ABSTRACT
By mixing industrial, metallic sounds and organic, throaty sounds, *Kitchen Sink* creates an acoustic universe which is at once repulsive and alluring. The article takes a phenomenological and deep listening approach to investigate how the soundtrack of *Kitchen Sink* contributes to the ambiguous narrative of the film.

KEYWORDS
soundtrack
hyperrealism
hi-fi soundscape
music
sound effects
narrative

A soundtrack between allurement and repulsion

Gentle and threatening tones
*Kitchen Sink* is not easy to grasp, either as genre or as narrative. On www.nzonscreen.com it is identified as drama/fantasy and there are also obvious intertextual and aesthetic references to the black and white *kitchen sink realism* of the sixties. However, in this short article I will try to show how the soundtrack of the film contributes to the experience of *Kitchen Sink*, for both the female protagonist and the viewer, as a negotiation between the alluring and repulsive, which I believe is a main theme of the film.

It is difficult to draw a line between music and sound effects and between real and artificial sounds in *Kitchen Sink*. The entire soundtrack is experienced as a unified whole developed and structured in time, and distinctions made in what follows between music and sound effects are mere constructions serving an analytic purpose. I define music as tones and/or rhythms that are repeated systematically as a distinct part of the soundtrack. Sound effects, on the other hand, occur in isolation and unsystematically, often in a more direct relation to the physical events that are visually enacted.
The first sounds in the film are a set of distant industrial booms mixed with a gong sound which pulses behind an airy human whistling motif, which reminds me of Ennio Morricone’s theme from the *The Good, The Bad & The Ugly* (1966). This musical theme bridges the opening credits and the kitchen sink (Shot 1), where the sound of running water is added. The flute is light and its carefree tone contrasts with the sombre booms, resulting in an ambiguous expression. The music stops when the woman spots the string in the plughole.

The second musical motif emerges from the long shock-scream effect (Shots 36-38): a wooden, natural sound of hollow bamboo pipes blowing in the wind, creating tone clusters in organic waves like gobbling turkeys. The theme is calm and relaxed after the intense shock of the scream, but the fateful, pulsating gong of the opening motif is still present underneath. This motif is only heard once, but if you listen carefully you can hear fragments of it during the next theme as well.

While the camera is zooming into the woman’s bag (Shot 46), a third musical theme emerges, sounding like a working piston engine. This sound composition comes to symbolize the churning thoughts in the woman’s head, since the visuals show us how she is trying to concentrate on her book while her eyes keep wandering to the rubbish bin where the creature has been placed. The rhythm of the “engine” is supplied by various shrill and squeaking sound effects, and it stops when she dumps the lifeless creature into the bathtub (Shot 51). After a rather long silent section, where only the few words from her telephone conversation are heard, this theme recurs when she returns to the bathroom and sees the big hairy body in the tub (Shot 65). This second time, the use of sound effects is more extensive and more rhythmically intense and Kiri Te Kanawa’s soprano voice is briefly used as a ghostly effect (see Alison Maclean’s comment at http://www.nzonscreen.com/title/kitchen-sink-1989/background).

The fourth, most profound and most “recognizable-as-music” theme is heard for the first time halfway through the film at the crucial point in the narrative where the general mood of the film becomes gentler. A flute melody with accompanying chords slowly grows while the woman is shaving the creature’s body. It begins very simply and calmly with just the flute, but develops through the night, becoming richer, rougher and
more threatening in the accompaniment, as the woman and creature lie side by side in the bed (Shot 97). Birdsong and the morning light finally supplant the unpleasant music and atmosphere. The second time we hear this musical theme is in the film’s other intimate scene (Shot 143). When the man and woman’s tender advances culminate in the kiss (Shot 145), a smooth clarinet-like melody is added to the theme which reduces the flute to a part of the accompaniment. As happened the first time, the theme develops from tenderness to a noisier, more threatening and more unstable mood during the kiss and when the woman finds the hair stubble in the man’s neck (Shots 146-150). The music is abruptly stopped by his scream when she pulls the string from his neck, but the theme returns during the final credits.

To summarize the musical themes’ narrative and aesthetic function, the first two themes simultaneously combine the calm and alluring (moving slowly with organic sounds of whistling and bamboo pipes) and the threatening (booms and fateful gongs). Theme number three is more unambiguously unpleasant and repulsive, with an aggressive rhythm and scary sound effects. When tenderness becomes a part of the narrative, the unpleasantness is something that emerges from the pleasant in theme four.

**Hyperrealistic sound effects**

Along with the more or less “musical” compositions, we hear a range of isolated sound effects: scuffing, squeaking, gurgling, crackling. Some of these are diegetic sounds which are perceived as issuing from sources in the physical universe of the story, such as the sound of squeaking taps or plastic bags, or the sound of the razor against hairy skin. Other sounds are non-diegetic: sound effects added to create a scary mood or shock effects. Some sounds operate between these categories, like the sound of squeaking leather when we see the string rubbing against the skin of his neck in the final scene (Shot 157). This sound is so obviously exaggerated that it is more likely to be perceived as a sound effect than as a realistic sound. In Shots 124-137, the crackling sound of the plastic bag imperceptibly evolves into the sound of rupturing finger bones as the visuals change.

The sound aesthetic of *Kitchen Sink* can be described as hyperrealism, the manipulation of sounds that we know from our shared environment (realism) in ways that
make them somehow exaggerated or excessive (hyper). In Kitchen Sink the most exaggerated quality is the sound of friction. All sounds are in essence a result of friction between two objects: the pressure of air against the human vocal chords, rubber against asphalt, bow against string, etc. (Have 2008). Examples of exaggerated friction sounds in Kitchen Sink occur when we hear the string’s resistance on the man’s skin, the crackling plastic bags and the slurping sounds of the vacuum in the kitchen sink. This exaggeration and the way the sounds seem to be mixed in close proximity to our ears, makes them intrusive in an almost physically unpleasant way, which holds our attention. An intense aesthetic presence is created by the materiality communicated by the sound structures. The tactile and material qualities of the sounds can be described as tactile anaphones, meaning sounds that are experienced as a kind of physical touch (Tagg 2001).

A recurring motif in connection with this hyperrealistic exaggeration of friction is the sound of water or wetness (which is also a visual theme). We hear slurping and slopping in the drains, in the bathtub, when the woman is dipping the razor, from the throats of both characters, etc. Some are familiar pleasant sounds of water while others are unidentifiable and repulsive splatter sounds.

The final sound effect of the film has an important narrative function. The man’s last prolonged scream grows into an undefinable earthquake-like sound (matching the small “skin volcano” in the visuals). First this sound contracts in synch with the screen going black, only to explode subsequently while the screen remains black. Thus the visuals end before the soundtrack does, leaving the film with an invisible open ending. What is the source of this agonizing sound? What is happening?

The soundtrack of Kitchen Sink is a hi-fi soundscape, referring to Schafer’s concept from his soundscape theory (Schafer 1994). Most of the sounds stand out distinctly and as if our ears are extremely close to the sound sources. This is also true of the music mixing. But though the sounds’ acoustic qualities are distinct and clear, the information they communicate as a whole can be ambiguous. Like the man, the sound design is attractive and real, but also repulsive and surreal: at one and the same time, both recognizable and yet exaggerated and unexpected.
REFERENCES
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Main research interest is music and sound as aesthetic and communicative devices in public media. I address questions about how reality, knowledge and emotions are realized, mediated and experienced through sound and music in audio-visual media. Among my publications are *Lyt til TV/Listening to Television* (2008), “Aestheticizing Politics. Non-verbal Political Communication in Danish Television Documentaries” (2008), “Background Music and Background Feelings - background music in audio-visual media” (2008) and “Underlægningsmusik i dokumentariske politikerportrætter” / "Underscore Music in Documentary Portraits of Politicians" (2009).