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# Listening to Terror Soundscapes

## Sounds, Echoes, and Silences in Listening Experiences of Survivors of the Bataclan Terrorist Attack in Paris

*Luis Velasco-Pufleau*

■ **ABSTRACT:** Listening experiences provide valuable insights in understanding the meaning of events and shaping the way we remember them afterwards. Listening builds relationships with places and subjectivities. What kinds of relationships and connections are built through listening during an event of extreme violence, such as a terrorist attack? This article examines the relationships between sound, space, and affect through an acoustemology of Bataclan survivors' sensory experiences of both the terrorist attack and its aftermath. I draw on the testimonies of nine survivors of the Bataclan terrorist attack in Paris, which unfolded on the evening of 13 November 2015 during a rock concert, as well as interviews with three parents of survivors and victims. This article explores how the study of listening experiences and aural memories of survivors contributes to understanding mnemonic dynamics and processes of recovery related to sound following violent events.

■ **KEYWORDS:** acoustemology, acoustic agency, auditory hallucinations, aural memories, music, organized violence, terrorism, trauma

The true measure of life is memory.  
—Walter Benjamin

Don't ever believe poetry is irrelevant in dark times.  
—Lawrence Ferlinghetti

### Introduction

Listening structures human perception of both time and space, shaping the way we remember events afterward. Listening experiences of both music and non-musical sounds work as “mechanisms of mnemonic fixation” (Berliner 2013). They shape the representations of events and have a central role in what Paul Ricoeur called the “selective dimension” of narratives and individual memories (2004: 448). Furthermore, because “listening is resonating” (Nancy 2000: 137), the auditors build relationships with places and subjectivities. These relationships unfold, as Tia DeNora suggests, in a “triple temporality” (2013: 270–271) that interconnects the sound event with multiple times and spaces: the elements of the past that make sense for the auditors,



the actions, and the associations deployed during the sound event and, finally, what happens in the future in relation to this event.

What kind of relationships and connections are built through listening during an event of extreme violence, such as a terrorist attack? What ways of listening are mobilized during and in the aftermath of such extreme events? How can listening to music reconnect survivors to their lives before the Bataclan attack and provide emotional resources for dealing with uncertainty and changes? The Paris Bataclan terrorist attack unfolded during the evening of 13 November 2015 during a rock concert with an audience of around 1,500 people. The terrorists killed 90 people and wounded hundreds.<sup>1</sup> The core aim of this article is to examine the relationship between sound, space, and affect through an acoustemology of Bataclan survivors' sensory experiences of both the terrorist attack and its aftermath. Drawing on the testimonies of nine survivors, as well as interviews with three family members of survivors and victims, I explore how studying listening experiences and aural memories of survivors contribute to the understanding of mnemonic dynamics, affects, and social changes following violent events.<sup>2</sup>

### **Sources and Methods**

This article is based on the testimonies of nine survivors (five women and four men, aged between 29 and 42 at the time of interviews) and three parents of survivors or victims I interviewed in France between April 2016 and March 2017. Most of the participants were members of the two main non-profit organizations (*associations*) initiated by victims of the 13 November Paris attacks: 13onze15: fraternité et vérité and Life for Paris. For a total of 16 interviews, I asked the participants to choose the meeting places themselves, and the interviews almost always took place in Parisian bars and cafés—except two interviews that took place in Bordeaux and in Le Mans. I also attended three rock concerts in Paris with a total of four survivors and, in one case, I spent a weekend at a survivors' home with her family.

The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended, with an average duration of two hours; they were recorded with the informed consent of participants. I explained the ethical implications and objectives of my research to my interlocutors, that is, understanding trauma and recovery through aural memories and listening practices. Overall, my research relationship with the interlocutors was built around music. As they told me several times, they were keen to talk to me because I am also a musician. They felt or assumed that I could understand their listening and music experiences. Within this context, I feel it is important to acknowledge the “multilayered co-construction of remembering in the research relationship” (Kevers et al. 2018: 659).

The starting questions were always the same and focused on their listening and music habits in the aftermath of the terrorist attack, for example, “Has the Bataclan terrorist attack changed your relationship with sound and music? If so, in what ways?” (*L'attentat du Bataclan a-t-il modifié votre rapport avec le son et la musique ? Si oui, de quelle façon?*). I also asked about their musical practices, the place of music in their lives, and if they constructed memories of the attack through sound and music. During the interviews all participants spoke about the moment of the attack and described to me their sensory memories and the sounds they listened to, decoded, and interpreted.

Furthermore, survivors' testimonies were complemented with the recollections of the members of law enforcement teams who intervened during the Bataclan terrorist attack that were published in the Reports for the Hearings at the French National Assembly commission (Fenech and Pietrasanta 2016a, 2016b). I examined the sources through thematic and textual analyses, following an “acoustic tuned exploration” (Ochoa Gautier 2014: 3) of written and oral archives.

I paid particular attention to survivors’ “audionarratives”—descriptions of unseen events based solely on an interpretation of their sounds (Daughtry 2015: 321)—as central sources for exploring how survivors experienced and made sense of the terrorist attack and its aftermath.

### ***Approach: An Acoustemology of Survivors’ Listening Experiences***

Steven Feld defines acoustemology as an “exploration of sonic sensibilities, specifically of ways in which sound is central to making sense, to knowing, to experiential truth” (1996: 97). Acoustemology is relational—because it is mutually constituted with others’ subjectivities—and embedded in the experience of place and time. Discussing the fruitful insights of Feld’s work, Georgina Born stresses that “at the core of our embodied experience of sound and music lies the interrelation between, and mutual modulation of, space and time” (2013: 8). Positionality and agency are central to these kinds of relational listening histories that produce knowledge through the audible—which potentially grounds the experience of place in its sonic and acoustic dimensions (Feld 2017: 86).

My study of Bataclan survivors’ embodied experiences of listening explores the multiple ways the terrorist attack resonates in the aftermath in their ordinary lives and how an examination of listening experiences can produce ethnographic knowledge related to affects and the senses. Many aspects of survivors’ behavior could be associated with the symptoms of what is referred to in psychiatry as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM 5) of the American Psychiatric Society. PTSD symptoms include unwanted upsetting memories, nightmares, flashbacks, emotional distress after exposure to traumatic reminders, physical reactivity after exposure to traumatic reminders (Pozza et al. 2019). However, as we will explore in this article, other musical habits challenge the symptoms typically seen in PTSD, such as avoidance of trauma-related stimuli after the trauma, which in Bataclan survivors’ cases might be attending live concerts or listening to particular music repertoires.

I examine sound and silence as both means of violence and symbolic resources for recovery. The ground-breaking work of Suzanne Cusick has shown how both sound and silence have been weaponized as means of torture and sensory deprivation in the so-called “war on terror.” The manipulation of acoustic environments in detention situations, such as solitary confinement or being exposed to extremely loud music, is at the center of what she calls “the destruction of prisoners’ subjectivities” (Cusick 2013: 276). However, since “trauma can only be understood and addressed with reference to the specific contexts in which it occurs” (Becker 2004: 404), it is important to examine survivors’ audionarratives and listening experiences as sonic testimonies of a particular traumatic situation.

This article is informed by flourishing scholarship on the relationships between music, sound, and violence (Daughtry 2015; Gilman 2016; Grant and Papaeti 2013; Nuxoll 2015; Ouzounian 2021; Rice 2016; Velasco-Pufleau 2020; Williams 2019). However, while most of these studies have focused on wartime and detention contexts, this article explores the particularities of listening experiences of people—civilians—who were and remain victims of a terrorist attack during a rock concert. In doing so, it aims to contribute to and develop the recent scholarship on music and trauma (Cizmic 2012; Rogers 2014, 2021), survivors’ musical practices (Pilzer 2015), and the sonic endurance of organized violence by civilians (Gilsing 2020; Hock 2020; Sykes 2018; Velasco-Pufleau and Atlani-Duault 2020, 2021).

In the aftermath of the terrorist attack, survivors often felt that it was difficult to construct a coherent account of what they had lived through. They only had fragmented memories and

at times, their narratives of the attack differed from media and official accounts. In fact, as Peter Levine asserts, “in sharp contrast to gratifying or even troublesome memories, which can generally be formed and revisited as coherent narratives, ‘traumatic memories’ tend to arise as fragmented splinters of inchoate and indigestible sensations, emotions, images, smells, tastes, thoughts, and so on” (Levine 2015: 7). Thus, survivors’ stories take on a multiplicity of forms but have in common the traces of the violence experienced that permeates hearing, smell, sight, and touch. As I noted in a previous article, the survivors then had to revisit all these sensations in an attempt to construct a more or less coherent account of the minutes or hours of the attack and hostage taking (Velasco-Pufleau 2018). When I first met Amélie and Raphael (names have been changed to respect the privacy of my interlocutors), they insisted on this point: “Our senses were marked by so much during this event. You had the sounds, the sound of bullets with the music, the screams, the smell of gunshots, the scent of blood, the pain of those who were hurt, all those sensations, being in the dark . . . It’s all mixed up, you have to really separate them well.”<sup>3</sup>

As I will show throughout this article, most of the survivors I met are music lovers and acknowledged an important transformation in their relationship with music and sound in the aftermath and during the months following the terrorist attack. Thus, at the beginning of our meeting, Raphael asserted, “For me, you’ve put your finger on a phenomenon that even I find difficult to explain to myself: the special relationship I have had with music since 13 November [2015]. The Bataclan has changed the way I listen to music and my relationship with it.”<sup>4</sup>

In this article, I first examine how survivors used listening as a strategic tool for understanding and facing what was happening during the terrorist attack and later framed the whole experience and memories. In the second section, I explore how the manipulation of the acoustic environment by the terrorists is closely linked to the violence and trauma that survivors endured. Next, I study how listening to music can prompt emotions in survivors that evoke and reactivate memories of their lives prior to the terrorist attack, allowing them to face their present with a renewed consciousness. Finally, I conclude my article with a reflection on the ethical dimension of bearing witness within trauma and recovery.

## Listening, Acoustic Agency, and the Sonic Intelligibility of the Event

Listening experiences are the basis of acoustic agency. Listening provided valuable insights in understanding the sequence of events of the terrorist attack as it unfolded, in order to respond with appropriate actions. Marc describes the role of listening in his initial understanding of what was happening at the beginning of the Bataclan terrorist attack:

The sound is the first thing that marked me: that there was a sound that didn’t come out of the speakers. Going to concerts regularly, we know if the sound coming out of the speakers corresponds to what we see on stage—as in the case of a band that uses artificial devices and pre-recordings, etc. So, any sound coming from behind would stand out. I realized something weird was going on. I quickly heard screams and then I saw the band leaving the stage, and the light quickly came on. I lay down right away. I don’t remember exactly everything. I remember the sound, the light, and the group leaving.<sup>5</sup>

Marc used the knowledge and sonic skills he acquired during previous concerts to understand the sudden change in the course of the event and take action to survive. Another survivor told me how one of his friends who was with him at the Bataclan realized he was shot by listening:

My friend who had been injured explained that he didn't immediately feel that he was hurt, but what marked him was the sound the bullet made as it entered his body. At that moment, all of us who were in front felt the bullets flying past, this kind of little whistle that went over our heads, we all felt it. But he just said that the bullet hadn't whistled, that it had stayed. In fact, you hear whistling going on and all of a sudden one whistle stops. And then you figure out that it doesn't stop by itself, it stops because it hits you. It's incredibly violent.<sup>6</sup>

In this testimony, listening anticipates the physical sensations of the gunshot wound. By listening, victims of the terrorist attack understood what was happening and inferred information such as the number and speed of shots, and the location of their origin and destination—which requires the analysis of complex spatial and temporal data. Listening takes on a central role in the intelligibility of the event.

However, acoustic agency and the sonic intelligibility of the event depends on positionality, intentions, and purposes of agents. A striking example of this is the testimony of the French army general Bruno Le Ray, who was the Paris military governor (*gouverneur militaire de Paris*) from 1 August 2015 to 30 July 2020 and coordinated the French Army counterterrorism mission Operation Sentinel at the time of the 13 November 2015 Paris terrorist attacks. He stated to the French National Assembly commission that from the outside of Bataclan “sounds of gunfire provide very little information about what's going on inside” (Fenech and Pietrasanta 2016b: 406). In fact, General Le Ray asserted that in order to carry out a military intervention in a hostage or crisis situation, soldiers need to not just listen to gunfire and know that there is a terrorist attack unfolding but also be specially trained for this kind of particular intervention, have a predefined plan of action, and know the layout of the premises and what they are going to find there (Fenech and Pietrasanta 2016b: 406–407). Since positionality is contextual, information obtained from listening was very different for people placed outside and inside Bataclan. For survivors inside the venue, listening was one of their main sources of information to understand the situation, protect themselves, and try to escape.

### *Acoustic Agency and Audionarratives*

One of the reasons for the significance of the aural dimension of survivors' memories is because almost all of them had a restricted field of vision after the beginning of the terrorist attack because they were hiding or lying down. For some, listening was the only way, or the principal way, to try to understand what was happening. Listening experiences of survivors are linked to the physical, emotional, and sensory conditions of the act of listening. Alexandre, a survivor I met in September 2016, wrote down his memories of the terrorist attack a couple of days after 13 November 2015. He gives a detailed account of his physical, emotional, and sensory conditions of listening:

We make a human pile in which my body is exposed and my face hidden. I then close my eyes for two hours. I wait for death and hope it'll be quick, or maybe wish for a miracle rescue. . . . I've kept my eyes shut, but I hear everything, the poor girl crying and the unfortunate guy moaning in pain in the background. I remember a person dying, unable to breathe on the other side of the barrier. Particularly when one of them [the terrorists], having clambered on stage, got closer. I think he shot a guy right behind me, whose scream still haunts me. The shot was so close that the hissing of the tinnitus was pure agony in my right ear. I remember every shot, hoping it'd be the last and not to be prey to the next one. An unbearable feeling of randomness. (Homo 2015b)<sup>7</sup>

This testimony shows the position of extreme vulnerability which survivors experienced during the attack and the central issue of interpretation. Survivors constantly interpreted the

sounds they were listening to, putting them into a narrative to understand what was happening. The testimony also shows that acoustic agency was at the center of survivors' experiences of the Bataclan terrorist attack.

Acoustic agency involves interpreting and understanding the event by listening, but it could also be means of resistance. The aural memories of survivors are often extremely precise and detailed although in some cases they are recognized in the aftermath as fictional interpretations of reality. For example, Amélie explained to me that she was hiding with around 30 people in one of the stairwells where there was no way out, and for two hours they listened carefully to all the sounds. She said: "I have very few images, I have some smells. Everything I couldn't see, I understood through the sounds: I heard shots, screams . . . Since we could only hear, I developed a particular connection with sound."<sup>8</sup> At the same time, she and other people interpreted the sounds in a particular way in order to communicate with others hiding in the same place and to reassure one another. They crafted sound into particular stories—what Martin Daughtry calls the "narrational zone" of wartime audition (2015: 80)—and through imagination they created a community of resistance (Asavei 2019: 623). Amélie asserts: "All we could perceive from outside were the sounds. Since we didn't want people to be too scared, we tried to analyze all the sounds that came in. There was a first explosion, and we said, 'don't worry, it's the police grenades.' But it wasn't true [it was the exploding suicide vest of one the terrorists]."<sup>9</sup>

Amélie and her companions constructed fictional audionarratives to be able to get through that particular moment and avoid overwhelming emotional reactions that could have been fatal had they allowed emotions to take over. They did not surrender. They used their acoustic agency as a means of resistance: Amélie and her companions interpreted sounds they listened to in order to keep emotional control over the situation. This shows that listening is not just a way to interpret or react to the world but rather a tool to inhabit, transform and make sense of it. Acoustic agency plays an active role in humans' engagement with "their own emotions and constructions of self" (Rice 2016: 7). In the next section I will show that controlling the acoustic environment of the terrorist attack is an issue of power and control, which still resonates with survivors long after the actual event.

## **Silence, Trauma, and Humiliation**

The performative dimension of silence is often associated in political language with "active politics of domination and nonparticipation" (Ochoa Gautier 2015: 183), yet it can be used as a means of resistance, hope, and speaking against death (Avramopoulou 2017). In each case, silence can be an extreme experience. As Ana María Ochoa Gautier asserts, silence "is lived as one of the most intense experiences across cultures." It invokes both "a type of plenitude most commonly associated with contemplative techniques of quietness as a means to bring a transformation of the self" and the "dangers and fears of the unknown; the insecurities produced by the ungraspable and by the profound irreversibility of death" (Ochoa Gautier 2015: 183). Silence can therefore be terrifying and used as a weapon in war and detention situations. Silence is essential for the destruction of the sense of the self and, as I will examine through the experience of several Bataclan survivors, it is a violent means of domination and power.

### ***Silence as a Weapon***

The beginning of the Bataclan terrorist attack caused a sudden rupture in the sound environment of the concert venue, a rupture described by most of the survivors I met as the contrast

between the silence that came a few minutes after the attack began and the atmosphere of joy and celebration in which they were immersed a few moments earlier. Several survivors described the silenced atmosphere which followed the beginning of the terrorist attack as a “deathly silence” (*silence de mort*)<sup>10</sup> in which hundreds of people were lying over each other or hiding behind seats and doors. Although survivors could whisper words to people who were lying next to them, the terrorists wanted them silent.

This silenced atmosphere is also described in the testimonies of two officers from the Paris Brigade anti-criminalité (BAC) special unit who got inside the Bataclan around 15 minutes after the beginning of the attack:

From the moment we started to advance in the corridor, the shooting stopped, and when we went inside, there was no more shooting, there was silence. There, the sight was indescribable. Hundreds of bodies—for us, everyone was dead—were tangled up one on top of the other: in front of the bar, in the pit, sometimes even piled up more than a meter high. You could really see that people had thrown themselves on top of each other. For us, there were no survivors: no one was moving, there was no moaning, no noise, there was an eerie silence. Our first reaction was to wonder how they managed to kill so many people in such a short time. (Fenech and Pietrasanta 2016b: 341)<sup>11</sup>

The terrorists forced the Bataclan concert attendees to behave as if they were already dead; they forced them to lie down, still and silent. The terrorists tried to establish an “absolute monopoly on acoustical agency” (Cusick 2013: 288) to make their victims feel powerless. It was a situation of deadness and domination in which the silence was only split by the fire of automatic weapons or dispersed screams and moaning. This situation continued for the most part of the hostage taking, as described by a police officer who entered the Bataclan venue with elite police squads approximately two hours later: “It was a terrible sight, a carpet of human bodies. There was a deafening silence, you just heard the sound of mobile phones . . . No one said a word. The wounded had to contain their screams of suffering in order to not attract attention.” Suddenly, members of the elite squads saw a survivor at the back of the venue. They ordered him to raise his hands and “then, from this carpet of bodies, all the survivors raised their hands and we realized that many of them were still alive” (Pironon 2015).<sup>12</sup>

### ***Sound and Gender Violence***

During my interviews with survivors, the situation of silence and domination was described in different ways depending on gender, the levels of powerlessness they experienced, and the kind of injuries they suffered. In fact, a gender-sensitive approach “highlights the power relations inherent in much armed violence” (Geneva Declaration Secretariat 2008: 110). In particular, three women talked to me about how they felt angry and powerless because of the silence, immobility, and body control imposed by the three male suicide-bombers affiliated to the so-called Islamic State. They responded to the situation with different levels of anger or inertia. Aude recounts: “It was the feeling of powerlessness that at one point gave me enormous anger, thinking ‘I’m lying here, I can’t do anything, I’m powerless and they’re going to kill me.’”<sup>13</sup> She felt strong injustice in such a situation where two or three “little bastards”<sup>14</sup> were going to kill and destroy the lives of hundreds of people. These feelings of anger and perceived injustice were also shared by Claire who saw the face of one of the terrorists at the beginning of the attack. She referred to him during the interview with extreme irritation and told me that when she passed someone with a similar appearance in the street, she got angry. Both Aude and Claire felt powerless but responded with anger, unlike Camille, who felt deeply humiliated.



Camille was seriously injured by a bullet that entered her body not far from the anus, perforated her intestines, and lodged in one of her lungs. She was operated on the day after the terrorist attack and remained in a medically induced coma for two weeks. When she gradually started to regain consciousness after the coma, she had auditory hallucinations involving a group of men singing lewd songs about her outside the hospital as if they were protesting in the street, but she could also hear them chanting inside on the hospital radio. She felt extremely humiliated by these men who were chanting “we made you a second asshole”<sup>15</sup> and singing degrading songs about penises, penetration, and male domination—in particular the lewd French song “La bite à Dudule” (Dudule’s cock).

This experience intensified Camille’s feeling of powerlessness. While she hallucinated, the assailants easily managed to hack the hospital radio frequency, and nobody was challenging their assaults against her. She perceived the songs and chants they uttered in her auditory hallucinations as a weapon to humiliate her, outside and inside the place where she was recovering. In this sense, the sounds prolonged the situation of domination and powerlessness she endured during the terrorist attack, transforming the hospital into an unsafe place. Furthermore, Camille responded to the extreme humiliation with inertia rather than anger or violence, in line with empirical studies on the affective dimensions of humiliation (Leidner et al. 2012). At the time of the interview—seven months after the Bataclan terrorist attack—she was suffering from post-traumatic emotional anesthesia, and it was not even possible for her to feel anger or insult the terrorists. She just felt that they “were nothing” and “did not deserve any consideration.”<sup>16</sup>

What is noteworthy in the example of Camille’s relationship between music and trauma is that the lewd French songs constitute sonic *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) associated with humiliation. I referred to this concept in two recent publications with the anthropologist Laëticia Atlani-Duault, in which we explored the role of music and sound in the construction of individual and collective memory (Velasco-Pufleau and Atlani-Duault 2020, 2021). We use this notion to explore both the “distributed materiality” of music (Born 2011: 377) and how music “provides a device” for unfolding and actualizing the temporal structure of past experiences (DeNora 2000: 67). In the case of Camille, the lewd sonic *lieux de mémoire* were actualized after the terrorist attack in the form of auditory hallucinations, as if she was still trapped in a situation of being hunted and terrorized.

However, once Camille started listening to music again, she could move on from this humiliating sonic site of memory. After she woke up from the medically induced coma, she was in intensive care for several weeks. There, she had difficulties breathing and once a day she had to wear an oxygen mask. She started listening to music with headphones in order to cancel out the noise of the oxygen machine. During our first interview, she remembered how good it was to listen to music again, she told me: “It was a strange feeling, as if the music was going into my body. Because I was really submerged in the noise [of the machine]. The music was passing through me in the same way as the strong breathing.”<sup>17</sup> In particular, she recalled the moment when she listened to Jimi Hendrix’s interpretation of Bob Dylan’s song “All Along the Watchtower”: “I remember this Jimi Hendrix song that made me feel good. I had missed the music. It was like an escape. I closed my eyes. Certainly, there was this noise of the machine breathing. But there was this music in me and for a few minutes I didn’t feel like I was in hospital. I closed my eyes and moved my body a little to the rhythm of the music.”<sup>18</sup>

Listening to music she loved helped her to move on from the sonic sites of memory associated with humiliation. She used her acoustic agency to slowly (re)connect with positive emotions, with something that helped her feel safe.

Other survivors also experienced music as a safe place and a bond with their lives prior to the attack. Before analyzing the role of music in the ways survivors dealt with the rupture caused

by the Bataclan terrorist attack, I will talk about other sorts of changes in listening experiences, mostly associated with PTSD symptoms.

### *Trauma and Silencing Musical Lives*

Some survivors experienced other kinds of silence in the months that followed the Bataclan terrorist attack. In some cases, the traumatic experience prompted survivors to stop listening to music or, in other cases, to stop listening to specific genres or bands. During thematic analysis of interviews, I observed that the survivors who had stopped listening to music for longer periods were those who had lost someone during the attack or who were in close proximity to the random killing of people. For example, Marc continued to listen to some rock bands he liked (Velasco-Pufleau 2019), but he stopped listening to the music of the Eagles of Death Metal, the band that was playing at Bataclan the evening of the terrorist attack. He did so because he associated the music with his friend who was killed at the venue. During our first interview he told me that before the Bataclan attack he associated the music of the Eagles of Death Metal with joy and celebration and this was the reason why he could no longer listen to it: “I will never listen to the Eagles of Death Metal again. I won’t be able to listen to the songs that they played, that I heard during the concert. I don’t want to anymore, especially because I wasn’t alone. I don’t want to think ‘this music is good,’ while . . .”<sup>19</sup>

Alexandre also wrote about how the terrorist attack affected his relationship with music: “That night, they not only killed and wounded hundreds of innocent, defenseless people. They also killed my love for music” (Homo 2015b).<sup>20</sup> One month later, he tried to listen to the Eagles of Death Metal again, but he “couldn’t listen to any of their songs without thinking about the smell of blood and gunpowder” (Homo 2015c).<sup>21</sup> Alexandre started to listen to music again by turning to genres that were “quite different from what I used to listen to before, such as classical music and electro ambient on YouTube.”<sup>22</sup> However, he could no longer listen to some of his favorite rock albums because, depending on the post-production work, the sound of the snare drum reminded him of the sound of Kalashnikovs being fired by the terrorists. When I met Alexandre in September 2016, he told me that occasionally, he still bought some rock vinyl records but most of the time, he could not even open them, feeling incapable of actually listening to them. He felt extremely sad about this kind of silencing of his musical life and was hoping he would one day be able to start listening again and enjoy rock music like he did before.

As examined in this section, the sonic dimension of the violence endured by survivors during the attack resonates in their lives in multiple ways. The auditory hallucinations Camille experienced show that music is culturally configured and can work as a strong means of humiliation. The music silence that Marc and Alexandre experienced is directly related to the pain and suffering they felt during the attack and in its aftermath. As an acoustemological approach of their sonic experiences shows, the manipulation of the acoustic space—both its sounds and silences—and the monopoly of acoustic agency are central in survivors’ traumatic experiences. However, as I examine in the next section, survivors can actually engage with music listening in a process of recovery and deal with the rupture caused by the terrorist attack.

### **Echoes, Resonances, and Memories**

Beyond the sound hypervigilance caused by the internalization that “any noise could be a danger,”<sup>23</sup> survivors highlighted a strong connection between music and emotions when describing their listening experiences after the terrorist attack. Listening to music did in some cases trigger

emotions that connected them with events and places from their life before or after the Bataclan attack. In fact, most of the participants of this research perceived the terrorist attack as a rupture, which can be conceptualized as “a breach in the continuity of the individual’s life course, which invites a renegotiation of taken-for-granted meanings and routine situations” (Kadianaki and Zittoun 2014: 192). Even though participants experienced this rupture in a variety of ways, all of them were dealing with uncertainty and changes in their lives. Following Irini Kadianaki and Tania Zittoun, “a rupture triggers a period of transition, during which the person finds himself in a process of uncertainty and imbalance that needs to be recognized and dealt with” (2014: 192). Music, as a symbolic resource, can be used as a semiotic regulator “to facilitate the process of dealing with the rupture by mediating the relationship of individuals with: (1) one’s self and inner feelings; (2) social others by creating, understanding, and transforming social relationships; and (3) social reality by facilitating understanding of the social world and positioning of the self in it” (Kadianaki and Zittoun 2014: 194).

For the survivors, listening to music constitutes an active way to connect their past with their present in order to allow self-continuity and recover an ongoing narrative of life. For some of them, music listening is essential, as Marc states: “Music can’t stop. There isn’t a day I don’t listen to music. Music used to be a passion, now it’s a binding thread in my life.”<sup>24</sup>

### ***Music as a Safe Place***

Parents of victims also recognize the importance of music and music listening. Jean-Pierre lost his son inside the Bataclan. He was a music lover—“music was his life,” observed Jean-Pierre—and they had a special relationship through music. They used to go to concerts together and swap CDs with song compilations in order to introduce each other to new musical discoveries; mostly alternative rock bands. Music was a way to share their emotional, social, and intellectual life. Before the Bataclan terrorist attack, Jean-Pierre would listen to various music genres, such as rock, country, and classical music. After his son was killed in the terrorist attack, he started listening intensely to music his son used to listen to in an attempt to “be close to him.”<sup>25</sup> Most evenings, he spent browsing various rock forums and listened to independent rock online. Listening with headphones accentuated his feeling of intimacy, a sort of solitary listening that maintained his connection with his son.

Listening to music has helped Jean-Pierre to deal with his rupture by mediating the relationship with his own memories, emotions, and feelings. During our emotional interview, Jean-Pierre asserted that he was trying “to continue to communicate with [his son] through music,” by listening to music his son loved. He talked about music as a place: “music is the only place where I feel well”; as a means: “music is one way I have of staying with him”; and as a link: “music is a bond that I want to keep with him, I need it.”<sup>26</sup>

It is interesting to note that in Jean-Pierre’s sonic experiences music is also a sonic *lieu de mémoire*, but contrary to Camille’s auditory hallucinations after waking up from her coma, it is a site of memory that is still safe, secured, protected, and cherished. Listening to music was and remains his connection with his son, providing a safe space dedicated to his son, where he feels his presence and continues the activities his beloved son used to enjoy (Despret 2015). In this context, listening to music brings about a sense of connectedness and life. Music is a refuge.

### ***Music, Emotions, and Remembering***

As shown above, music allows self-continuity between past and present. However, survivors’ memories and chronological accounts of the Bataclan terrorist attack were often distorted since

“accuracy of memory is affected by the emotional valence of an experience” (Kolk 1998). This is why Maude had difficulties remembering details of what she lived through during the terrorist attack. In the aftermath, it was important for her to have a precise account of what happened during the time she was inside the Bataclan. As Judith Herman asserts, “the fundamental stages of recovery are establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community” (2015: 3). The first three or four weeks after the terrorist attack, Maude could not listen to music because her “head was so full of information and sensations that there was no room for music at all.”<sup>27</sup> However, after about a month she started listening to the music of the Eagles of Death Metal in order to challenge the emotions associated with the event—“to listen to the songs again, the very songs I had heard just before it all happened.”<sup>28</sup> She listened almost exclusively to the music of the Eagles of Death Metal on a daily basis. At the beginning, the sounds took her straight back into the terrorist attack. It was painful but she also considered it an opportunity to recover her missing memories:

At that moment, when I started listening to the band again, it was mainly to try to remember some of the moments missing in my story. I remembered how it unfolded, I remembered some things, but there were still fragments that were missing. As I listened to the music again, it took me back to it all, I mentally relived how the event unfolded. So, I thought that certain moments could come back to me as I listened to the music. I had the feeling that if I listened [to the band] and put myself back in [the music] a bit, they would end up coming back.<sup>29</sup>

She listened to their music for around six weeks and over time, the feelings and sensations from the attack associated with the music decreased. In the end, Maude did not really recover her memories through music listening but through hypnosis and by talking to and exchanging recollections with other survivors. This fact shows the “permanent, obligatory and irrepressible interaction” between individual and collective memories (Eustache and Peschanski 2019: 390). She “learned to listen to and appreciate the music [of the Eagles of Death Metal] again.”<sup>30</sup> In some way, she managed to break the association between the music and the event.

Sometimes, for survivors listening to music has become a real source of pleasure and life. When she described moments of listening to one of her favorite songs in her living room, Aude asserted that “music always brings life, life into me, emotions, and it continues to bring life.”<sup>31</sup> For others, it is the direct experience of live concerts that has become essential, as for Raphael who attended at least one rock concert per week in the aftermath of the terrorist attack. When talking about these moments that make him feel alive, he says: “I think I enjoy the concerts much more than before. Because I live them more. I am more aware of the impact that music has on me. I realize how important a live concert is compared to the [recorded] music I hear . . . Seeing it live, I feel like I enjoy it more.”<sup>32</sup> For some survivors, listening to music and attending concerts creates emotional spaces to transform their sensory experience and collective memory of armed violence, allowing them to restructure an ongoing narrative of life (Velasco-Pufleau 2019).

## Conclusion

Through listening, human beings shape and (trans)form their affective experiences of places and events. Music and sound are essential resources to construct human subjectivities, and therefore they can also be used as a means to dismantle them. As examined in this article, an acoustemological approach of Bataclan survivors’ listening experiences of both musical and non-musical sounds offers particular insights that help them and us to understand their experiences of terror, trauma, and recovery. First, listening was central to survivors’ intelligibility of the terrorist

attack, it was a strategic tool for enduring and surviving armed violence. Survivors used sound narratives and their acoustic agency to understand and make sense of the event. Second, the manipulation of the acoustic environment and the monopoly of acoustic agency are central parts of the terror experience. In particular, several survivors experienced the silenced atmosphere imposed by the terrorists as a powerful means of domination and humiliation. Finally, survivors' music listening has been crucial in their processes of recovery, especially because survivors could mediate and negotiate their relationship with their own feelings, emotions, and memories. Here, music is perceived as a safe place: a sonic *lieu de mémoire* that is able to keep and restore the connection between the survivors and other members of their communities. In this sense, survivors' musical activities can be understood as "important sites of witnessing, of reckoning and overcoming, and of self-reconstruction" (Pilzer 2015: 483–484). For the survivors I met, listening to music is a form of resistance that connects them with their past, brings about life, and builds a common humanity.

I would like to finish this article with a short reflection on the ethics of witnessing. Research is a process of collective discovery, which transforms the subjectivities of both researchers and research participants. During my research with Bataclan survivors and families of victims, I strongly felt the responsibility of bearing witness. Responsibility both for them and me, since "the knowledge of horrible events periodically intrudes into public awareness but is rarely retained for long" (Herman 2015: 2). In her research on the performative power of listening, Deborah Kapchan asserts that to bear witness "is to testify from one's memory, from one's mindful experience and knowledge" (2017: 280). However, to witness is not just about knowledge, "it is also somehow to transmit that knowledge and to do so publicly, that is to testify." This is why the process of witnessing is collective, it is "a kind of social gnosis" (Kapchan 2017: 280), which have undeniable ethical dimensions.

The process of witnessing, as Anna Papaeti asserts, "emerges as an ethical moment that calls us to make sense and respond to these stories, their multiple versions and voices, in ways that open up the debate about the violence and abuse of the past and the present" (Papaeti 2020). In this sense, we have a responsibility to enable victims to articulate their unique stories and to listen to them.<sup>33</sup> However, the process of witnessing is dialogical, shaped by the interaction between my interlocutors and me (Kevers et al. 2018). Qualitative research is a process of collective discovery that involves both the researcher and the participants. Through our research-centered relationship, I discovered as much about my interlocutors as about myself and my own story. They taught me about the role and importance of embodied experiences of sound and music in the production of knowledge. They took me to concerts and introduced me to rock bands that I did not know before and that I now love and continue to listen to—for example, the French rock band No One Is Innocent and the Canadian post-rock and experimental music collective Godspeed You! Black Emperor. For the survivors and the parents of victims and survivors, talking about music was a way to reconstruct and articulate their personal stories of violence, trauma, and recovery. This is fundamental because "sharing the traumatic experience with others is a precondition for the restitution of a sense of a meaningful world" (Herman 2015: 70). As I have examined in this article, listening to music and musical practices are ways to reconnect with, exist in, and create a future in their changed world.

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## ■ NOTES

Epigraphs: Walter Benjamin [1934] 2005: 788; Lawrence Ferlinghetti 2007: 27.

1. The Bataclan terrorist attack was part of a series of terrorist attacks carried out in Paris by militants of the so-called Islamic State on the evening of 13 November 2015. The attacks killed 130 people, critically wounded 493, and directly affected more than a thousand (Fenech and Pietrasanta 2016a: 61).
2. This article is a complementary contribution to other studies on the social and human consequences of the recent series of terrorist attacks in France, such as the large-scale transdisciplinary research program 13-Novembre, which explores the construction and evolution of memory after the terrorist attacks of 13 November 2015 (Eustache and Peschanski 2017).
3. “On a imprimé plein de sensations lors de cet événement. Tu as les sons, le bruit des balles avec la musique, les cris, l'odeur de la poudre, l'odeur du sang, la douleur pour ceux qui ont été blessés, toutes ces sensations, le fait d'être dans le noir . . . C'est un mélange, tu dois bien les dissocier,” interview with Amélie and Raphael, 19 April 2016 in Paris. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.
4. “Pour moi, tu mets le doigt sur un phénomène que même moi j'ai du mal à m'expliquer: la relation particulière que j'ai avec la musique depuis le 13 novembre. Le Bataclan a changé ma façon d'écouter la musique et ma relation avec elle,” interview with Amélie and Raphael, 19 April 2016 in Paris.
5. “Le son est le premier truc qui m'a marqué: qu'il y avait un son qui ne sortait pas des enceintes. A force de faire des concerts, on voit si le son qui sort des enceintes correspond à ce qu'on voit sur scène—comme dans le cas d'un groupe qui utilise des artifices, etc. Du coup, un son qui vient de derrière, il interpelle. J'ai compris qu'il se passait un truc bizarre. J'ai vite entendu des cris puis j'ai vu le groupe quitter la scène, et la lumière s'est rapidement allumée. Je me suis couché tout de suite. Je ne me sou-

- viens pas exactement de tout. Je me souviens du son, de la lumière et du groupe qui s'en va," interview with Marc, 2 June 2016 in Paris.
6. "Mon copain qui a été blessé explique qu'il n'a pas senti tout de suite qu'il était blessé mais ce qui l'a marqué est le bruit que la balle a fait en rentrant dans son corps. Sur le coup, nous tous qui étions devant on a senti les balles fuser, cette espèce de petit sifflement qui passe au-dessus de la tête, on l'a tous senti. Mais lui, il dit justement que la balle n'avait pas sifflé, qu'elle était restée. En fait, tu entends des sifflements qui se prolongent et tout d'un coup il y en a un qui s'arrête. Et là tu comprends qu'il ne s'arrête pas pour rien, il s'arrête parce que tu as été touché. C'est hyper violent," interview with Amélie and Raphael, 19 April 2016 in Paris.
  7. "Nous formons donc un tas humain où je me retrouve à découvert mais le visage caché. Je ferme alors les yeux pendant deux heures. J'attends la mort en espérant qu'elle soit rapide, ou une intervention miracle.... J'ai gardé les yeux fermés mais j'ai tout entendu, la pauvre fille qui pleurait et le pauvre mec qui gémissait de douleur au loin. Je me souviens de la personne à l'agonie incapable de respirer de l'autre côté de la barrière. Et surtout, quand l'un d'eux a approché en montant sur la scène, je crois qu'il a tiré sur un mec juste derrière moi, dont le hurlement me hante encore. Le tir était si proche que le sifflement de l'acouphène a mis mon oreille droite au supplice. Je me souviens de chaque tir en espérant que ce soit le dernier et ne pas être la victime du prochain. Un sentiment d'aléatoire insoutenable" (Homo 2015a). Alexandre published his essays under the name *Ecce Homo* on *Medium*.
  8. "J'ai très peu d'images, j'ai quelques odeurs. Tout ce que je ne voyais pas je l'avais par les sons. J'entendais des tirs, des cris... Comme on ne faisait qu'entendre, j'ai développé un rapport particulier avec le son," interview with Amélie and Raphael, 19 April 2016 in Paris.
  9. "Du coup tout ce qu'on entendait dehors étaient les sons. Comme on ne voulait pas que les gens aient trop peur, tous les sons qu'arrivaient on essayait de les analyser. Il y a eu une première explosion et on leur a dit 'ne vous inquiétez pas, ce sont les grenades de la police,' mais ce n'était pas vrai," interview with Amélie and Raphael, 19 April 2016 in Paris.
  10. Interview with Claire, 18 August 2016 in Paris.
  11. "À partir du moment où nous avons commencé à progresser dans le couloir, les tirs ont cessé, et quand nous sommes rentrés, il n'y en avait plus aucun, c'était le silence. Là, la vision était indescriptible. Des centaines de corps—pour nous, tout le monde était mort—étaient enchevêtrés les uns sur les autres: devant le bar, dans la fosse, parfois même entassés sur plus d'un mètre de hauteur. On se rendait vraiment compte que les gens s'étaient jetés les uns sur les autres. Pour nous, il n'y avait aucun survivant: personne ne bougeait, il n'y avait pas de gémissements, pas de bruit, il régnait un silence glacial. Notre première réaction a été de se demander comment ils avaient fait pour tuer autant de gens en aussi peu de temps."
  12. "Là, ça a été une vision terrible. Dans la grande salle, c'était un tapis de corps humains. C'était un silence assourdissant. On entendait juste de temps en temps des sonneries de téléphone. Personne ne disait un mot. Les blessés devaient contenir leurs cris de souffrance pour ne pas attirer l'attention. A un moment, au fond de la salle, un homme est arrivé. Des collègues de la BRI [Brigade de Recherche et d'Intervention] lui ont intimé l'ordre de lever les bras en l'air. Et là, du tapis de corps humains, tous les vivants ont levé les bras. Et on s'est rendu compte qu'il y avait encore beaucoup de personnes encore vivantes."
  13. "C'était le sentiment d'impuissance qu'à un moment donné m'a donné une colère énorme, en me disant 'je suis couchée, je ne peux rien faire, je suis impuissante et ils vont me tuer,'" interview with Aude, 31 May 2016 in Paris.
  14. "Petits cons," interview with Aude, 31 May 2016 in Paris.
  15. "Nous t'avons fait un deuxième trou du cul," interview with Camille, 15 June 2016 in Paris.
  16. "Je n'arrive pas à les insulter. Pour moi ils ne sont rien, ils ne méritent aucune considération," interview with Camille, 15 June 2016 in Paris.
  17. "C'était un sentiment étrange, comme si la musique pénétrait en moi. Parce que j'étais vraiment plongée dans le bruit [de la machine]. La musique passait en moi en même temps que cette sorte de respiration assez forte," interview with Camille, 15 June 2016 in Paris.
  18. "Je me rappelle de cette chanson de Jimi Hendrix que m'avait fait beaucoup de bien. La musique m'avait manquée. C'était comme une évasion. Je fermais les yeux. Certes, il y avait ce bruit de respiration de

- l'appareil. Mais il y avait cette musique en moi et je n'avais plus l'impression d'être à l'hôpital, l'espace de quelques minutes. J'ai fermé les yeux et bougé un peu mon corps au rythme de la musique," interview with Camille, 15 June 2016 in Paris.
19. "Plus jamais je n'écouterai les Eagles of Death Metal. Je ne pourrais plus écouter leurs chansons qu'ils ont pu jouer, que j'ai entendu pendant le concert. Je n'ai plus envie, surtout parce que je n'étais pas seul. Je ne n'ai pas envie de me dire 'tiens cette musique est bonne,' alors que . . .," interview with Marc, 2 June 2016 in Paris.
  20. "Ce soir-là, ils n'ont pas seulement tué et blessé des centaines d'innocents sans défense. Ils ont aussi tué mon amour de la musique" (Homo 2015a).
  21. "J'étais incapable d'écouter un de leurs morceaux sans repenser à l'odeur du sang et de la poudre."
  22. "J'ai recommencé en écoutant de la musique assez éloignée de ce que j'écoutais avant—du classique ou du électro ambiance sur YouTube," interview with Alexandre, 30 September 2016 in Paris.
  23. "N'importe quel bruit pouvait être un danger," interview avec Amélie et Raphael, 19 April 2016 in Paris.
  24. "La musique ne peut pas s'arrêter. Il n'y a pas une journée dans laquelle je n'écoute pas de la musique. Avant la musique était une passion, maintenant c'est un fils rouge dans ma vie," interview with Marc, 27 September 2016 in Paris.
  25. "La musique est une façon de me rapprocher de lui," interview with Jean-Pierre, 21 May 2016 in Paris.
  26. "J'essaye de continuer à communiquer avec lui à travers la musique. . . . La musique est le seul endroit où je suis bien. . . . C'est un moyen que j'ai pour rester avec lui. . . . La musique est un lien que je veux garder avec lui, j'en ai besoin," interview with Jean-Pierre, 21 May 2016 in Paris.
  27. "J'avais la tête tellement remplie de plein d'information et de plein de sensations qu'il n'avait pas du tout la place pour la musique," interview with Maude, 24 March 2017 (video call).
  28. "C'était une sorte de défi pour moi de réécouter les morceaux, ces morceaux que j'avais entendu juste avant ce qui s'est passé," interview with Maude, 24 March 2017 (video call).
  29. "À ce moment-là, quand je commencé à réécouter le groupe c'était surtout pour essayer de me souvenir de certains moments qui me manquaient dans mon histoire. Je me souvenais du déroulé, je me souvenais de certaines choses, mais il y avait encore des fragments qui étaient manquant, qui étaient manquant. En réécoutant, la musique me remettait dedans, je revivais mentalement le déroulé de l'événement. Donc je pensais que certains éléments pouvaient me revenir avec l'écoute de la musique. J'avais l'impression qu'en écoutant et en me remettant un peu dedans ça finirait par revenir," interview with Maude, 24 March 2017 (video call).
  30. "J'ai appris à réentendre [leur] musique et à l'apprécier," interview with Maude, 24 March 2017 (video call).
  31. "La musique permet toujours de mettre de la vie, de la vie dans moi, des émotions, et ça continue à faire vivre," interview with Aude, 31 May 2016 in Paris.
  32. "Je pense que j'apprécie beaucoup plus les concerts qu'avant. Parce que je les vis plus. Je me rends plus compte de l'impact que la musique a sur moi. Je me rends compte à quel point un concert en live est important par rapport à la musique [enregistrée] que j'entends . . . En live, j'ai l'impression de plus en profiter," interview with Amélie and Raphael, 19 April 2016 in Paris.
  33. Convinced that artistic creation is a means of exploring aspects of human life different in nature but complementary to academic research, in 2018 I composed "Le concert d'après," a radio-inspired electroacoustic miniature based on the testimony of a Bataclan survivor I interviewed. The piece was nominated for the flashstory competition of the sonOhr radio & podcast festival 2019 (Bern, Switzerland). To know more about and listen to "Le concert d'après," see Luis Velasco-Pufleau, "Listening to No One Is Innocent after 13 November 2015." *Music, Sound and Conflict*, 15 May 2020. <https://msc.hypotheses.org/2075>.

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