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## **Doing things with Sound**

*The Reflexive Intentionality of the Ultra-local in the Practice of Peter Laugesen*

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# Doing things with Sound: The Reflexive Intentionality of the Ultra-local in the Practice of Peter Laugesen.

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**In the following, I am exploring the 'ultra-local' positions in the practice of the (Aarhus, Denmark) poet and artist Peter Laugesen. I am arguing that Laugesen is systematically doing things with sound to create a feed-back of the 'ultra-local' vicinity of Aarhus, Denmark. Furthermore, I am arguing that this ultra-local practice of doing things with sound could be seen as a post-human phenomenology that Laugesen is performing.**

*Ultra-local, Sound Practices, Post-human, Phenomenology, Peter Laugesen.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Post-human phenomenology is concerned with the situations where the lifeworld of human beings is becoming crowded with devices that have intentionalities of their own. These devices shape our experiences and dealings with the world where not only humans, but things (including technological and digital apparatuses) have relations to each other – and to humans. According to Peter-Paul Verbeek, Philosophical reflection is not enough to explore and understand this new 'posthuman condition.' Thus, post-human phenomenology presents itself on three levels of intentionality-of-things, of things that do:

Augmented, constructive and reflexive, where the reflexive intentionality is 'technology [...] directed at the ways in which humans are directed at reality, in order to let human beings, experience themselves as experienter' (Verbeek, 2008, p.7).

Verbeek makes the point that the posthuman condition and the intentionality-of-things are especially traceable in artistic practices:

It is the artists who show us the way', rather than the philosopher or theoretician, because artists are 'experimenting with what is going on and confronting us with this in an experiential rather than a discursive way.' (Verbeek, 2008, p. 2).

In the following, I am tracing this post-human condition in the practice of Peter Laugesen – and argue that, through his practice, emerge a reflexive intentionality-of-ultra-local-things. Here, the hidden streets or quarters of Brabrand, a city in the

provinces of Denmark as hidden and 'out-of-the-way' places. This reflexive doing of a reality is mostly sound-based - augmented through ultra-local soundscapes, dialects and the (de)construction of well-known genres (here seen as expressions of poetic intentionalities) of Jazz, Beat, Pop, Rock and Punk. The ultra-local sound and deconstruction of genres, and the reflexive intentionality of things is further reflected through the notion (from Kierkegaard) of an 'Ironic mediacy' and the construction of the aesthetic as a double feed-back loop - directing humans toward a reality, and humans back to human – experiencing themselves as experiencers..

## 2. THE ULTRA-LOCAL

The origin of the term 'ultra-local' is uncertain, but it most probably stems from atomic physics, where it is used as a metaphor to describe the particles that are 'nearby' each other in the atomic structure (and which never have a precise, but only a 'probable' location). From this a number of metaphorical and philosophical uses are drawn:

The ultra-local has been used in urban planning theory as a metaphor to describe 'a finer grained neighbourhood unit than is usually implied by the term 'local'...', then the ultra-local...

... would be a neighbourhood between Arterial and Sub-Arterial Roads, uncomplicated by broader metropolitan mobility demands, perhaps even a neighbourhood bounded by Collector Roads.' (Scott-Carver, 2014)

According to Lars Bang-Larsen, the ultra-local is first and foremost based on that which is not unique

or perceivable; not presented in the names or images of a culture; it is what comes before and after, what he terms as 'the official ontologies':

You can say that the ultra-local has to do with what you make of a place, and less with its official ontologies. There are ultra-locales within the metropolis as well as in the wasteland; specifically constituted and singularly connected, multiple time-spaces that produce uniquely and resist translation and representation. The ultra-local is not what makes a locale unique or perceivable: it is both above and below the landscape or the cityscape, and something prior or posterior to the names and images with which we identify them. It calls for new cartographies and other types of navigation that are based on the realization that no centre holds and that no overview is possible. (Lars-Bang Larsen, 2015)

In a seemingly 'invented quote' by Michel de Montaigne, the surrealist artist and painter Salvador Dalí referred to the ultra-local as an alternative route or deviation leading to 'the universal', "Aller à l'universel par l'ultralocal" (Lars-Bang Larsen, 2015). Here, the ultra-local appears to be part of an artistic tactic much in-line with a surrealist aesthetics, with the purpose to confuse.

From the ultra-local, then, emerge some different, unconventional and altogether unexpected layers of materiality and meaning. In the following I will show that the ultra-local cartographies include the technologies that are mapping out post-human territories in Brabrand – and that those territories play into the post-human setting and urgent reflexive intentionality of Peter Laugesen's poetry.

### 3. IRONIC MEDIACY

To develop, and refine, the notion of the ultra-local further, and position it near to the intentionality-of-things, I am revisiting Søren Kierkegaard's notion of ironic mediacy. In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard introduces the conceptual idea of 'concrete' and 'abstract' medium: The most concrete medium being that which is most literal (closest to language); and the most abstract being that which is farthest removed from language, i.e. the abstract idea mediated in the perfect abstract form: sound (and music, as organised sound).

As an example, Kierkegaard presents the ultra-aesthetic moment of Mozart as the example of the use of the abstract medium, sound, and how it turns into a work of art, through aesthetic representation and expression of organised sounds, into music:

... the only medium that can present it is music. Music has an element of time in itself but nevertheless does not take place in time except

metaphorically. It cannot express the historical within time. In Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, we have the perfect unity of this idea and its corresponding form... its idea is altogether musical in such a way that the music does not help along as accompaniment but discloses its own innermost nature as it discloses the idea... (Søren Kierkegaard, 1845).

Music is thus the result of doing things with sounds, which makes it possible to abstract expressions from the concrete medium of language, its meaning and grammar. But it also makes it possible to operate with the relationship between the materiality of the sound and the mediated representation of that sound. This relationship relies on the interplay of the intentionalities of a (non-human) material reality and a very human reality of sensuous experience, which may only be partial and never 'complete' (and thus, 'ironic' in the sense of Kierkegaard – keeping us from 'existence'). As most of Kierkegaard's early writings, *Stages...* is mediated by a pseudonym and thus is poetic, if not in form, then in communicative intention and content. The act of writing becomes the medium of uncertain speculations served in a veil of poetic ideas that do not, however, reveal themselves in any distinct aesthetic way (even though Kierkegaard is writing about it in the lines of the book).

Thereby, I would claim that the true ironic shaping of form and content in *Stages...* creates a third, albeit veiled mediated situation akin to the abstractness of music: Underneath the immediacy of music abstraction, the act of writing enters into a mediacy of existence that cannot be written or communicated in words. Thus, the writing subject, if and when it tries to avoid bourgeois conventionalism (which it always should, according to Kierkegaard), is caught in a self-ironic flight, when it (as a singing bird) soars to escape from conservatism also distances itself from (facing) realities. Therefore, irony is a selfish albeit a necessary method, since it leads to what Kierkegaard characterizes as a 'deep poetry', a poetry without or before words, more akin to biological cycles than language:

Irony is selfish (it combats philistinism and yet it remains within it as the individual like the singing bird lifts up, soars in to the air, throwing off some burdens little by little whereby it is running the danger of ending with a 'selfish-to-hell-with-it-all'; because irony has not yet killed itself by seeing itself, as when the individual sees itself in the light of irony.). (Kierkegaard, 1837).

This, I would claim, speaks to the unique poetic iteration of the reflexive intentionality-of-things, which are at play in the ultra-local experiential practice of Peter Laugesen.

In what follows, the of generative sound situations of Danish provinces, life cycles and -actions, the ironic mediacy of poetic practice in an ultra-global (and ultra-mediated) age is framing (I am claiming here) the reflexive post-human intentionality of the ultra-local in the practice of Peter Laugesen. Things are doing things with sound, which is doing things with poetry, readers of which are having an experience of experiencing.

#### 4. DOING THINGS WITH SOUND

As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, Verbeek is pointing towards art practice as a non-philosophical medium of post-human intentionality. Indeed, it would be possible to detect all three levels of post-human intentionality – the augmented, the constructed and the reflexive – through cases of artists working directly with technologies in one way or the other, and where technological media is the medium of aesthetics, conditioning the representation. However, I would argue that it is possible, in the case of Peter Laugesen, to trace non-human intentionality even in artistic practices where technological apparatuses are omitted or only hinted at in the final expression.

The intentionality-of-things-and-apparatuses is part of an everyday life-world setting, devices or electronic media weaved into the fabric of our socio-cultural context. Here, I claim, the ultra-local becomes the site of practices of post-human intentionality.

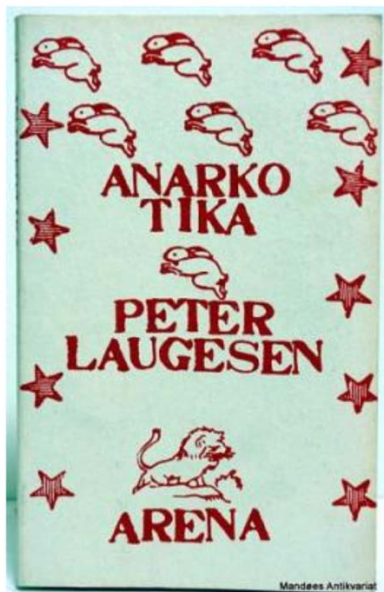


Fig. 1. Peter Laugesen, *Anarkotika*, Front Matter. (Screen Shot)

From his early practice starting around 1962, Peter Laugesen 'mediates' words ironically on different levels and in different ways, in many different media and across various genres. He is experimenting with spontaneous writing techniques, using writing machines of different categories (typewriters, stenographic apparatuses, etc), which should be seen as a step away from, and deconstruction of, subjective intentionality in his practice. Instead, it is possible to see a rudimentary reflexive intentionality at play, searching for adequate ways to experiencing the experiencer-of-writing-machine-text. An early example of this is the 'automatic writing' book with the para-symbolic and meta-poetic title, *Anarkotika* (Anarcotics):

Dear friend, what can I say, there is nothing to say, all things go without saying, it goes without saying that it is automatic, but still it does not know what it is, to put it this way with words. How can I find no words to say it like it is, with the left index finger resting on Ee all the time, the right dancing around on many more keys [tangent]. / Dear friend, in many ways, we will always be far apart. (Laugesen, 1975)

This passage strikes a chord running through Laugesen's entire production; a 'dance around' the many ways words and the intentions behind them are mediated (and revealed, as intentions), which (in the poem, as well as in the reading of it) places them 'far apart' from the world or reality and things that 'goes without saying'.

Furthermore, the passage demonstrates, how doing things with words doing things with things emerge as a sonic surface of where the intentionalities implied in the semantics and phenomenological layers of the text. This is where ultra-local sounds become the (ironic) medium of an augmented non-human intent, expressing that which it is not even possible to express (and those things that do in fact go without saying/language). But, more than that: on the typewriter, the apparatus of language and intentionality, the world is distant and obfuscated, yet seems tangible by proxy: the keys ('tangent', in Danish, which also refers to 'the tangential', or an 'off topic' projection of meaning) are another level of ultra-local intentionality performing in sound and a bodily mechanics, hitting the keys with his index fingers.

Here, doing things with sound may be seen as the causality of pressing the keys of the typewriter and in the 'automated' processes of making words as effects of that causality. The typewriter is indeed a 'writing machine' in the sense of Katherine Hayles, making a 'human document', or 'humument' which, 'interrogates the material properties of the book, and operationalizes them as resources of

signification', and emerge as 'technotext'. (Hayles, 2002)

However, the technotext of Laugesen is situated in the ultra-local environment through the sound as material property from the index fingers striking the type-writer keys.

In his practice in the 90s, 00s and 10s, the computer will add several more layers of doing things with ultra-local sound, using the keystroking and tapping on several other kinds of 'writing machines', staging the construction of a reflexive intentionality, which resonates the mechanical. The most important sonic 'writing machines', however, is that of the live performances and recordings with the bands Mindspray and Singvogel.

##### 5. REFLEXIVE INTENTIONALITY PERFORMED: MINDSPRAY & SINGVOGEL

Probably the best example of this reflexive intentionality practice, where a machine reality does things with sound, is Mindspray. As a band-construction, Mindspray builds on the premise of situating words in a generative interaction between keystrokes, rhythm, genres, tempo, and the experiential levels of audience as self-listeners. The inspiration from Beat poetry is evident in both the style of presentation and the jazzy instrumentation of Mindspray.

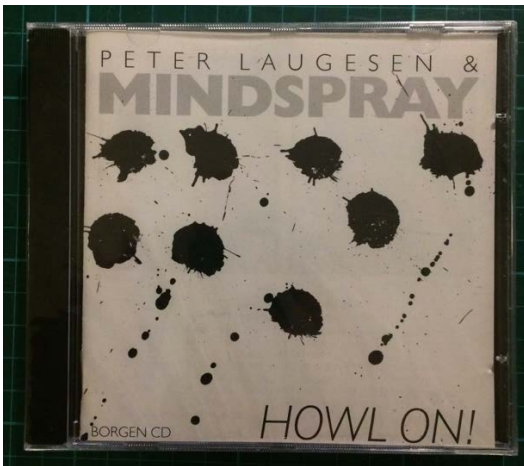


Fig 2. Peter Laugesen & Mindspray. Howl On! Album Cover (Screen shot).

However, this 'Beat'-style is cut-up and deconstructed by the ultra-local soundscapes that Laugesen inhabits and roam; the sounds-of-machines and apparatuses resonate with the those of the local vicinities of Denmark. When performing the album 'Howl On!' (at Glyptoteket in Copenhagen, 17 and 18 September 1999), one witness describes this experience as a 'sonic force-feeding' of the Howl, in which the experiencer let himself 'be seduced by the suggestive, almost monotonous rhythmical readings and the cool

distance to its own love for a (distant) world...'. (Andersen (2002))

In The film 'Nattegn' (nightpass), Peter Laugesen & Mindspray (2006) portrays the parallel between writing machines and ultra-local sound performances in words and rhythms in a number of mixed media performances. The film begins with a shot from an almost darkened room creating a 'shabby' image, which turns out to be of Laugesen himself. He moves in and out of focus as a rhythm slowly takes over and the lyrics grow out from behind the instrument's ambiance. 'A poem is a form of dance for the eyes and ears', Peter Laugesen states in what appears to be an implied reference to 'Anarkotika's' dance of index fingers.

Mindspray literally sprays the ultra-local onto the minds of the experiencer, looping intentionality from apparatuses to humans to apparatuses to the world, reconstructing realities as a maze of noises and after-images. In this maze, Laugesen and the audience are reflected, as post-minds (that are a little lost).

This experiential layer of the consequences of a post-human world is even further developed when Peter Laugesen begins performing with Singvogel around 2001 (which is best described as an ultra-local jazz / noise / electronic / punkish / rockish band). Apart from carrying possible (yet unclear) connotations to Romantic aesthetics, a singvogel, in the ultra-local context of Peter Laugesen's practice, connotes an automated singing bird. According to Kierkegaard, form and content work close together in the construction of aesthetic experience, but this constructive principle leads to an existential problem of how reality is then 'mediated' and, indeed, accessible – to humans. this 'aesthetic deportment' is especially urgent in poetry, since it "... deals with immediacy and cannot therefore think an ambiguous situation..." (Kierkegaard, 1845).

It would be possible, I think, to see this critique of ironic mediacy (epitomized in the automated singing bird) as reflected in the ultra-local 'reflexive intentionality' in the practice of Peter Laugesen and Singvogel. The ironic mediation fed-back into itself in sonic and noisy loops.

Thus, the practice of Peter Laugesen and Singvogel, in an uncanny dialogue with Kierkegaard it seems, is revealing irony as a selfish, ultra-humanistic 'trap', where reflexivity is a twisted self-reflexivity (see quote above).

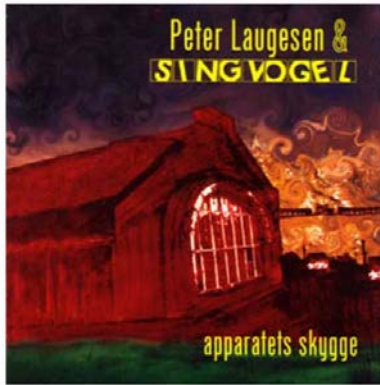


Fig. 3. Peter Laugesen & Singvogel, *Apparatets Skygge*, Album Cover (Screenshot)

That the effects of this appear urgent to Laugesen is particularly evident on the album 'The Shadow of the Apparatus' (*Apparatets skygge*) from 2005. "The voice of the crow is blue like coal / the squirrel is red like rust / the language dust in a distant city / like the laundry in a backpack." The title-track creates an image of an empty city without any humans and where the language goes completely blank, without any references (or mediacy, and thus without irony). The beats of the band produce the sound of a train drumming over the rails. And it is precisely the train in which the poet is a passenger who looks at the desert-like city outside the window. A reflexive intentionality-of-things receives a voice in the shadow of the apparatuses and takes a further step away from pretentious representation and pointing-things-out.

The ultra-local sounds and materiality, sound-of-things and apparatuses, then, appears as a countermove to ironic mediacy, in the practice of Peter Laugesen. *Mindspray* and *Singvogel*, indeed the various writing machines from Laugesen's debut until today, are not pointing semiotically or self-reflecting existentially, but seeking the death of irony in the relationship between things, apparatuses and humans. They are resonances of an ultra-local post-humanity.

## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, I have argued that the poetry of Peter Laugesen should be seen as a reflexive reaction to an ultra-local environment that does things with sound, tracing reality in the probable vicinity of the intentionality-of-things. The somewhat hidden streets or quarters of a Danish suburb (Brabrand), or the provinces of Denmark as hidden and 'out-of-the-way' places, are ultra-localities that Laugesen live by. With Verbeek as catalyst, I am arguing that this can be seen as a practice of reflexive intentionality, operating as a post-human phenomenology of things that are resonating in and with the ultra-local environments. I am arguing further that the reflexivity of this intentionality-of-

things is made operational as 'poems' primarily by letting things-do-things-with-sound, ranging from writing machine to the performative projections and rhythms of *Mindspray* and *Singvogel*, circulating interpretations of Jazz, Beat, Rock and Punk as aesthetic resonances of post-humanity, beyond 'ironic mediacy'.

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