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"The Sound of Society": a Method for Investigating Sound Perception in Cairo

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ABSTRACT In their previous work, the authors have demonstrated the importance of the acoustic dimension of everyday urban life in Cairo and showed how its ambiance is constituted as "social production." The next step was to proceed with its ethnography. In doing so, the first difficulty we encountered was with the cities inhabitants' limited ability to verbalize their experience of this sensory dimension. The authors thus developed an original methodology by testing an experimental procedure – "Mics in the Ears" – designed to provide access to the "natural language of sounds." Two tendencies emerged from this ethnography of acoustic ambiances in the Egyptian megalopolis: a socialization of sound, and a sonorization of

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the social. Implicit in residents' descriptions of their city's sounds is an approach that remains to be fully developed: an acoustic ecology of the city of Cairo.

KEYWORDS: Egypt (Cairo), ethnography, urban ambiance, sound, verbalization

Introduction

The purpose of the experimental procedure undertaken in Cairo, presented here, was to obtain verbal descriptions of the acoustic experiences of city dwellers of diverse social and residential backgrounds. This endeavor poses a particular methodological challenge in the field of sensory studies. Public discourse often represents Cairo as a megalopolis subject to a "permanent cacophony."[1] This cacophony is represented both physically (measured in decibels, Hopkins, Mehanna, and el-Haggar 2001; Hopkins 2011) and normatively (Farag 2009): for example, the Minister of Religious Affairs called for the unification of calls to prayer to "civilize" the city (see Battesti 2013).[2] What is missing in these discourses are residents' descriptions of their own acoustic environments, not to define a vague sonic identity of the city but because they help us better understand "how anyone can be urban" in Cairo, through anthropology (Battesti and Puig 2011). The procedure that

Figure 1
A popular-style wedding party with musicians, belly dancers and nabatchī, taking place under a vast tent in the public space of the Sharabiyya neighborhood, November 21, 2015 (12:30 am), Cairo (Egypt), © Vincent Battesti.

we implemented in Cairo seeks to give voice to these experiences. This article presents a method that we consider to be, an effective tool for accessing some of the sensory perceptions that Cairo's residents experience, as revealed through their own descriptions. Examining these verbalizations, we were able to establish a lexicon and then identify the semantic content interweaving social and sound dimensions.

1. Acoustic Sensory Experiences expressed through Language: Methods

One of our working hypotheses is that in Cairo there are different ways of producing and perceiving urban acoustic ambiances, which form part of differentiated and socially structured sensory universes (Battesti 2013). We have studied this "aural production" elsewhere, most notably among professional ambiance performers, including musicians and the *nabatchī*, the popular "partyers" who animate weddings (Puig 2010), but more generally through our investigations into the participatory dimension of this production in everyday practices (Battesti 2013). Producing sound depends on acquired skills, just as listening does.

Ethnography of local acoustic ambiances, received and produced in Cairo, becomes possible when these are treated as "social productions" (Battesti 2009a). Research in sensory studies and sound studies has demonstrated the need for precise observations of this neglected dimension of our relationship – which is always first sensory – to our social and ecological environment. While an analytical grid has been proposed for understanding the different ways of relating to this sound matter (Battesti 2013), no tools have yet been devised or perfected that would allow us to overcome the obstacle that the weak verbalization of most of our sensory activities represents. Without a discourse to build on, ethnographers find themselves at a loss.

How, then, can we approach the idea of an "acoustic community" (Truax 1978), and does this make sense in Cairo? It was after undertaking numerous studies on Cairo's urban life and society that we became interested in residents' everyday relationships with their sound environments. We made use of different tools to gain access to Cairenes' acoustic experience. We are aware of the limits of interviews. When one focuses on the question of the city's sounds or ambiances – and the term "ambiance" is appropriate here, being equivalent to *gaw* in Egyptian Arabic dialect, which is a key local concept for Cairene practices and mobilities (Battesti 2006; Battesti and Puig 2011) – descriptors tend to include very polarized, hedonic terms (e.g. "I like" versus "I don't like"). A more effective method was proposed in the "aural postcard" experiment tested by Vincent Battesti, which is somewhat similar to Augoyard's "reactivated listening" (2001). Various informants were asked to use stereophonic

headphones to listen to sound ambiances recorded in different Cairo neighborhoods, then comment on them. The experiment is of interest, not because listeners were always able to determine where the recording was done (for they were not always able to do so), but because the listeners provided information on their own spatial categories of neighborhoods and territories of sound in the city, as well as on the ways in which they distinguish them. For example, how does a *cha'abī* (or "popular") neighborhood sound to a Cairene, and what are the key acoustic elements that set it apart? These local (*emic*) categorizations tend to classify neighborhoods as being, for example, noisy or calm, densely frequented or not, heavily populated or not, etc. and distinguish them according to their key acoustic features, such as the sounds of pedestrians walking in the streets, merchants' cries, different greetings, accents and tones of voice, the presence of Vespas, etc. These features can undoubtedly have an iconic character for the different territories of the city.

However, this "aural postcard" remains too dependent on the investigator's frame of reference: like a photograph, the initial sound recording involves a spatial and temporal "framing" of the subject. What the informants were offered in the end, is a montage: just as the landscapes featured on postcards are intended to be recognized by their recipients, this experiment's shortcoming is that it offers listeners a preselected version of reality. The difficulty still lies in trying to capture the most intimate everyday experiences: they must be captured *in situ*. The "commented walks" method (Thibaud 2001) – a trajectory that is recorded by the investigator walking alongside an informant, who describes the sounds he hears and his impressions of them along the way – may also yield results, but this method, somewhat artificial, does not capture the daily interactions that informants have within their socioecological environments.

We decided to approach the question of sound globally (not through a specific activity, such as music, or a specific trade, such as musician, or a specific device, such as cassette sermons), by asking informants, who had previously been immersed in an sound ambiance (in a position of natural listening), to break down their reality according to their own perceptions and to describe it according to their own categories. It was with this in mind that we implemented an original methodology, our "Mics in the Ears" procedure, which uses binaural microphones placed in our informants' own ears to record as accurately as possible individuals' intimate exposure to the sounds of the city as they go about their solitary daily activities (Battesti Forthcoming).

2. The Procedure

We developed an experimental investigative procedure to record both the sound ambiances encountered in Cairo and the residents' descriptions of and comments on these sounds. We were

not seeking an expert discourse but one based on ordinary everyday language, which does not exclude listening and production skills (Battesti Forthcoming). Our informants (only some of whom are mentioned here) were chosen from among our usual acquaintances and informants, from different neighborhoods of the city, social classes, ages and genders. We equipped them with binaural stereophonic microphones and asked them to undertake one of their routine daily trajectories: from home to workplace, or running errands in the neighborhood, for example. This entailed importing a procedure used in the sound arts into the field of anthropology. However, beyond the sound recordings' potential museological value, the objective of this procedure was to gather information on content inherent to participants' sound perceptions.

Informants' trajectories were not only recorded but also georeferenced, thus forming the basis for potential sound maps. Informants were later asked to provide an oral description of their route (which we also recorded) while listening to the recording. We then transcribed the descriptions and their accompanying commentaries in Arabic and translated them into French, paying close attention to the reproduction of sound-related vocabulary in Cairo's Egyptian Arabic.

This involved attempting to document a sound environment (that the residents refer to using the *gaw*, "ambiance") by identifying the constitutive elements of a specific sensory world. The resulting analysis sheds light on the notion of the "habitability" of the world, the interaction between socially constructed bodily dispositions and the properties and textures of sound.

Our informants, at times skeptical of the experiment's usefulness, engaged in a reflexive task, that of putting into words something that is part of their ordinary everyday experience. In addition to the lexical registers obtained, this procedure allowed us to distinguish sounds that informants identified from those that they ignored, which were somehow "inaudible" to them. The tendency toward generalization in this reflexive work varied. Some informants were inclined to offer social interpretations, identifying and indexing the sound markers of their trajectories with reference to social groups ("it's the sound of society"), while others strictly provided descriptive inventories.

This procedure was carried out within different neighborhoods in Cairo: Mugharbilīn (the old city), Bachtīl (an unofficial neighborhood) and Bāb Cha'ariya are all working-class neighborhoods, while the previously bourgeois city center (Wast al-Balad) and Garden City are both spaces populated by the middle and upper classes, despite their relative drop in social position, to the benefit, notably, of gated communities outside the city.

2.1. Stage One: the Sounds in the Street

The sound recordings were made using Roland brand binaural microphones, which resemble normal intra-auricular earphones

and are small enough to fit inside the ear. These microphones were worn by the informant and connected to a small digital recorder. The informant also carried a GPS tracker, which allows us to visualize their route a posteriori on a map or satellite image. It is therefore possible to analyze the data with reference to either the sound recording (situating the sounds) or the descriptions of the routes provided by our informants (situating the descriptions of sounds). We asked informants to walk alone (or at least without us) thus equipped (the device is not very invasive) and follow a usual route through their neighborhood for between twenty and thirty minutes. The recording is thus not a "soundscape." It is rather the capturing of all the sounds that reach the informants' ears, and not only the ones that they hear (which is a mental process). Nor do the microphones record other sound frequencies received by the body (ears are not the only auditory organ). What makes these recordings unique and personal is that they vary not only in space and time, but also according to each informant's behavior in public spaces. Interacting with sounds, whether from human contact or other sensory stimuli, an informant's manner of turning his or her head in response to something or lowering it out of modesty, even the shape of the informants' face or wearing a hijab, can all produce variations.

With this approach, we are not seeking an objective, unbiased recording, but quite the opposite: that of a socialized body, immersed in an urban ambiance, that reproduces as closely as possible an individual's *in situ* acoustic experience and provides access to their oral, self-referential descriptions of this experience after the fact. However, while the microphones record everything, including background and other more prominent sounds, the brain-ear pair is able to filter the incoming signals. This is why the informant's interpretation is crucial.

2.2. Stage Two: Reliving the Experience through Listening

The next stage involved a sort of "reactivated listening," a concept first proposed over twenty years ago (Amphoux 1993, 22–30). Perfected by Augoyard (2001), this technique involves listening to a montage of recorded sound ambiances. Our approach is different in that our informants listened to their own, very personal twenty-minute recordings (which captured their ordinary, everyday listening experiences) instead of our own selected montage of sounds. We can therefore consider this act of listening to be truly "reactivated," or even "re-immersive," as these binaural recordings have a considerable psychoacoustic effect: informants were transported back to their own actions, movements and travels through their neighborhoods, reliving this everyday experience through listening. We then recorded their descriptions ("Can you please tell us what you hear?"). We hoped that the process would provoke a reaction,

induce some reflexivity, beyond a simple dichotomous analysis in hedonic terms or with reference to intensity. We paid special attention to the vocabulary that our informants used (in Cairo's Egyptian Arabic) for their descriptions. The form interested us as well: the cadence of their speech, their gestures when concentrating, or their use of the first-person singular, which helped them recall their specific trajectories.

The GPS helped us verify the route taken by the informants through their neighborhoods, and when combined with oral descriptions, helped us identify the effects of crossing a threshold, for example, when informants "entered" into a *hāra* (a sub-neighborhood of the old city, where everyone is on familiar terms), or into a shop, their apartment building, a new ambiance, and so on. After the listening stage, we always had a discussion with the informants in order to elaborate on certain points (the commentary stage).

Reliving one's trajectory is not easy, and informants might be uncomfortable at first: listening through stereophonic headphones is clearly an acquired skill that is not universal, though the initial difficulty is not insurmountable (use of audio headsets, in general, is increasingly popular in Cairo). Issues also arise from the quality of this hi-fi binaural stereophonic recording, which reproduces the three-dimensional nature of the original experience, thanks to the psychoacoustic properties of the human ear that allow it to localize sounds. Sound space is not the same as luminous space: unlike light, sounds reach us from everywhere, travelling from other rooms, streets, and spaces to our ears. This is what we call the ubiquity effect (see Augoyard and Torgue 2006 for more on this subject). Someone listening to this type of recording will have the sensation of actually being in the same situation, having the same exposure to sounds that the informants had during their walk. The effect is even more realistic for someone listening to their own walk.

3. The Different Forms of Data Collected

3.1. Types of Data

The procedure offered us a wide range of different data types, requiring differentiated analyses:

The first type of data was obtained through the documentary rendering of an urban sound environment in a megalopolis at a given moment of its history and evolution. Incidentally, the recordings that residents made of their walks constitute a sound archive that should be conserved, a well-documented sonic trace of the city's history. Since the routes are georeferenced, it is possible to develop a sound map of the city in different locations across middle-class, working-class and downtown neighborhoods.

The second type of data collected was the sound description that residents provided of their routes. These descriptions provided a

Figure 2
Night-time atmosphere in the poor neighborhood of Duwiqa, November 19, 2015 (7:30 pm), Cairo (Egypt), © Vincent Battesti.

sound lexicon, revealing the ways in which the local language refers to sound phenomena. They also allow us to identify how sound is socialized and, in turn, how social life is sonorized. Of course, elements that are absent from the descriptions or frequently overlooked (whether because they were "truly" forgotten or due to habit and habituation) are also noteworthy.

The third type of data was provided by the generalizations that informants made either during the description of their route or in the following stage when commenting on it during discussion. Informants were especially inclined to generalizations in their comments when reflecting back on their experience. This step involved obtaining a discourse on residents' position in relation to the sounds of the city and to the characteristics and evolution of their sound environments, including various psychological and sociological observations, for example.

Finally, the fourth type of data was to be found in the cross-referencing of the first and second types, that is to say, in our comparisons of the georeferenced recordings made by residents with their sound descriptions of it after the fact. This allowed us, from an objective (*etic*) point of view, to identify changes in ambiance, threshold effects, people's positioning in relation to each other through sound, and various vocal intonations and inflections that reveal how sound habits are shaped. Meanwhile, it also provided access to an (*emic*) acoustic ecology as viewed or described by the diverse informants themselves. In our view, an acoustic ecology can

be defined most simply as the system formed by the different ways of inhabiting a sound space and producing one's own sound space within a given environment. The qualities of this environment are not neutral. Population density, architecture, circulation, and many other factors must be taken into consideration.

3.2. Research Prospects Emerging from this Corpus of Data

In this article, we wanted to present a method, shed light on the richness of the information obtained and begin discussing its heuristic implications. We envision numerous research prospects, and we encourage other researchers to make use of this information and apply their own lines of questioning (from a sociolinguistic perspective, for example).

For us, the next step is to compare the descriptions with the sound recordings in order to distinguish the sounds that were identified, those that were ignored, and those that could be described as shared landmarks (sound markers such as the *adhan*, the call to prayer) or as familiar, even intimate sounds (elevators, voices of doormen and their children, etc.). Listening to the descriptions again will allow us to complete this exploration of perception and its ways of filtering sensory information. What do informants pay attention to (the acoustic landscape, the sounds they expect, or exceptional, incidental sounds)? What sounds do they place emphasis on? Are there different points of focus, particular sounds that are mentioned? Such questions can help us identify the quality and diversity of local perceptions, while also supporting the hypothesis of a language of sounds (through signs and signals, see Battesti 2013).

Finally, another area open to exploration is polysensoriality, in particular, the privileging of sight among the senses in interpersonal relationships, which is observable in the field and assumed to be a permanent feature of urban societies.[3] Sight, the "overseer" of the senses, is constantly intertwined with hearing. From this perspective, it would be tempting to assess how visual memory interferes with the memory of a sound event, if only to distinguish the (re)cognition of an ambiance based on familiarity (how a particular place should sound at a particular time) from recognition based on remembering one's own specific route taken just a while ago. For example one informant (Mohammed), in describing his route, often anticipated sound events in advance, saying "you'll see, we're going to hear…"

4. Descriptions of the Routes: Between Socialization of Sound and Sonorization of the Social

The Natural Language of Sounds

By "natural language of sounds" we mean ordinary language used in everyday life in Cairo to evoke acoustic experiences. How can

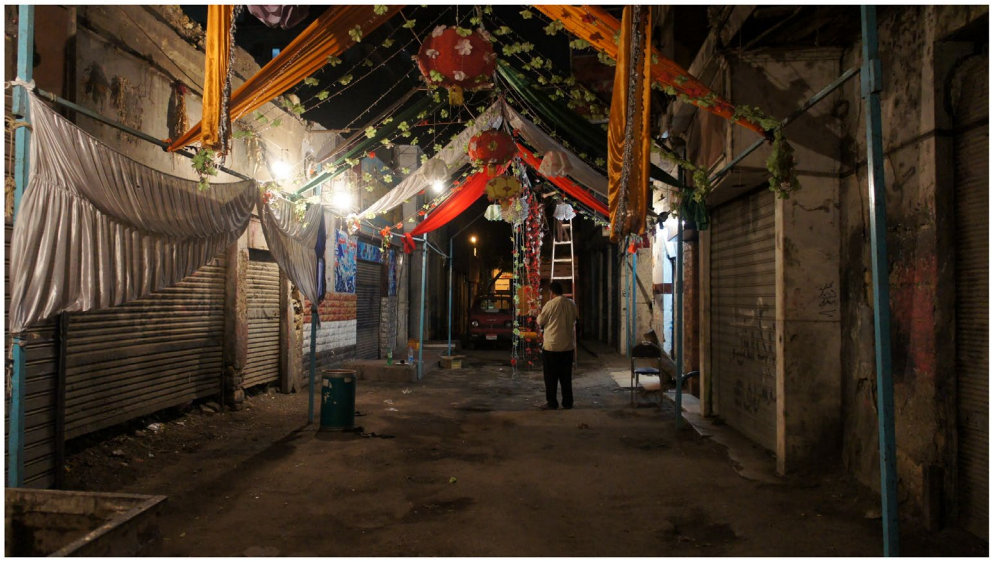

Figure 3
Setting up for a wedding party in the street, a practice formerly confined to local neighborhoods that has become increasingly accepted downtown since the 2011 Revolution, September 27, 2012 (12:00 am), Cairo (Egypt), © Vincent Battesti.

this sensory register be expressed in language? The procedure presented here allowed us to access a lexicon of urban acoustic experience that we found difficult to access in traditional interviews.

4.1. Sounds and their Sources

In everyday life, sounds are never heard by virtue of their own characteristics. Listening is never "reduced," in Pierre Schaeffer's sense, to perceiving isolated sound objects as totally independent of the entities that give rise to them and their context of production (Schaeffer 1966; Chion 1983).

In Cairo, we found that sounds are systematically linked to their sources ("that's the noise of a car") or related to the message being transmitted (verbal communication, for example). Candau and Wathelet (2011) have observed the same phenomenon in France with respect to odors: natural language does not describe smells by breaking down perceived forms into discreet units. In our Cairo experiment, references to acoustic events were based on their quality as signifiers, as vehicles of exchange or social situations ("a child is crying," "the call to prayer is starting"). None of our informants described the quality of the sound itself, the signified, or described the actual music that was heard, noting, instead, a wedding taking place or the source of the music. This is ordinary listening. It is so "ordinary" that the vocabulary employed is also ordinary, that is, not

based in an expert vocabulary or discourse. The descriptions we obtained include very few novel or specialized words.

While sounds were rarely described in themselves by our informants, they were also rarely attributed specific qualities. We have already observed that the characterization of sounds is often limited to hedonic, polarized terms (agreeable versus disagreeable). We also note a binary opposition of intensity (strong versus weak), to which we could add that of familiarity (known versus unknown). That individuals are limited to this series of three polarized categories to describe their sound environments is, for certain proponents of an *Acoustic Ecology*, symptomatic of a deteriorated "soundscape" (deteriorated by urban and industrial society) (Wrightson 2000, 12). However, Wrightson's comparison of modern urban societies with the Kaluli communities of Papua New Guinea (Feld, 1984) is problematic and his conclusion is debatable: can this inability to verbalize sound experience really be explained by environmental change (urbanization)? On the one hand, this implies that the modern city is lacking in sound *stimuli*, in signs and signals (which it is not), on the other, it overlooks the diversity of sensory universes that distinguish different social groups.

4.2. Informant's Diverse Descriptions

A few samples of our results are presented here. Hassan, who is in his sixties, lives in Cairo's Islamic quarter, the historic and popular heart of the city. One of his daughters, Mona, who is close to her thirties, is married and lives in Bachtīl, an "informal"[4] working-class neighborhood on the outskirts of Cairo.

These two individuals had very different ways of describing their recordings, and this distinction provided a point for departure for our analysis of their sound descriptions. We were able to establish two poles on a perceptual axis, according to the emphasis placed either on the sonorization of the social (reading society through the senses) or the socialization of sound (relating a sound to its source: "that's the noise of a Vespa"). Hassan anchored part of his description of his route clearly in the first pole, by proposing an interesting theory of civility based on mutual tolerance of others' actions:

> This, this is the sound of the street. There's the noise, the commotion, the life of people interacting with one another. And this, this can have, that is to say, this can have a negative aspect and a positive aspect. If we're talking about the positive aspect, we find that Man was created to live in society and interact. What one continually hears and what we are hearing [in the street] is that there is a great human diversity. There are many definitions of the human, that is to say, if one is walking down the street and the street is narrow, the sound of motorbikes is annoying. And in this way... I'm starting from the fact

Figure 4
Numerous small industries, like this forge in Bab Zuweila neighborhood, are part of the urban fabric of one of the oldest Islamic cities in the world. November 19, 2015 (1:30 pm), Cairo (Egypt), © Vincent Battesti.

> that I see him [the source of the sound] like someone that I put up with. I put up with his nuisance and at the same time I excuse him because he's going about his business, because life goes on, and we all endure it together and me, for example, I have a motorbike that gets on my neighbor's nerves, and my neighbor puts up with it, it's one of the aspects of love in fact, there's love... And if one looks at it another way, one might say it's sound pollution, that it's noise and that it has a negative influence on people and on their psychological state. While he [my neighbor] might enjoy peace and quiet. But everyone has their habits and environment; we're all in it together. People are used to living in a particular environment, they're part of it, and this is the sound of the street and the sound of society. (Hassan, 28 October 2011)

Hassan works as a popular musician in various neighborhoods, and the sound dimension of the procedure interested him much more than the performative dimension of the experiment. The walk seemed pointless (*fādi*) to him, in particular if he couldn't take his cellphone with him (we were concerned about interference with the microphones). He took at least a few cigarettes, and his wife gave him a few errands to run in the neighborhood. Unlike his daughter, once in the street, he assumed his social role of the amiable gentleman, observing local working-class etiquette, and greeting several people along the way, as was his custom. He understands his place

as a man in Cairo's theatre of everyday life, and he readily assumes his role.

In his description, Hassan pays little attention to his itinerary and focuses instead on explanations about his society. Hassan, from the outset, tended toward ever-increasing generalizations, interpreting the sounds of his neighborhood as evidence of its distinct sociabilities. In his comments, he adopts a moral position based on mutual tolerance.

Mona, on the other hand, privileged the second pole by taking a more descriptive approach, not in describing the sounds themselves but in relating them to their source. She went out to buy electrical wire accompanied by her three-year-old son. Over the course of her walk through the neighborhood, her head covered by a veil, she was in constant interaction with her child. During the reactivated listening stage, she provided a detailed account of all the sound events that she was hearing. She began by describing her actions and repeating all the sentences that she formulated in different situations as well as bits of conversation overheard. She was, however, very focused on herself, on her own route, and she seemed to be in constant movement. Her movements involved actions or patterns with a double reference: to her own mobilities and to those of the world around her:

I'm going down the stairs [hearing her footsteps]… It's the sound of a [street] wedding [in the neighborhood], it's loud, the wedding... Ibrahīm [her son]… a car is passing in the alley, the wedding…, it's noisy, the wedding is moving further and further away...

Very loud, and happy children, very happy, Ibrahīm is delighted, celebrations the party, the party, cars, the noise of a motorbike... the party…, noise, the sound of the party is getting further away, the further I move forward in the street, that is to say, the alleyway. We are even further down the street, and children, people sitting down, people who are there, people who are there, the sound of a bicycle, so noise, it's the main street...

> The sound of children, the sound of a store opening and a store closing, and the sound of a cat. Someone is saying to a grocer: "roasted seeds from Syria or what?" Someone is calling out to the coffeemaker Ahmed, the ironer, the sound of a big car that is passing. A big car that is passing. People walking. Noise and a young girl wearing shoes. A café, a café... And someone saying to someone else "How's it going, chief?" and I have entered the electrical supply store. (Mona, 26 October 2011).

The description of sounds given by Mona differs from that of her father, but their attitudes along their routes are also different. Mona does not greet people in public space. Her journey seems smoother in a way, more linear from a point of departure to a point of arrival, focused on the trajectory. She doesn't really inhabit public space

Figure 5
The urban setting and its constant state of flux shape the way inhabitants perceive and produce sounds in Cairo. February 3, 2015 (5:00 pm), Cairo (Egypt), © Vincent Battesti.

but, rather, makes her way through it. The other women's routes in our sample also reflect this gendered logic that differentiates men's and women's trajectories in public spaces.

5. Increased Generalizations: the Sonorization of the Social

5.1. Neighborhood Sound Markers

Our informants were sometimes inclined to notice sound differences between different neighborhoods. One of them, Mohammed, adopted a directly comparative approach by including in his description of his route in Ghamra references to the middle-class neighborhood of Manial, where he has a second dwelling. The acoustic properties of working-class neighborhoods were quickly identified by informants: the sound of people dragging their feet on the ground was an acoustic motif regularly identified as being emblematic of many residents' way of walking in these neighborhoods:

> People in Manial walk without making noise. That is to say, they walk lightly on the ground. They are comfortable, they have a car. Why do we [here in Ghamra] hear the sounds of footsteps, it's because the guy, he's tired right (…). The guy, he's arriving from work tired right, so he walks dragging his feet on the ground, he can't lift his feet very high. While the people in Manial, they have cars, they're comfortable and their

Figure 6
Driving in Cairo mobilizes both sight and sound; hearing and emitting horn signals form an integral part of how people get around by car. November 22, 2015 (2:30 pm), Cairo (Egypt), © Vincent Battesti.

> feet lift off the ground with ease. To the point that the foot is lifted and lowered and you don't hear a sound. But here, you hear sound, because people walk like this [he mimics a heavy gait]. (Mohammed, 30 May 2013)

Mona, for her part, notes the sound variances between the neighborhood where she is currently living (Bachtīl, an informal neighborhood on the periphery of Cairo) and the neighborhood where she was born, Mugharbillīn (or Darb al-Ahmar), an animated sector of the medieval city where a permanent market is installed:

Maybe in Darb al-Ahmar there is even more noise. Because in Dar al-Ahmar there is a market, the vegetable market. And they sell vegetables and other products, and they call out [merchants' cries]: there is a density, but these sounds [here in Bachtīl], it's more the cars. Most often, it is the cars, rickshaws and motorbikes. But in Mugharbillīn, the thing you hear the most, is people, the noise of people, grocers, the sound of stores and the voice of fruit and vegetable sellers. But here, it's difficult. What you hear most is motorbikes, rickshaws, bicycles passing again and again. People passing by, walking and talking, I can hear this if I go to the market, I mean, if I go to my market here, the railroad market... if I go there, I can hear noise similar to the sound of Mugharbilīn. But it can be a bit louder. But not all the time. In al-Mugharbilīn, it's all the time. You can hear this sound, because in Mugharbilīn, they're always working. But in my neighborhood, to hear the same level as in Mugharbilīn,

you have to wait until ten in the morning, it's very beautiful! Starting around ten, you hear people very clearly. (Mona, 26 October 2011)

The relational density of the working-class neighborhoods is also emphasized in contrast to the middle-class neighborhoods (*raqqī*) and is experienced through the many exchanges of greetings and news that inevitably punctuate citizens' comings and goings. This density of exchanges recalls the "time-out sociabilities" observed by Nicolas Puig in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon:

> The publicizing of private affairs takes place within specific arenas of sociability where decisions, arguments and viewpoints are exchanged, debated or approved. One could characterize as "time-out sociabilities" residents' interactions as they cross paths in the daily course of frequenting various public or semi-public places, such as stores, social and cultural centers, Internet cafés, hairdressers, etc. These are all places where one is expected to linger awhile and engage in micro-rites of hospitality, the café constituting a central element. These moments reveal the obvious pleasure taken in conversation and exchange" (Puig 2012, 245–246).

But, unlike the Palestinian camp-neighborhoods of Lebanon, social exchanges in the working-class neighborhoods of Cairo take place right in the street. In this way they play a role in the dramatization of these places and clearly mark another stage in the publicizing, through sound in particular, of people's private affairs. These forms of civility contribute to the unmistakable sound ambiance of these neighborhoods.

> (…) I adore Ghamra because when I leave my place, I greet everyone and everyone greets me. I feel that I'm living amongst people. In Manial, I feel like I'm living in the desert. Nobody greets you, for example my neighbor, I don't know his name, over there in Manial. And here, [in Ghamra], if you notice when I'm walking, I greet a lot of people. I go to the café, and I say hi to everyone I know. There, in Manial, if I leave my place and walk for five hours, I'm not going to find anyone to say hello to. So, over there, it's an ambiance of concentration and here it's a social life, people living together with one another. (Mohammed, 30 May 2013)

5.2. Appreciation and Social Background

> Social relations are like this, they have this aspect about them. In my case, I like... these noises, and, in this way, I'm talking about it and I'm saying that it's a limited disturbance, the com-

> mendable disturbance, that is to say not a bad disturbance, No. It's commendable, it brings people together, and people pay attention to one another and nobody hides anything, in other words, everything is really open [readable]. And someone who is feeling oppressed by something shouts, shouts in the street, he says, he says to his friend, he says to people he doesn't know, he says everything he has on his mind to avoid becoming depressed. He complains about his son, he complains about his wife, he complains about his father, in the street, out loud, as if everyone were listening. He speaks loud and clear. (Hassan, 28 October 2011)

Perspectives on the sound characteristics of Cairo's different neighborhoods differ according to the informant's social class. Hassan lives in a working-class neighborhood of the old city and considers the presence of private conversations in public space to be a positive attribute. Maurice, on the other hand, deplores this habit, which he generalizes to all Egyptians, maintaining that they are "loud" (noisy, garish), or that, in any case, they speak loudly, notably because of the omnipresent competition for space in the city:

> People's conversations... and this is what's awful, I often have the immediate reflex to just move aside, because you can find yourself walking in the middle of two people in front and two people behind you, and you're in the middle with two other groups behind, and then they're walking slow, dragging their feet on the ground, all talking about who knows what, shouting, you find yourself in the middle of a ... (laughs), I don't know (laughs), ten conversations that are getting on your nerves, you're not the least bit interested, so you just immediately move aside. Well, […] it's like the guys who are there with their gizmo, Bluetooth or whatever, shouting into the phone and you're there having to hear and see a guy and listen to a guy shouting, and it's absolutely none of your business. (Maurice, 30 May 2013)

This attitude vis-à-vis the distinct civilities of working-class neighborhoods and their spilling over into other places in the city is recurrent among the upper classes in Cairo.[5] For members of the demoted middle-class living downtown or in Garden City, those who cannot "expatriate" themselves to one of the numerous gated communities on the city's outskirts (assuming they would like to), the neighborhoods that surround them today, originally conceived as bourgeois neighborhoods, no longer represent their universe of reference (Battesti 2009b). The loss or dispossession of their sensory environment fuels discourses of rejection and/or nostalgia. By contrast, the working classes, who represent the large majority, extend their activities

and sociabilities into the exterior spaces of their residential neighborhoods, which they include within their own universe.

While the production of sound is evidently gendered (Battesti 2013), and perhaps its reception is too – we are working on elucidating this – in the material gathered in this procedure, the question of gender was not raised in our informants' descriptions and comments on sounds. It was, however, present in the different types of trajectories undertaken (linear and even or, on the contrary, broken up by social encounters) and in the sound traces of solicitations made to women by men as revealed in the recording of one woman walking alone in a downtown neighborhood (Wast al-Balad), through vocalized noises, bits of songs murmured in passing, etc.

The territories of Cairo are also clearly gendered. The crowd in the street is for the most part masculine: it is where men hang out, work, discuss, walk, have their coffee, kill time, argue... Women only pass through. This varies depending on the neighborhood, but in general women represent the minority both in terms of numbers and in terms of the ways they occupy public space. However, in the working-class neighborhoods, women take over areas that they consider to be extensions of the domestic domain. Alleyways, corridors and stair landings become, for women who do not leave home to work, gendered in-between spaces that give rise to specifically feminine sociabilities. It therefore goes without saying that there are important disparities in mobility practices, not only with respect to social milieu and age, but also where gender is concerned (Battesti and Puig 2011, 152–154), and this will inevitably have an impact on a procedure, such as the one presented here, that documents the sound perceptions of different participants during urban trajectories.

Conclusion

The cognitive economy in the brain's processing of sounds bears striking contrast to the acoustic richness of the city of Cairo, which is both a product and condition of residents' sound activities. Though the descriptions of Cairo provided by residents in this "*Mics in the Ears*" procedure are somewhat rudimentary, the comments that they gave rise to, that is to say, their reflections on the sonorization of society, are, by comparison, very rich. The acoustic dimension clearly contributes to shaping everyday urban life, but residents, finding themselves immersed in their environment, are more inclined to talk about sounds from the perspective of their social dimension than to analyze them from an acoustic, sensory or ecological point of view. This immersion is total – some sound frequencies are received by the body, stimuli being both auditory and tactile. This immersion is sometimes described in positive terms as a sort of protective envelope generating a sense of familiarity. In this way, the city's sounds are immediately related to a source, to a human activity. This supports the idea that everyday sounds and others' voices resonating in

public space, which form the city's conversation, play a reassuring role by providing a "sound coating" or protective envelope for some people. Others, however, like Maurice, deplore this intrusion into their personal sphere. Discourses on urban acoustic experience that are more ecological than sensory generally characterize the city's sound ambiance in positive terms, while the link between sounds and sensations is often made in situations that are perceived negatively, in which case, people speak of sound nuisances as sources of aggravation and trauma. One is left with the impression that the inability to verbalize acoustic sensory experience is an indication of its banality, even of people's obliviousness to it. Or should we conclude, rather, that this sensory dimension is so important that its social implications take precedence over analysis of sound itself? Also implicit is the moral dimension of sound. In our material, this was more evident in the positive or negative qualities attributed to a milieu through its sound characteristics than it was with respect to moral messages diffused by sound in public space.[6]

We have not yet fully evaluated the data and presented the results of our experimental procedure, notably the dimensions of an acoustic ecology, but this brief overview of the daily urban acoustic experiences of Cairo's residents, particularly through the natural language of sounds, suggests that an urban ethnography has much to gain by taking serious interest in the sensory dimensions of existence.

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Notes

1. "Cairo, a capital that ignores silence." *Cairo*, Jan. 28, 2008 (AFP). "Cairo's record-breaking air pollution is compounded by a permanent cacophony, which makes it one of the most unbearably noisy capital cities in the world, according to scientific studies […]".
2. "The goal of this project is purely organizational – for the well-being of Cairenes, and also to make mosques appear more civilized. […]" (TV Arabia, Sept. 26, 2004, Egyptian Agency Shark al-Awsat). This public policy was, in the end, approached from a sound design perspective.
3. From Simmel (1991) to Joseph (1997), urban microsociology has focused on sight as the central modality of urban civilities.
4. A neighborhood erected outside of official urban planning regulations.

5. One could extend to the residents of the central downgraded neighborhoods what we wrote of the upper classes who "set their preference for regulated decorum between people against the common civilities, sometimes synonymous with familiarity, that are encountered during rare occasions of social mingling in the public spaces of modern downtown neighborhoods. In fact, these civilities are a partial transposition of the sociable mode that prevails in working-class neighborhoods, imparting to civilities among strangers some of the depth of closer relations" (Battesti and Puig 2011, 170).
6. For example, the sermons diffused in Cairo by audio cassette, as studied by Hirschkind (2006).

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