather miserable living conditions of a substantial share of the local population, texts from this period devote much attention to the human voice, as well as to bells and music, while there is much less attention for sounds of traffic and hardly any attention for the sounds of handwork and industrial activities. The thinking and writing about sound still reflected an older notion of sound: as a phenomenon that started from a fundamental contradiction between music and all other sounds. This is why musical terms played a large role in the jargon, while many of today's words for sounds had another meaning at that time. If words like 'noise' (*lawaaï*) and 'din' (*herrie*) could refer to much sound, they were used in particular to connote a lack of order, utterances of protest, divergent opinions or claptrap. The word 'sound' was often used to refer to a singer's voice: he or she produced a 'nice sound'. And where we would use 'noise' (*lawaaï*), in the years 1875-1895 one used words such as 'buzz' (*gedruisch*) and 'roar' (*geraas*).

The thinking about sound in terms of music and non-music seems to imply that at the time music represented some sort of ideal sound and that all other sounds represented a lesser if not banal quality. In this logic, one is also more likely to gear atten-

tion to voices and musical instruments, the sources of the sounds admired or valued. In this context complaints about less desirable sounds also focused on this type of sources including, for instance, talking voices and carillon music, which kept foreign visitors from sleeping and made them complain about the unmusical ears and voices of the Dutch. Residents of Amsterdam, in turn, mostly complained about the voices and music of the 'lesser people' or 'mob', a segment of the population that ought to be 'compliant and meek'. When they still let themselves be heard – for instance, as 'rough blokes, howling vendors and shouting street urchins' – this was an erosion of the established order and its civilization. This also makes it understandable that the noise of factories was hardly seen as a problem. In fact, it generated little public attention, unlike the 'reprehensible tunes' of the workers. It is relevant here that the gap between working class and bourgeoisie was still substantial during this era. The views and opinions voiced in the available texts were largely those of educated residents or visitors of course, as working-class residents were much less likely to write books or letters to newspapers.

Compared to the late nineteenth century, the discourse on sound and the city took on a quite different character in the interwar period. This period is the focus of the second case-study. In the 1920s and 1930s, sound was increasingly approached from a physical and/or technological angle, as marked by vibration and a certain intensity, as a phenomenon working on the human ear and 'nerves'. During this time, engineers developed several methods and units of measuring sound, including the well-known decibel. In contrast to the late-nineteenth-century discourse on sound, the words 'sound', 'din' and 'street noise' (*straatrumoer*) were now mostly used in ways familiar to us today.

There are several reasons to assume that the sounds of urban traffic have changed significantly since the late nineteenth century. By the 1930s, many streets, for one, were paved with asphalt and wheels came with pneumatic tires. This partly suppressed the noise of moving vehicles. At the same time, however, the horse-drawn trams, cars and carriages had been replaced by electric trams, trucks and cars, while in absolute terms the number of vehicles had significantly gone up. Because all these sources of sound, taken together, contributed to the masking of separate sounds, and much traffic also moved along at greater speeds, many vehicles needed to signal their presence through bells and honking. Also, horses and carriages could still be seen and heard in the city, as was true of handcarts and hawkers. The large pack of bicyclists was new as well by the 1930s; together with the expansion of the tram network, they played a major role in commuter traffic. The intensity of traffic and the much wider spectrum of speeds called for another conduct in traffic and other uses of streets. Way into the 1930s, this process of change was accompanied by much honking and sounding of bells, as well as by much discussion about the need for and meaning and nuisance of such deliberately loud sounds.

What is more, in this period living and working increasingly took place in separate urban quarters. Factories and businesses no longer had to be situated at walking distance, and the city's expansion through annexation of surrounding municipalities gave rise to a band of new, partly suburban neighborhoods around the old inner city. In these new city neighborhoods, local residents, who used to live in the inner city's cramped communities and deplorable houses, lived in more spacious homes and a relatively quieter environment. Furthermore, the rise of prosperity and regulation of labor conditions resulted in an increase of leisure.

In such silence and peacefulness potential sounds were more intrusive, causing noise by neighbors to be a source of irritation much easier. Furthermore, the strict class distinctions gradually receded to the background in favor of a much more diffuse yet also harder to fathom social structure. At this time, popular media such as newspapers and radio frequently reported on the bright and shady sides of America's titillating metropolitan life. In this context undesirable sounds in Amsterdam were no longer connected to the 'mob', but, after the American model, to the 'masses', whose members – through their 'inborn rudeness' – let themselves get carried away by jazz music, improper dancing, cinema and other 'cheap' entertainment. They were perceived, in other words, as loud and noisy people, who were incapable of responsibly handling their radio set, gramophone, motorcycle or car horn.

The Second World War, the third period under study here, announced itself in Amsterdam by the nightly sounds of aircraft and anti-aircraft guns. Moreover, for a large number of residents this noise, together with the air-raid sirens, constituted the most direct experience of war violence in the days prior to the country's surrender. When by 16 May 1940 daily life seemed more or less restored, people were struck by the relative silence in the city; unlike in the prewar period, the noise of cars and buses was now largely absent.

The outbreak of the war had caused abrupt changes in the meaning of particular sounds – the noise of aircraft, for instance, turned into a warning for a potentially life-threatening situation – but the Dutch surrender again gave rise to new meanings. Suddenly, for example, the anti-aircraft guns were aimed at 'friendly forces' rather than the 'enemy'. This caused people to listen differently, even if the noise itself or the dangers involved may have been quite similar.

The sounds of war activities also gave rise to new expressions: the anti-aircraft guns 'barked' (*blaft*) or 'blared' (*tettert*) and the sirens 'shrieked' (*loeien*) and 'wailed' (*huilen*). The discourse about urban sounds changed as abruptly as the meaning of particular sounds, even if there was no change in the physical nature of the sound or the jargon used to describe it. The noises of traffic, which during the interwar era gave rise to much discussion and complaining, were now dearly missed as a sign of better days. Likewise, neighborly noise was no longer reason for complaining. It rather served as a reassuring sign of the neighbors' presence, or, in a situation where neighbors willingly or unwillingly posed a risk, as a major source of information. As the war

progressed, the silence in the city became a sign of the involuntary leaving of many Jewish residents and the uncertain fate awaiting them. Aside from the loud noises of aircraft, anti-aircraft guns, sirens and shooting, then, silence evolved into a quite intense 'sound' of war as well.

Adults, sometimes much to their surprise, proved capable of adapting to the sounds of war swiftly, but for youngsters and children the powerful noise of anti-aircraft guns, explosions and sirens continued to be frightening. Most city residents did not welcome the German presence, and this also applied to the sounds accompanied with it. As a result, these were either ignored in the discourse or characterized through words such as shouting, yelling or clamor. Apart from this form of 'politics of sound', whereby normative language was used to describe a situation or conduct one loathed, both sides deployed music to practice politics during the war. While parties linked to the Germans organized musical performances and parades in town, for many local residents the national anthem and other music associated with Dutch identity became a sign of resistance and self-affirmation.

The three historical case-studies about the sounds of Amsterdam reveal that we cannot well understand the influence of changes on everyday urban life in the past from the perspective of the soundscape we inhabit today. In 'bridging' our distance to historical soundscapes and their role in everyday life, the analytical frame applied in this study serves as a productive tool. It throws more light on the specific historical relations between the material aspects of the soundscape (ecology of sound), the interventions in sound (politics of sound) *and* the meanings involved (semiotics of sound). The meaning attached to silence in the 1920s and 1930s, for example, changed in the subsequent war, which makes it understandable that the noise of car traffic, which used to give rise to lots of complaining, was desperately missed by residents during the war. Similarly, the increasing complaints about neighborly noise during the interwar period did not logically follow from a growing population density in the city, but should be seen in the light of the fact that for the first time a large segment of the local population lived in more spacious, quiet suburban neighborhoods.

A comparison of the three cases reveals that it would be wrong to assume that population growth, industrialization and technologization will automatically lead to 'more' sound, and hence to an increase of complaints about sound. Moreover, the complaints voiced do not need to be tied directly to the sounds produced by more people, machines and workplaces. Despite the growing industrialization and technologization of Amsterdam during the years 1875-1895 and the interwar period, the increased noise of machines and industry failed to generate much attention as of yet.

If we compare the results of this study with the role of sounds and noise in our own era, it strikes one that today complaints about noise tend to be no longer connected to a moral sense of the erosion of order and decency by society's marginalized forces or to overstimulation of the urban residents' nervous system resulting from irresponsible behavior by the immoderate man in the crowd; rather, they are linked to

the exposure to detrimental influences that make people ill and are costly to boot. Such comparative approach to complaints about noise – covering, in this instance, the late nineteenth century, the interwar period and our own time – is interesting because it underscores that in each period a limited number of sounds is associated with largely abstract and uncontrollable threats and dangers. In the Second World War, ‘silence’ proved to have such function, symbolizing a threat or sense of danger because of the absence of familiar urban sounds or because the uncertainty of the moment was thus stressed.

This dissertation has shown that in the course of nearly a century and a half much has changed when it comes to the sounds of Amsterdam, but that it is not possible to understand these changes simply in terms of more or less urban silence, or more or less noise. Every era has sounds of its own, and words of its own to describe these sounds, as well as its own ways of expressing complaints about noise or articulating views on silence. Silence may connote an oppressive sound of war but also a melancholy sense of loss for a city that used to be lively and vigorous. For this reason, claims that cities grow ever noisier or that their sounds get ‘worse’ all the time need to be largely understood as a rhetorical strategy for expressing discontent with the present.