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Mics in the ears: how to ask people in Cairo to talk about their sound universes (Egypt)

Vincent Battesti¹

Abstract

The sound dimension of is an essential component of the appreciation of a Cairo neighborhood by its users. The ethnography of sound ambiances received and produced in Cairo (Egypt) must first of all be methodical. To get closer to Cairenes' everyday experience of the city sound ambiances, and to deal with one of the major difficulties of working on sensory experience as social anthropologists, an original experiment is under way. Various inhabitants made a georeferenced routine trip equipped with binaural microphones. The goal is for users of public space to put sound events or soundscapes (be they received or produced) into words, for a better understanding of specific markers of sensorial universes.

¹ This chapter uses and summarizes in part work published in French (Battesti 2013), with the permission of its editors J. Candau and M.-B. Le Gonidec.



Figure 1: Traffic hum in Wast al-Balad, Downtown Cairo, April 21st, 2011, 07:10 pm (Vincent Battesti).

Introduction

Amazed to hear the vibrant and bustling sound ambiance of the Egyptian capital, it seemed to me a surprisingly overlooked aspect of Cairo urban life.

Document 1: Recorded ambiance in front of the Azbakiyya Park, by al-ʿUyūyū, Downtown Cairo, April 14th, 2011 at 3:25 pm (recorded by Vincent Battesti)

An ethnography of local sound ambiances received and produced in Cairo is possible (Battesti 2009, 2013), and sound studies taught us the necessity for close observations of these neglected dimensions of our relationship—which is first of all sensorial—to the ecological and social environment. To understand local ways of dealing with sound matter in the everyday life

requires first being methodical, by setting up an ethnological analytic grid, and then by improving ethnological survey tools, as the main resistance to the study is to gather relevant verbalizations.

How to tackle the idea of an “acoustic community” (Truax 1978), if one makes sense in Cairo? As a social anthropologist, my interest focused on the everyday experience of the Cairene people with the sound environment of their city. To explore these experiences, I tried out a set of tools. Observations and interviews met the pitfalls of studies of the senses—the difficulty for the informants to verbalize this part of their life. When we get more specific about sounds or ambiances of the city—this word “ambiance” is relevant, “*gaw*” in Egyptian Arabic, as it is a key-notion for understanding the local practices and mobility of its inhabitants (Battesti & Puig 2011)—, the judgments tend to be summed up in mere polarized hedonistic terms. A more efficient way was the “aural postcard experiment”, kind of “reactivated listening” (Augoyard 2001). I used sound ambiances I recorded in different neighborhoods, and informants, while listening with headphones, had to comment them. It was interesting, not because they were able to localize precisely the recording—most of the time they could not—but because they informed me of their own categories of the sound-city: for example what a “*šaeabi*” (popular) neighborhood should sound like, or what the sound key-elements of a place are. But still, this aural postcard remains steeped in the researcher’s culture (it is a montage), and the difficulty of capturing the intimate experience of a sound city remains: it has to be seized *in situ*. The commented-walk method (Thibaud 2001)—a walk recorded by the investigator with an informant describing (while walking) the sound and his impressions—could offer some results,

but, because too artificial, would miss the very everyday interactions of the informant with his socioecological environment. It is the reason Nicolas Puig and I set up the idea of “mics in the ears”: a mix of the two former methods. Binaural mics in informant’s ears record the most possible intimate exposure to sound ambiance during a routine alone trip. This chapter will firstly present the grid I offered to use in order to document the social nature of the sound ambiance—it will help also to give an insight into the peculiar Cairo ambiances—, and then a short presentation and some early results of the “mics in the ears” protocol and its contribution to our knowledge of the various social experiences of Cairo sound ambiances.

Hypothesis

Let’s recall that considering a unique sensorial dimension seems a bit mistaken: the sensorial experience—from a physiological, social, and perceptual standpoint—is ruled by the combinative nature of the senses (see Candau 2010). This sacrifice is nonetheless necessary in order to isolate some potential sociological features of hearing. Listening or hearing is anything but “natural”: it is not sufficient to possess functioning ears. It is about organizing and understanding, consciously or not, the various signals from a wavelength phenomenon from our environment that meets the ear, and from there, the brain. We do not hear the sound waves; we receive them, and “hear” a brain processed signal. Our hearing equipment is “distorted” in the way all our sensorial equipment results from an education: we learn to perceive, by limiting or increasing the possibilities of our sensoriality. This is part of our personal history, our education and learning, and our social conformation: because learning to “feel” the environment is first

done with others, with our own different social groups. This organization of senses is therefore social (Corbin 1990), and evolves with social changes.

Every social group defines the arrangement of sensory filters, or, to be more precise, the presence or absence of perception, the balance among senses, the qualification of perceptions (value, good taste/distaste, discomfort, pleasure, etc.).

My position is that sound ambiance is not only ambient sound. This study on Cairo starts from the premise that the sound ambiance of a place is indeed the result of the activities taking place there (passive definition), a side effect, but also a collective and—more or less—voluntary construction by producers of sound phenomena (active definition). Then, this study assumes that people of Cairo do live in different sensorial universes. Consequently, the main hypothesis is the existence of a social sound structure. Sound ambiances (produced and received) of the urban fabric and the qualities they inherited are organized according to the “strong and sound” social structure of urban Egyptian society.

In order to demonstrate this, and to ascertain that sound ambiances are social productions and do not appear by mere coincidence, I used an analytical grid elsewhere (Battesti 2009), which proves the possibility of an anthropological hold over this intangible dimension of day-to-day urban life. This chapter presents only a summary of this four-rubric analytical grid, which is partially inspired by an ethnomusicologist’s work (Feld 1984: who used six partly different rubrics).

An analytical Grid

This patchy and improvable grid is simply a tool to test the social readability of sound ambiances, through the competence, the form, the production, and the views expressed about the sound environment.

The competence

I differentiate between the competence to listen to and the competence to produce sound ambiance.

There are two ways to listen to urban sound environment, although they often coexist and work simultaneously: a competence of natural listening and a competence of discriminative listening. Both are “ordinary listening”, according to Schaeffer (Chion 1983), who contrasts it with the “reduced listening”². In natural or discriminative listening the sound is a vehicle allowing us to reach other objects, while, in “reduced listening”, our intention targets the sound object for its own sake and not the values it carries or suggests. At any rate, immersed in Cairo urban life, with no real option to escape from its sound dimension (“earlids” do not exist in the way eyelids do), people give meanings to the sound objects or phenomena they hear: are they the sound expression of a street wedding of a popular neighborhood or a political demonstration downtown, both electro-amplified? “Natural listening” allows a comprehensive listening, and the competence is that capacity to recognize sound indices and signs as a meaningful whole. The

² “*Écoute réduite*”, named in this way in reference to the notion of phenomenological reduction (*epoche*).

reality of sound signatures of the diverse territories of this socially hierarchical city is obvious for any urban dweller. However, the competence is acquired. This signature is analyzable; it is possible to discriminate among the dozens or hundreds of different sounds, identified or not, composing this sound ambiance. Yet, the meaning here is given by comprehensive listening, and not by each one of its sound components (as also asserted by *Gestaltpsychologie*). With the “aural postcard experiment” (a kind of acousmatic experiment), Cairenes can determine not always by name, but at least the type of neighborhood that I previously recorded, and which they are listening to in their headphones. In doing so, they offer an *ex-post* typology of Cairo neighborhoods. The comprehensive listening allows them to identify a set of sounds with a place, but when they have to objectivize their answers, pressed by me to justify them, the experimental subjects put some chosen sounds or sound effects forward.

Listening to a busy evening in downtown Cairo, it will be for instance the density of car horns or the hawkers’ cries and especially the newspapers sellers (“*al-Ahrām, al-Akhbār, al-Gumhūriyya!*”—the three major Egyptian titles).

Document 2: Walk between Talaat Harb square and Sherif Basha street, Downtown Cairo, November 4th, 2009, 7:45 pm. (Recorded by Vincent Battesti).

Listening to a differently busy shopping street of the old Fatimid neighborhood of Darb al-Aḥmar, the relevant sound effects noticed were the *šibšib* (flip-flops) dragged through the dust, the familiar or offhand manners people address each other, the usual greetings used among

acquaintances (which signals territories of acquaintanceship, unlike anonymous strolling territories of Downtown).

Document 3: Same day, about one hour later, walk between Bebani square and ḥara al-Meemār, Darb al-Aḥmar, Old Islamic Cairo, November 4th, 2009, 9:05 pm. (Recorded by Vincent Battesti).

Some sounds can signal quite certainly an urban area type: the “*roba vekkiyya!*” (from the Italian *roba vecchia*, old things) cry of the ragman/junk gatherer that reverberates between the high apartment buildings to reach the last floors (to inform he’s picking up any junk) is only possible in a bourgeois neighborhood.

Document 4: “*Roba vekkiyya!*” cry of the ragman/junk gatherer in the street, recorded from the 7th floor of a Haussmannian-like building, in an pedestrian area, Downtown Cairo, November 6th, 2009, 8:57 am (Recorded by Vincent Battesti).

Obviously, a competence for discrimination is used alongside the competence for natural listening. Without ignoring the overall context, it allows one to extract from a whole sound environment, one or a couple of sounds that make sense in a peculiar situation. This competence is noteworthy as sounds surround us, are not frontal, and come from everywhere: to establish the source is not always an easy task. The psychoacoustic studies explain this ability to segregate sound in the brain in various “auditory streams” (like in the “cocktail party effect”, see Bregman 1990). This ability may be necessary and salutary in urban life: the pedestrian must hear in the ambient noise of engines, horns and shouts, the acute little music of the continuous bell of the

often-brakeless-bicycle of the Cairo bread carrier: weaving in and out of traffic and people, one of his hand holding the *ḥaṭṭ* *baladī* (common flat bread) arranged on a large palm rack balanced on the head, the other holding the handlebars. Drivers and strollers alike must extract and identify the shrill warning: all have to yield to this bike.

Document 5: In the outstanding traffic ambiance of the Ramsīs square, the cries of the microbus touts can still be heard by the fares, in Cairo, November 2nd, 2003, 11:24 pm. (Recorded by Vincent Battesti).

The competence to produce sound ambiance allows participation in the sound environment of the city. For instance, to know how to whistle in the street, where, when, and at what age is indeed a competence. In the same way, to know how to act like this “jaded woman filling the world with her cries at dawn, as a relative of the brother of the husband of her aunt Um Ahmad is dead!”³ is a competence on the proper use of lament and permissible encroachment in the acoustic space of the neighborhood. Similar are the women's ululations of joy, or the ability to “overplay” the cries of dispute between cafe patrons during a football match on television. This production competence is socially stratified: it depends on gender, age, social class, etc. The attention modes, the perception's thresholds, the meaning given to the sounds, the respective position of the tolerable and the intolerable, all this is experienced differently by everyone, but with certain sociological patterns. The acquisition of this competence and this knowledge is sometimes socially problematized or acknowledged: socially, such as your authority to call the waiter, also

³ Passage taken from the lyrics of Bayram Ettounsi's song, c.1920, “*Hatgann*” (I go crazy).

professionally such as the cries of the microbus touts, or the street peddlers who can pitch their voice (often nasal) to carry in their sound environment, or the fluency of the *nabatšī* (see Puig 2010), the MC of popular street weddings.

Document 6: Cry of a street greengrocer in the residential Doqqi neighborhood, Cairo, December 5th, 2009, 1:21 pm. (Recorded by Vincent Battesti). Her cry is very modulated and difficult to perform but highly recognizable by the potential customers.

Moreover, these competences are learned, and evolve over time: they have a history. With the Egyptian Revolution of 25 January (2011), new competences spread: the appreciation and participation in demonstrations' ambiances are, from a social perspective, a new thing for many Cairenes. Arguably, for the last decades in Cairo, the first training in demonstration dates back to late 2002 with the mobilizations against the war launched by the U.S. in Iraq, and then in 2005 with the demonstrations related to “Kifāya!” movement (“Enough!”, al-Ahnaf 2011), and this culminated of course with the last, ongoing, revolution.

Document 7: Street demonstration against the American war in Iraq, a few left-wing intellectuals meet, but enjoyed coming back to the street (unthinkable for a long time), on the sidewalk in front of Sayeda Zeynab mosque, Cairo, February 15th, 2003, 1:21 pm. (Recorded by Vincent Battesti).

Hitherto, demonstrations involved mostly few urban actors close to intellectual, artistic, and left-wing political circles, but new social groups, lower middle class and urban proletariat, have since experienced and learned to take part in the festive or electric ambiances, learning for instance

patterns become fairly universal (enjoying and singing political slogans like “*al-šaʿab yurīd isqāt al-nizām*”—the people demand the fall of the regime).

Document 8: Street demonstration for the January 25 Revolution, and against the military, by protesters of different social classes on Talaat Harb street and Tahrīr square, Downtown, Cairo, October 31st, 2011, 10:38 pm. (Recorded by Vincent Battesti).

The form and its means

The form of sound ambiances depends on both the means of production combined with the invested intentions and local possibilities of arrangement of these productions. These means are both the presence and use of audio production tools, and the availability of a material and social context of production.

Silence is hardly ever total. The silence of a mosque or a Coptic church, apart from the ritual celebrations, has the tinge given by the architecture, the marble or the carpets, the murmuring of the city. The social and material contexts could be the royal Poinciana (*Delonix regia* Raf.) in Doqqi (a middle-class residential area) where certain species of whistling birds nest, or the unevenness of a narrow street of beaten earth near the butcher's in the old Islamic Cairo good for penning in bleating sheep, or these more or less green open spaces or building roofs where children play soccer or fly a kite, loudly, or that balcony building whose owner did not dare refuse allowing the self proclaimed muezzin of the neighborhood to install a loudspeaker....

Document 9: At dusk, birds that populate a huge villa's garden, in the chic residential part of Mansuriyya, country suburb of Cairo, February 25th, 2007, 7:00 pm. (Recorded by Vincent Battesti). No doubt those

who can afford to enjoy such a sound ambiance in Cairo are a very happy few (this bourgeois villa belongs to a former minister and businessman).

They are both tools and settings: a setting of Haussmann-like buildings in Downtown Cairo does not offer the same sound opportunities as do the alleys of Fatimid Cairo or this deep and narrow lane between high red brick buildings of the *eašwā'iyāṭ*, the said “informal” districts (built without official authorization). Here and there, the asphalt is rare, the reverberations and absorption play differently, automobiles and pedestrians traffic vary. The density of human bodies ranks among the relevant variables, especially regarding the ambiances: despite the undergoing homogenization (800 to 1,500 inhabitants per hectare in Cairo), the megalopolis remains one of the densest global cities, with high disparities (7 inhabitants per hectare in Maadi, a chic suburb, for instance). Whether these spaces are structured by the vegetal (parks) or mineral (neighborhoods), the “soul” (*rūḥ*) of the place matters for their Cairene users, whose first manifestation is the co-presence of other human, sonic transmitters and receptors (Battesti 2006). Strollers come to enjoy the ambiance, take part in the show that the city generates by looking at or listening to itself.

More regular means of sound production exist, whether or not it was their first design: the megaphone of the preacher collecting for a hypothetical new mosque, the roar of a truck, the clinking of glasses, the gurgling of narghilé, the scraping of PVC chairs dragged on the pavement, the hum of thousands of *takīf* (air conditioners)...

Document 10: Same day, two and a half hours later, ambiance in a local café of Suleymān Gawhar (Doqqi), with patrons paying *tawla* (backgammon) and domino, smoking *šīša* (narghilé), February 25th, 2007, 9:30 pm. (Recorded by Vincent Battesti).

We cannot neglect the world of audiocassettes, widely amplifying popular music from Vespas and minibuses in the public space (Puig 2011) or Muslim sermons that accompany everyday life (Hirschkind 2006). Obviously, means are inequitably shared out in the Cairo urban society: producing sound with a combustion engine requires owning a car, an unaffordable luxury for most people; to preach requires know-how (and, first off, being Muslim), etc.

The form of the sound environment is therefore reliant on the arrangement of these means of sound production. This leads to a consideration first of layout and patterns, and secondly of aesthetics.

Concerning layout, all means of production are not implemented all together, of course, but selectively. No one imagines firecrackers at the mosque, but in the street during religious festivals, nor megaphones in a cafe, but loud radio or television, with Egyptian light music or American wrestling, as sound background is well conceived. With “aural postcard experiments”, it was clear that some patterns make sense to Cairo people, for instance: cars and newsboys or *šibšib* and “people greeting each other”.

The notion of esthetics is therefore obvious since there are voluntary productions and assessments. When the urban working classes claims “the atmosphere is great” (*al-gaw ḥelū*) in a park at a given time, it means they are experiencing something likely to qualify this time and this

place, it means they attach a great importance to their feelings, even if hard to express, and finally it means they come here to partake in this ambiance (see the Giza Zoo in Cairo, Battesti 2006). Difficult to formulate, assessment criteria would vary at least between good and bad, good taste and bad taste. The dividing line between them is shifting, notably according to social categories. To define in a word the popular aesthetics (that make sense for most) of a “great (sound) ambiance”, I would pick “saturation”. It could be the electrical saturation (amplifier effect), but more generally the saturation of the sound space. Excellent examples are the popular wedding street parties (the *farah baladī*) or the *mawālid* (plural of *mūlid*, simultaneously saint festival and patronal fair). There, amplified music with electro-saturation effects—which would be avoided (almost) anywhere in the world—fills all the public space and dominates it.

Document 11: Saturated sound space in the popular neighborhood of Sayeda Zeynab during her *mawlid*, the annual saint festival (for a week), Cairo, October 1st, 2002, 11:26 pm. (Recorded by Vincent Battesti).

The muezzin as well tends to push the effects (echo and reverb) of his prayer hall loudspeaker. Even more than esthetics, in Cairo we come close perhaps to the notion of *ṭarab*: the absolute and positive assessment, a state of ecstasy while listening to music and lyrics. Some ambiances do indeed induce trance (especially during *mawālid*), but do Cairenes pursue this *ṭarab* through more mundane urban ambiances?



Figure 2: Packed rickshaw in Baštīl, a popular neighborhood of Cairo, March 26th, 2011, 7:57 pm. Photo: Vincent Battesti.

The production

This rubric will deal with the sound production issue in urban ambiances through spaces and times of production, co-productions, and ends of production. Unlike a “deterritorialized” electronic music listenable on any medium, a sound ambiance has to be experienced in its space-time of production.

Document 12: Religious sounds (prayer from a small mosque nearby) heard in a composed ambiance with other incidental and accidental sounds during a walk inside an informal overcrowded market in Azbakiyya, Downtown boarder, Cairo, February 19th, 2007 (Recorded by Vincent Battesti).

In other words, ambiances are necessarily part of precise spatialities and temporalities. They also have producers, often multiple, who may or may not share a common purpose.

Document 13: Religious sounds (Friday's sermon from the local mosque) heard in a composed ambiance with other incidental and accidental sounds, from an apartment in the neighborhood of Suleymān Gawhar, Doqqi, Cairo, February 16th, 2007 (Recorded by Vincent Battesti).

Urban spaces are not only a physical potential of sound effects: their qualifications by people of Cairo—what they say about them, how they use them—turn spaces into places (Depaule 1991). The old town is qualified differently from downtown, or a middle-class neighborhood, or a gated community of recent nearby desert towns. Some practices are possible here and not there. Urban users are limited by formal and informal regulations (Battesti 2006) to such-and-such sound productions. The mesh can be even thinner: open spaces differ from enclosed spaces; what can be done on an avenue is not what can be done in these downtown passages: the ambiance is different because its users and “producers” read or hear that the atmosphere is more intimate there and feel they should comply with it.

What applies to the space of production, applies to the time of production. The sound event can be unique (a demonstration, a street altercation, a crowd pursuing a thief) while having to happen in a peculiar place. The sound event can occur at given hours and punctuates the course of the day (a typical example is the structuring contribution of calls to prayer). A sound environment or any part of it (a sound event) may recur daily like pupils coming out the school or the closing of stores' metal shutters, or may vary in intensity with the course of day (more or fewer cafe or

street restaurant patrons, more or fewer hawkers)—and needless to say with night and day (for some neighborhood, this does not contrast silence with noise but different ambiances)—, with the course of the seasons—temperatures change the sound, and the incessant hum of *takīf* (air conditioners) stops in the Fall.

Sound environments are inherent to space-time, as are soundscapes. Tim Ingold rightly criticized the neologism “soundscape” (2007). The definition here of “soundscape” (“*paysage sonore*”) is my own (Battesti 2013) as I distinguish “soundscapes” from “sound environments” by the regularity or the reproducibility of the sensory event, of the set of sound effects that gives it its iconic nature and allows identifying it as the sound signature of an (urban) territory. A bell is a bell; it is a sound event. A bell mixed with other incidental sounds, composite or composed, still do not together make a clear identifiable signature (the situation can be recognized, but not identified yet as a space/time signature, as an iconic sign): it is a “sound environment”. The “sound landscape” (or soundscape) is therefore a sound event that signs a place and a time, an identifiable “sound environment” (it remains to be seen who can read the signature).

The various examples of ambiance productions given above demonstrate that they often depend upon more than a single producer. We should therefore think of them as “co-productions”, since an accumulation of producers and productions often happens. Although sound productions are restricted in place and time, “ambiance producers” most often seem chaotically to join in a whole that makes sense as ambiance only at that holistic level (the principle of emergent phenomena). However, since there are layouts and patterns, this “sound individualism” is never complete. Even actual cases of deliberate co-productions can be given. Music performances are obvious

examples of coordinated people shaping an ambiance, but the usual “horn concerts” in the heavy Cairo traffic clearly are also: an acknowledged fact is that the police officer directing the traffic at an intersection changes the direction only under the pressure of the vehicles expressing their impatience by sounding their horn, and there is an actual rhythmic cooperation of motorists to break the official down. Different grades of productive cooperation could be distinguished, from “one to one” (I coordinate with one other, and it can spread eventually to more people) to “one to all” (I agree with the dominant ambiance to “add” my own production to it).

Document 14: Cries close to screams of young peddlers selling T-shirts at night on Talaat Harb street, Downtown Cairo, April 14th, 2011, 8:20 pm (Recorded by Vincent Battesti). With the revolution, people took back the street, and especially vendors. In strong competition, they cry or scream to draw customers, but nonetheless they sometime co-operate to create a specific street ambiance.

Finally, what about the intentionality of this production? Let's say that any action producing sound is grounded on intentionality: it cannot be said however that all the produced sounds were intentional. They could be incidental to the main purpose of the action. Cairenes have to move around in the urban fabric, the carpenter has to work the wood, the butcher the meat, etc. Nonetheless, sounds accompany the action; they can be enjoyed or expected. The sound production can also be manifest and deliberate. The intentions can be to back an idea of party, celebration, leisure-activity, urbanity, aesthetic, protest, wellness, or to draw customers or believers, to announce the urban culture you belong to, etc. The purpose of a sound production can be nil or to overthrow a regime.

Views expressed

The last rubric of this analytical grid concerns the language used and the views expressed about the sound of urban Cairo life. Some sound ambiances may offer the opportunity for discourse; not all are a discursive object.

Broadly speaking, all sensorial feedback loops between perception and sensation—fast-flowing (almost synchronous) and self-fulfilling—are often unconscious, probably avoiding cognitive overload. Does the unconscious nature of the mechanism explain why they are so poorly “expressible”? Anyway, only a few words are in use in Cairo to verbalize this sound dimension, even though ambiance is a central dimension of urban life.

This phenomenon is actually recurrent in sensorial studies, and deprives the ethnologist of his main material. To have urban actors of public spaces say more than “I like” (*baḥibb*) or “I don’t like” (*mabaḥibbš*), possibly “it’s noisy” (*dawša*), is rare and difficult and the verbalization restricted to hedonic or intensity terms is a real challenge. “The atmosphere is great” (*al-gaw ḥelū*). That’s it.

Two types of discourses differ in this case, those of Cairenes in/on the public space, and those of a smaller population of intellectuals, politicians, and media people in the public sphere. The latter have over the past few years gone through a wide public debate—in which the notion of “noise pollution” occurs—about the governmental decision to replace the thousands of amplified muezzins by an automatic, synchronous, and centralized broadcasting of recorded *azān*, call to prayer (Battesti 2013 and in detail Farag 2009). Indeed, the language used and the views expressed on the sound component of the city vary according to the social class of the speaker and of the addressees, with obvious intentions of distinction, in the sense Bourdieu (1979) means

it. People from any Cairo neighborhood do not talk of their own ambiances in the same way they would talk about the ambiances of the others: Cairo is a juxtaposition of urban micro-cultures (about urban “over-differentiation”, see Battesti and Puig 2011), which are all different sensorial and perceptual universes. To be a little simplistic (but to take up the classical local bipolarity), silence is adorned with virtues in the discourse of the upper classes (*al-būrgwasiyya*) which are now freed from urban sounds through residential segregation (in private neighborhoods, gardens or cities, they say they value the muffled ambiance in cozy lounges, a withdrawal from the hubbub, see also Said 2013), and, on the contrary, popular classes (*šaeabiyya*), always associated by the former with the noisy (*dawša*) and dense (*zaḥma*) crowd, express their satisfaction at the warmth of pleasant (and festive) company, of the reassuring “sound coating” of the neighborhood environment. The latter see the silence of the former as possibly desirable—far beyond the issue of loudness—because associated with a comfortable life, with the signature of a *rāqī* (luxury) neighborhood. Popular classes, however, also quickly associate this silence with loneliness, isolation, whereas the primary wealth of popular universes is the interlacing of social networks, the density of the fabric of everyday encounters necessary for survival in an informal economy. Upper classes celebrate *zaḥma* and *dawša* ambiance only as a form of nostalgia for the popular, without any desire to experience it: for them, *zaḥma* and *dawša*, much like poverty, dirt, and rustic ignorance, are popular. A “muted” fear keeps them away from getting a foothold in these neighborhoods (see Battesti and Puig 2011).

This last rubric most lacks the resources to run its program. Tools for analyzing a verbalization of the intimate relation to the sound environment have to be improved upon or invented.

Getting Cairenes to verbalize

Keeping my distance from the linguistic determinism (the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) that assumes that “we conceive a universe that the language has already patterned” (Benveniste 1966, 6), the fact remains that I have to consider semantic distinctions and inbuilt ontologies within the language: obviously, language affects the ways we conceptualize our world, our *world view*, or *world hearing* as it may be. Furthermore, as we use language as a medium to share our perception of the world, a better understanding of the words used to express the everyday life experience remains the requisite for social researchers.

I already brought up two different procedures employed in the Cairo fieldwork: the “aural postcard experiment” and the “mics in the ears” experimental set-up. The first procedure was used to get interesting, but insufficient, data. With this technique, some words already came out, especially to describe the general ambiance, and fortunately also some local—*emic*—categorizations of Cairo neighborhoods according to the sound status evaluated by Cairenes (noisy, quiet, or jammed, crowded, etc.), and according to some sound-key features: footsteps, peddlers’ screams, greetings, tone and accent of the voice, presence of Vespas, etc. It would be possible to establish a cartography of preferences, of liked and disliked sounds ambiances of Cairo, suited to each social groups, but we would have learned nothing about the way people live or experience this sound dimension.

To be closer to the intimate and daily experience, we had to find access to another stage of verbalization. First to get a set of local descriptors, a terminological survey seems unavoidable. It was the first purpose of this procedure, the “mics in the ears”, Nicolas Puig and I set up an

innovative experimental procedure, still under development. A dozen in-depth interviews reassured us about its efficiency (a later paper will present detailed results).

A procedure: in the street

The technique uses stereo binaural microphones/earphones (Roland), small enough to fit inside the ears (like intra-aural headphones), along with a digital recorder and a GPS device. We asked people to have a daily walk route in their neighborhood—or from home to work, or to go shopping in local stores, etc.—for a twenty-thirty minutes alone with this non-intrusive equipment.

It is not the recording of a “soundscape”. This technique results in a unique and personal experiment, gives unique and personal results, specific to an informant and a space-time. But, still, only sounds reaching informant’s ears are recorded, not what this informant is listening to. I haven’t yet stressed this dimension in this text, but we will simply quote Barry Truax (1978, vi-vii) who wrote thirty-five years ago:

“In any of these measuring systems, no matter how sophisticated, one sound is treated similarly to any other sound; there is no way to distinguish what meaning the sound has for those making or hearing it, [...] whether it is perceived as background or foreground, wanted or unwanted. In other words, any such device or system treats sound as a signal to be processed, instead of information to be understood.”

I am not looking for an objective or unbiased recording, quite the opposite: even the shape of the informant's head plays a role (the shape of the nose and ears, of the use of a veil or not, etc.), and also, of course, how this informant behaves in the street, bends his/her head, greets people, and turns his/her head to talk, or to react to sound, smell, contact, and visual *stimuli*—especially because while walking, his/her environment is changing (the use of a “dummy head” would not render that). His/her body is immersed in the city ambiance. These recordings are the most accurate reproduction of the reality experienced by the informant. However, microphones are recording everything: background and sound events, regardless of their personal or social qualities.

A procedure: after the walk

A second step has to take place: the “reactivated listening”. The idea of “*écoute réactivée*” dates back from twenty years (Amphoux 1993, 22-30), but this technique perfected by Augoyard (2001) relies on listening to a montage of recorded sound ambiance. The approach here differs in the way our informants have to listen to their own and very personal twenty-thirty minutes recording (during which recording they did not practice expert listening), not our montage. Therein this listening is, for us, “reactivated” (the psychoacoustic effect of binaural recordings are noticeable) or we should say, “re-immersed”: informants are brought back into their own actions, movements, and displacements in their neighborhood. They are reliving their routine trip in the city, and here we record their comments: “Please, tell us what do you hear?” We expect to produce reaction, to induce reflexiveness, beyond the simple dichotomy of hedonic or intensity terms. We are very interested in the very words (in Egyptian/Cairo Arabic) used by our informants as descriptors. The form adopted to express this hearing reactivation interests us also:

for instance, slow speech flow, gestures of concentration, and use of “I” (people speak in the first person) express the recollection of this precise daily walk.

The GPS device helps us to check the route the informant took, and, accompanying the comments, it helps to spot the threshold effects, when “entering” a *hāra* (sub-neighborhood, alley), entering a shopping street, home, a new ambiance, etc. After the listening, we always have a brief further talk with the informant to deepen some topics.

Some first results

To relive one’s own walk is not an easy task. Informants can at first be confused by the experience: to hear through headphones is obviously an acquired skill. And maybe especially for this kind of recording: they are Hi-Fi stereo binaural recordings, creating a 3-D stereo sound thanks to psychophysiological properties of human hearing for localization of sounds: unlike light—ear space is not eye space—, sounds can come from everywhere, other rooms, other streets, other spaces, and be heard, it is the ubiquity effect (on this, read Augoyard and Torgue 2006). The listener will get the sensation of actually being in the very same situation as the informant recording his/her walk (and even more if the listener is the informant).

Aside from this small confusion, the personalities of our informants are an important factor to consider. It is always a challenge for a social anthropologist to link up the particular and the collective, psychological and social dimensions. We first tested this procedure with inhabitants of Cairo among our acquaintances or usual informants. Nicolas Puig and I have both known most of them for a long time, and so assumed interpreting the results would be easier. To present

samples of the results here, I will refer to two people from the same family: Wā'el, living in historic Islamic Cairo, and Malak, one of his daughters, married and living at the far end of city, Baštīl, part of *εašwā'iyāṭ* “informal” districts. All are popular neighborhood dwellers, and poor. Malak went to buy some electrical wires, with her three year old son. During her walk in her neighborhood, head covered by her veil (she is Muslim), she was in constant interaction with her child. During the reactivated listening, she gave us a minute and detailed description of every element she heard. She started to describe her actions, and to repeat every conversation she had or simply heard in the street, but she was most focused on herself, on her own movement, and seemed constantly on the go. But movements are dual-actions or dual-systems of reference: her movement and the movement of the world. For instance, she commented: “I go downstairs ... this is the sound/noise of the wedding [in streets of the neighborhood], it is loud, the wedding, Ibrahim [her son], a car coming along the [narrow] street, the wedding, it's noisy, the wedding gets further and further away”.

With Wā'el, it was different. The father and husband is also a working-class musician. The sound dimension of the experiment interests him. But the performing dimension of the experiment, much less. This walk seemed to him useless, and especially if he cannot take his mobile phone (I feared possible interferences with the mics). He took a few cigarettes at least, but left with the feeling of a *fāḍī* (useless) walk, even if his wife found the opportunity to ask him to get something from the store. Contrary to his wife, nonetheless, he is, in the street, playing the customary affable man, observing the “*bienséances*” (proprieties), cheering a lot of people. He knows his male lines in the (popular) Cairo human comedy. Concomitantly, Wā'el was very forthcoming when time came to give his comments, but it was actually less localizing his route

in the neighborhood than giving a lot of theories about his own society. He started like the others (“Here is the sound/noise of the street...”), but he slipped quickly into interpretation: “man has been created to live in society, and in the sounds here we hear, in the relationships here we hear, there’s a lot of humanity, because we’re walking in the street, a narrow street, and the sound of motorcycles is annoying, and I endure that, and at the same time, I let him get away with it, because he finds it worth his while, because life’s going on, and all of us have to bear each other, and perhaps I’ve a motorcycle too that bothers my neighbor and my neighbor tolerates it, and that’s an aspect of love, that’s love. But, from another point of view, we can regard it as noise pollution.”

Although unequal or uneven, none of our experiments has “failed”. Much is meaningful: words used to describe this part of the sound environment, and silence to pass over this other one.

These verbalizations make audible the sound experience of a life in Cairo.

With careful generalization, it would be possible to move on issues for which Schaeffer’s theories and semiology (1966) will be useful. For instance the distinction made between “natural listening” and “discriminative listening” on the one hand and “reduced listening”, as the latter is not actually used: informants refer to sound events only as signified, vehicles of exchanges or social situation, no one describes the quality of the sound itself, the signifier (“a child cries”, “the call to prayer begins”) or qualifies the music heard, they just notice the “wedding event” (ordinary listening). To take this study further, we should investigate the notion of intentionality, as sound seems to be heard at least as indices (in the semiotics sense), as something that can be interpreted as having an unintentional meaning (“[I hear] The butcher's boy is pounding the meat with a mallet”, so I’m near the butcher), and which is nonetheless able therefore to communicate

information to the listener (“[I hear] this guy tooting his horn because he’s in a hurry”). This semiotic perspective seems fruitful, as it is possible to distinguish between index and sign—the sign is with the clear intent of passing on a message (“A woman has an argument with a child”, “The call for payer just started”).



Figure 3: Coffee patrons on the sidewalk, looking at the television, in the loud ambiance of the popular neighborhood of Darb al-Aḥmar, old Islamic Cairo, March 31st, 2011, 9:53 pm (Vincent Battesti).

Conclusion

To conclude, I must repeat that the analytical grid has no pretention of being definitive but of offering an anthropological hold on the sound dimension of a city, received and produced by Cairo’s inhabitants. Our “mics in the ear” experiment is still a work in progress. This study we

conduct in Cairo has a double perspective: to document the local perception of sound environment, and also to think about a sound ecology of Cairo.

Our experiments underway engage our informants in a kind of introspective work: urging people to verbalize, to put their everyday relationships into words or speech, as listeners and producers of the sound dimension of their city. They perform a selection of relevant sound phenomena, but still we are not sure they all choose to “voice” the same “classes” of those sound phenomena, which are audible or inaudible to them. So far, our Cairo informants have more pointed to sound as vehicle than described the sonorities: maybe the average Cairo citizen is much more a semiologist than an acoustician.

We may have to dig up issues raised by Edward T. Hall: he contrasted “Arabs and Americans” to underline “how the senses are used by different peoples” (1966, 3). Beyond cultural approaches and stereotypes about “Arabs”, interesting considerations concerning proxemics and the abilities to screen out sound remain. In Wā’el’s comments, the notion of the self-regulations of proprieties regarding the daily sound dimension already came up (Goffman 1956 would be useful). The idea that in urban—especially popular—situations, people have to cope with others, because their lives encroach upon one another, seems contrary to the right to quietness and tranquility... demanded by members of other social classes. The study has to be continued...

Document 15: Saturated sound space during the popular annual saint Festival of Sayeda Zeynab, during the *leyla kebīra* (the last and greatest night of the *mawlid*), Cairo, September 24th, 2003, 0:37 am.

(Recorded by Vincent Battesti).

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