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Soundtracks of Our Lives: Music-Making and Musicians in MENA Cinema

Ways of Listening: An Interview with Sound Designer Rana Eid

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Soundtracks of Our Lives: Music-Making and Musicians in Cinema of the MENA Region

WAYS OF LISTENING:
An Interview with Sound Designer Rana Eid

Rana Eid *DB Studios*

Shohini Chaudhuri *University of Essex*

Abstract | This article is an interview between sound designer Rana Eid and film scholar Shohini Chaudhuri. It explores Eid's personal and professional journey into sound and her work on MENA and international film soundtracks, highlighting the ethical, political and artistic dimensions of sound design in cinematic storytelling. Eid explains the different roles and elements of audio post-production, her preferred working practices and the different challenges of working on Lebanese, Arab and international films. Together, Eid and Chaudhuri discuss the ethics and aesthetics of sound design in fiction and documentary, and the importance of attentive listening to our environment and to each other. The discussion is illustrated with examples from the extensive portfolio of fiction feature films, feature documentaries, shorts and TV mini-series that Eid has worked on, as well as her own documentary, *Panoptic* (2017).

Keywords | Rana Eid, sound design, audio post-production, Lebanese cinema, Arab cinema, film ethics, documentary sound.

Abstract | Cet article est une interview entre la conceptrice sonore Rana Eid et la spécialiste du cinéma Shohini Chaudhuri. Il explore le parcours personnel et professionnel d'Eid dans le son et son travail sur les bandes sonores de films MENA et internationaux, soulignant les dimensions éthiques, politiques et artistiques de la conception sonore dans la narration cinématographique. Eid explique les rôles et les éléments de la post-production audio, ses pratiques de travail préférées et les défis de travailler sur des films libanais, arabes et internationaux. Ensemble, Eid et Chaudhuri discutent de l'éthique et de l'esthétique de la conception sonore dans la fiction et le documentaire, et de l'importance d'une écoute attentive de notre environnement et des autres. La discussion est illustrée par des exemples tirés du vaste portefeuille de longs métrages de fiction, de longs métrages documentaires, de courts métrages et de mini-séries télévisées sur lesquels Eid a travaillé, ainsi que de son propre documentaire, *Panoptique* (2017).

Mots-clés | Rana Eid, conception sonore, post-production audio, cinéma libanais, cinéma arabe, éthique cinématographique, son dans le documentaire.

INTRODUCTION

The sound designer Rana Eid has described her practice as "creating an identity for the image" by adding "a sense of place, time and meaning" to it.[1] Shohini Chaudhuri, the guest editor of this special issue of *Regards*, talked to her in July 2023. This article, an edited transcript of their conversation, explores Eid's journey into sound and her work on MENA and international film soundtracks, highlighting the ethical, political and artistic dimensions of sound design in cinematic storytelling. Unlike her existing interviews about individual films, this article focuses on her distinctive approach to sound design, illustrated with examples from the extensive portfolio of fiction feature films, feature documentaries, shorts and TV mini-series that she has worked on, as well as her own documentary, *Panoptic* (2017).[2]

Eid begins by describing how her journey into film sound started during her childhood in the Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) when she was brought up with sounds of warplanes and gunfire and recording became her way of overcoming the violence. She then charts how she came to be a professional sound designer, travelling to Paris in 2002 where she trained in sound editing and had the chance to observe sound personnel working on MENA films there. Instead of staying in Paris, where she was offered work as a sound editor, she decided to return to Lebanon and establish sound editing in Beirut. With composer Nadim Mishlawi, she co-founded DB Studios, a facility for sound and music post-production in Beirut in 2006.[3]

During the interview, Eid explains the different roles and elements of audio post-production, her preferred working practices and the different challenges of working on Lebanese, Arab and international films. Having collaborated with many of Lebanon's prominent directors, including Randa Chahal Sabag, Ghassan Salhab, Philippe Aractingi, Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, and Vatche Boulghourjian, she has helped to shape the sound of contemporary Lebanese cinema. Increasingly she has been involved in other projects from the MENA region and around the world. She was the main sound designer for the Oscar-nominated documentary *Honeyland* (2019) and worked as a sound effects editor with the Danish sound designer and re-recording mixer Peter Albrechtsen on another Oscar-nominated documentary, *The Cave* (2019). This, in turn, has led to

1- MISHLAWI, Nadim and EID, Rana, "The Soundscapes of Conflict", a transcript of a lecture by Nadim Mishlawi and Rana Eid at the School of Sound, London, 10 April 2015, published in *The New Soundtrack*, vol. 5, n° 2 (2015), pp. 153–165, and online. Link: https://www.schoolofsound.co.uk/read/the-soundscapes-of-conflict-a-transcript-of-a-talk-by-nadim-mishlawi-and-rana-eid-presented-at-the-school-of-sound-london-on-10-april-2015/ (accessed 1 August 2023).

2- On the Internet Movie Database, Eid has 92 sound department credits to date. See "Rana Eid" [online]. Link: https://www.imdb.com/name/nm2438745/?ref_=fn_al_nm_1 (accessed 1 August 2023).

3- For more details, see the DB Studios homepage [online]. Link: https://www.db-studios.net (accessed 1 August 2023).

further opportunities as Eid's signature ambiences and room tones have gained recognition in the international sound community.

In the second part of the interview, Eid and Chaudhuri discuss the ethics and aesthetics of sound design in more detail. As music and sound have often been used to amplify stereotypes of the Middle East in Western media, Eid underscores the importance of listening to Middle Eastern cities to represent them with greater specificity. Music and sound are both part of our everyday environments as well as film soundtracks. Eid elaborates how she approaches sound design as a form of musical composition, inspired by the practitioners of *musique concrète*.[4] The conversation then moves to the ethics of sound design in documentary, which bears a creative aspect similar to fiction. It concludes by underlining the importance of attentive listening to our environment and to each other.[5]

PART 1: A JOURNEY INTO SOUND, FROM TRAUMA TO THERAPEUTIC AND PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Shohini Chaudhuri: You've traced your journey into sound back to your experience of the Lebanese Civil War, specifically the 1982 Israeli invasion. "That was the year I decided to close my eyes and take refuge in sound", you say in voiceover in your documentary *Panoptic* (2017). In the underground bomb shelter where your family would gather, you were unable to see the violence of the war but heard it constantly from overhead. Your parents would listen to the news on a radio/tape player and you'd use this device to record the sounds around you. This seems to have been a formative experience for you as a sound designer. Can you explain how this shaped your approach to sound?

Rana Eid: When I did that, I had no intention of being a sound designer. I was six, so I didn't realize what I was doing. The very interesting thing is, it went completely into my unconscious. I couldn't remember it for years. Later, because my mom was – and is still – a huge fan of cinema, when I discovered that we have a cinema and audiovisual school [the Institute of Scenic, Audiovisual and Cinematic Studies (IESAV) at the Saint-Joseph University of Beirut], I went there. The first time I met the sound teacher, he said something about recordings, and I started crying. He asked, "Why are you crying?" I said, "Because now I remember something I used to do when I was a kid: recording." I asked my parents about it. They

4- *Musique concrète* is a method of musical composition using recordings of real-world sounds. See SCHAEFFER, Pierre, *In Search of a Concrete Music*, trans. Christine North and John Dack, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

5- Readers may also be interested in Eid's project with historian Karine Le Bail, which seeks to listen to the musical vibrations of the "imploded" cities of Beirut and the Seine-Saint-Denis department of France. See "Les vibrations souterraines des villes implosées. Scènes sonores à Beyrouth et en Seine-Saint-Denis, un projet porté par Karine Le Bail et Rana Eid est lauréat du programme CRESS – Création recherche en sciences sociales" [online]. Link: https://sons.cnrs.fr/2022/04/28/karine-le-bail-et-rana-eid-laureates-du-programme-cress-creation-recherche-en-sciences-sociales/ (accessed 14 August 2023).

found two cassettes; the others were destroyed. At this point, the teacher said to me, "Would you be interested in working in sound?" And I said, "I always did, but I forgot".

And then I did many years of psychotherapy, and I understood that, as a child, doing that was a way to record that I'm still alive, because I was so afraid of death and that my parents and neighbours would die. Recording our voices was like putting everybody in history. You'd know that we existed. We're not zombies underground. We existed. We were there. Political consciousness can start very early in a child. I was six, and that assertion – that we're still there – was a political act during the Israeli invasion. So, when I discovered all that, I found that this is my passion. Sound is part of me. It's not my job, it's me. And joining arts and physics and politics was, for me, a joy. This is what I wanted to do in life.

SC: You actually started working in sound in Lebanese cinema after you graduated and before your professional training in Paris – on Randa Chahal Sabag's *The Kite* (2003), is that right?

RE: I was a boom operator and sound mixer on set. I also did an Egyptian film, which I'm very proud of, as a boom operator – *Gate of the Sun* (2004) by Yousry Nasrallah.

SC: What did you learn during your training in Paris that you planned to apply to Lebanese cinema? Because you decided not to stay in Paris and be one among several sound editors working on Lebanese and other Arab films there, but to return to Lebanon.

RE: I learned sound design. I learned sound editing. I learned discipline, because, you know, the French way of doing things is very rigid sometimes. But this taught me how to face challenges, such as directors who can sometimes be very despotic. Paris was a tough city to be in; the rhythm can be so fast so, if you are alone there, it can feel overwhelming. It was expensive, and I didn't have money. All of this built my character. But, because I relate to politics with a capital P, I felt that I couldn't listen in Paris. The act of listening would have been wrong there. I could have worked and made a career. But I don't want to just make a career. I want to create a path, more generally and in Beirut in particular, so that my city has a proper political listening: to listen to our city, sound our city, understand the city, and be one of the people trying to build an industry. I don't know if I achieved that now, but I tried.

SC: A big part of that was establishing DB Studios in Beirut, which offers diverse elements of audio post-production, including dialogue editing, sound design, re-recording mixing, foley, automated or additional dialogue replacement (ADR), audio restoration and music. Can you explain the significance, from your point

of view, of founding this studio? How important is it that post-production work is done in Lebanon?

RE: When I came back from Paris, it was difficult for me because I'd learned the discipline. You weren't taught specialization at the cinema school here in Beirut. I met a lot of people who were doing a lot of things together – DJ-ing, sound design, music. I said, "No, no, we can't do everything together." We didn't have dialogue editing, sound effects editing and foley artists. They are different jobs. They are not one. Some people do music and sound design together, and they are brilliant, but I don't think making it a norm is healthy. It was important for me to establish that and tell people in the industry about dividing the job.

SC: Can you clarify the different roles you have played in the sound department? In your extensive filmography, you're credited as sound designer on many films. Is the role of sound designer the sound equivalent of a cinematographer, responsible for the overall conception of the soundtrack (apart from music) just as the cinematographer is for the image?

RE: I'm not a fan of making a parallelism between sound and image, because they are different, and you can add 10,000 sounds to one image. But, like cinematography, sound design is not only technical. It has a huge technical part, of course, but it's writing the story with sound. It's listening to the film. For me, sound design is writing another layer of the film. It's another aspect of writing.

SC: So it's about storytelling through sound, and adding that dimension to the film. In other films, you're also credited as supervising sound editor, which I think is another title for sound designer. Is that right?

RE: It has a small difference. It's when you have a crew. There are several sound effects editors and foley artists, and you're supervising all this, on top of doing all the sound design work.

SC: And the other roles that you've played include sound effects, sound mixer, and re-recording mixer.

RE: Sound effects editing is something I've done when I've had a chance to be in a crew with other sound designers – for example, the last film I did with Peter Albrechtsen. It was the horror film *The Evil Dead Rise* (2023). I'm now known in the sound community for the fact that I adore working with ambiences and room tones. So, Peter called me, and said, "I'm working on a horror film and I want the room to be scary. Can you do something?" I was only responsible for haunting the room and the building. Because the whole story is set in one place, I had to make the identity of the room scary. Sound mixer was a role I did before I went to Paris, when I was on location; I'm not doing it anymore, although I record a lot

of ambiences for my own library. And being a re-recording mixer, that was when, before having a crew, I didn't have any other option. When I first started, there was no division, so I did dialogue editing, I did foley recording, all by myself. But now, I am so lucky to have an amazing crew. I can supervise or do sound design or, when I have the chance, I love working with other sound designers as part of *their* crew to learn more; it's an amazing experience.

SC: When you are commissioned for a new project, do you bring your crew from DB Studios on board and do you also work with other sound teams elsewhere if it's an international production?

RE: Yes, because, in my team, we're growing together, and it's a family for me, I tend to choose from within the team. But, sometimes, we need more than one sound effects editor, for example. And sometimes, because the nationality of specific crew members can be stipulated by the funding, the production team want a re-recording mixer with a different nationality. So, I talk to the international community. We tend to, at least when we can, work with someone outside the team.

SC: So, audio post-production can really be a geographically dispersed enterprise. What kind of working practices do you prefer, in terms of pre- and post-production discussions when you're assigned a new project? What's your ideal scenario?

RE: The perfect scenario is when I get on board during the writing of the script. I'm tending more and more not to accept a film if they come too late. Because, when you come after the editing, there are problems with the rhythm. You're just doing a job at this point. You can't create with the director. You can't enhance the rhythm. You can't tell your story or build the identity of a space. Ideally, when the director is happy with a version of the script, they send it to me. Talking about the script with the director before production is extremely important because you will give them ideas for the shoot. For example, in the Palestinian-Jordanian drama *Farha* (2021) [*where the protagonist, a fourteen-year-old girl, is trapped in the locked pantry of her home during the 1948 Nakba. For forty minutes of the running time, the story takes place in that one room, while sounds of her village being destroyed can be heard outside. The violence is occasionally glimpsed through Farha's point of view via a small aperture in the wall and chinks in the door, but largely these scenes rely on her point of hearing.*] Because we worked on the scenario, I sent the sounds to the sound mixer on set. The actress had earpieces in her ear and was reacting to sounds that could be added to the space in post-production. So, when you prepare sounds, you build the choreography – not only where the actor is going, but the whole choreography of the space and the relationship of the character to the space with sounds.

SC: So, it really is about creating the identity of the space and even building the actors' performances. Clearly, there are many advantages to having those discussions early on. And in terms of afterwards, for example, in the dubbing, are there any ideal scenarios there, like coordination with other departments?

RE: The main challenge – it's a very old one – is the relationship with the music composer, because sometimes there can be an ego trip from both sides. We can have ego trips, and the music composer can have ego trips. So, who is going to take this scene – you or me, or us together? That's why, when we get to know each other before the shoot, all of this is well-balanced beforehand. When I have a discussion with the music composer beforehand, it's really very interesting because we send each other sounds. I'm now just finishing a film. I sent sound textures to the composer, and he said, "Okay, so in this scene, I'm going to only do a part, and you're going to go with your sound." And then, for another scene, I said, "Listen, this is a musical scene. I'm not going to do anything. Go ahead fully." So, with this collaboration, it's more dynamic for the whole soundtrack: music and sound.

The second challenge is a new challenge after Covid. Now it's logistically easier for us to work with directors remotely because there's zoom and source connect software that enhances the work remotely. But, especially since last year, I'm feeling that I miss the relationship with the director sitting next to me and having discussions. Because, when you're working remotely, it's very academic. You send the work. And then they send a document with comments. But it's difficult to discuss. You must have several Zoom Meetings or do something live, so you can discuss the whole concept of what you're doing. Now I'm asking producers to have the director with me for at least a week. But now another challenge is that no one wants to come to Lebanon, because it's not thought to be safe after the blast and what's been happening recently.[6]

SC: Over the years, you have worked extensively in Lebanese cinema as well as, increasingly, on films from other parts of the Arab region and international films. What do you see as the challenges of working on sound in each of these different contexts?

RE: Generally, worldwide, we lack one job. It's the creative producer. I know that in England and in the US, they have it. In Arab independent cinema, we have the producer and then the director. We don't have a middle person, between the producer and the director, who knows creatively what's happening. I don't

6- On 4 August 2020, a catastrophic explosion in Beirut's port area killed over 200 people, while injuring and displacing many others and causing widespread damage to the city's buildings and infrastructure. Lebanon is also undergoing a chronic and severe economic crisis, with hyperinflation and shortages of basic commodities, making daily life a struggle for many of its population. Furthermore, all of this has happened against the background of the Covid-19 pandemic.

blame them, because all of us are in an emerging industry, but most producers don't know what we're doing, and lack knowledge of the creative process. How much dialogue editing will we need? How much foley will we need? When do we need the final picture lock? When do we need the visual effects? The whole management of post-production is something extremely important. When you have a creative producer at the beginning, you can make the links between the key people – the editor, the music composer, the sound designer, the cinematographer – who are going to enhance the image and affect the end result. When the producer lacks this cinematographic knowledge, it's really difficult. But when we have a creative producer, the process and the workflow is amazing.

Lebanese cinema is now really suffering. I think it will suffer for a while because of our economic problems. So, for now, unfortunately, I'm not taking on any Lebanese films, since there are very few that are being shot. Some people may not like this, but I don't want to see any more documentaries about the explosion of August 4, if no one cares for the people who died, or documentaries calling what happened in 2019 a revolution.[7] We need time to understand and digest what happened; it's too soon to make a film about it.

Regarding Arab film, I'm working with the Sudanese director Amjad Abu Alala, who did *You Will Die at 20* (2019). And now he has produced another Sudanese film, *Goodbye Julia* (2023), which was in Cannes this year. There are some challenges in Sudanese cinema, because the schedule is sometimes tight, they don't have a lot of knowledge about the process in post-production, but what they're doing – the films, the scripts, the energy they have – is amazing. There's another Egyptian documentary filmmaker now making his first fiction film. His name is Ali Al-Arabi. He's part of a group with Amjad Abu Alala and others.

When working with international films, there are the general challenges: time, production, everything. I'm 47 now. I have 25 years of experience, but still, when I am asked to work on a foreign film like *Evil Dead Rise* or *Rebel* (2022), I get so excited. I'm like a little girl in front of a huge shop of chocolates. I still can't believe that I made it. Every day, I ask myself, "Why are they calling me? Why are they taking me seriously? I'm in Lebanon. I'm a Lebanese sound designer." And for me, realizing that I did it, until now it's a blessing.

SC: You also belong to the Motion Picture Sound Editors (MPSE), which is another form of international recognition.

7- In October 2019, after new tax measures (including a levy on WhatsApp communications) were announced in response to the economic crisis, tens of thousands of protesters poured onto the streets across Lebanon to demand social justice, an end to corruption and the resignation of the people in power. Yet, despite some resignations, the leading figures have stayed in power. The protest movement, known by some as the 17 October Revolution, was also stalled by the lockdown imposed by the government as a health measure during the Covid-19 pandemic.

RE: When they asked me to be a member of the MPSE, I didn't sleep for two months! My first opening to the world and sense of being on the map was when I went to the Oscars with *Honeyland* (2019) and *The Cave* (2019). You feel it immediately. That you're not the Lebanese sound designer anymore. You're a sound designer. You're an international. You're known and you have the stamp of the MPSE, so you're a serious sound designer.

SC: Does it create better working conditions for you?

RE: That doesn't change, but your family gets bigger. For example, the MPSE sponsored a huge lecture that we did in Copenhagen a few months ago. So, you know that when you want to do something and you're short on money or connections or sponsorship, they will be there for you.

SC: Do you get treated according to your experience when you work at these international levels?

RE: Yes. I don't think it's because of the MPSE. The sound community is such a nice, gentle, generous community that we all respect each other. When we talk together, it's like kids with toys: "You like ambiences? I like these effects. How can we do it?" In Lebanon, sometimes I struggle from lack of respect. Not respect, exactly, but lack of knowledge.

SC: Is any part of that gender-based? Or is gender not a factor in it?

RE: I felt it when I was 20, when I was starting. I felt it in that I don't do music, I only do sound. "You don't do music, and you're a female. You're not going to make it." This is what I heard for several years. I also heard a lot: "You're petite. You're not very tall. Maybe you can act or be a TV presenter – why do you want to do a man's job?" But now, because more than half of my crew is female – and this was just a coincidence, or maybe unconsciously it happened that way – I don't have this problem. Anyway, I don't feel it. But I feel that, especially in Lebanon, because there are a lot of problems, there's more resentment than gender bias.

PART 2: SOUND ETHICS AND AESTHETICS IN FICTION AND DOCUMENTARY

SC: In mainstream film and TV in the West, Arabic music and sounds are often used to present stereotypes about the Middle East – for example, the Muslim call to prayer, intoned by a muezzin, has become a conventional sonic cue for establishing a Middle Eastern city, and usually a marker of exotic or sinister difference.[8] Even when there are Christian bells, they tend to emphasize peacefulness in comparison to the frightening element of Islam. And so Islam figures on the soundtrack as a feared religion. The attempt to simulate local sounds often comes from a place of prejudice and assumptions, added to the fact that these elements are usually concocted quickly.[9] Can you comment on this and your own use of sound to create a more empathetic relationship to Middle Eastern cities?

RE: Listen, this is the main responsibility of sound designers and sound editors – when you have to tell the producer and the director, "No, I won't put a muezzin if I want to go to a Muslim area, or I won't put a bell". What I adore in sound is doing ambiences and room tones because, for me, sound is the identity of an image. Sound is an identity of the city. So listening to cities is extremely important. For example, in Lebanon, I know my city. I've heard it for years, so I know the little details of every area. I know what the streets sound like, the acoustics of the city, the reflections of the buildings. When I mention those small sounds, the producer and especially the director tend to say, "Oh, that's so interesting. I didn't think about that." It opens a discussion. I say, "Okay, I can put a muezzin. But let's try this to make it more dynamic and more accurate". For example, when I worked on the films from Sudan and Yemen, I would always hear all the sound rushes and even the video rushes to understand the textures of the cities, so that I, myself, won't be clichéd about them. In Sudan, there are, for example, lots of crows. I didn't want to use this bird throughout the film. I wanted to hear how people walk on the streets, the sound of footsteps, the sounds of people's behaviour in the apartments, their voices. This is, really, our responsibility to listen. And it is the main problem these days, all over the world. We don't listen. Listening is very important. It is a political problem.

8- Although it often functions as a musical cue in cinema, the call to prayer is not considered to be music in Islam. A muezzin is said to proclaim the call to prayer, rather than to sing it. For general references to musical stereotyping of the region, see SHAHEEN, Jack, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, Northampton, Mass: Olive Branch Press, 2009.

9- As Eid has previously remarked, not listening carefully to the environment produces "sonic mistakes" and breeds misconceptions. For example, in the film *Syriana* (2005), George Clooney's character is in Beirut's Shiite Muslim suburbs, but the call to prayer that establishes the place does not correspond to what you would hear in a crowded city since its dispersed reverb suggests empty surroundings; furthermore, it is the Sunni call to prayer. Eid has also characterized the use of the call to prayer to establish the Middle East as "misleading" because it implies that the whole region is Muslim, even though Christian and Jewish communities also live there. See MISHLAWI, Nadim and EID, Rana, "The Soundscapes of Conflict", op. cit.

SC: So it's about listening to the specificity of sounds that give a city, or any place, its identity. Despite the division of sound into music, dialogue and sound effects, supervised by different professionals in post-production, these areas often overlap. Your sound design has been described as "incredibly musical" by Peter Albrechtsen.[10] And I know that you are a fan of David Lynch, who has said, "The borderline between sound effects and music is the most *beautiful* area".[11] In what ways is sound design like composing music?

RE: This is a huge subject – a book on its own. You know Pierre Schaeffer and the masters of *musique concrète* in the sixties, who used sounds to make music?[12] I'm extremely inspired by them. They really changed the way I think about sound. When I was in Athens, I saw an exhibition about the composer Iannis Xenakis, and how he was using mathematical formulae to do music. For me, he's a huge mentor and teacher. You cannot dissociate music and sound. If you close your eyes and listen to anything – your home, the streets next to you – it's so well composed, you don't feel anything is odd. Okay, there are loud sounds and annoying sounds. But everything is flowing, like the molecules in physics. Everything is flowing in a complete harmony. This is why, when I work on a film, I don't divide by scene in my head. It's like doing a composition for one hour and a half. I always work on three or four scenes together, in a row, so I can have this flowing feeling of musical composition between the scenes. If you want to listen to the film for one hour and a half, you will have something very melodic and harmonious. It's like listening to life. Sound is harmonic. Those geniuses like Xenakis, Schaeffer, John Cage and Brian Eno, they changed the way we think of music – as responding to sounds.

SC: There are also particular moments where music and sound are almost indistinguishable in the films that you've made or have worked on. *Panoptic* is a kind of city symphony in which you listen to the sounds of the city as if they were music.[13] I'm thinking particularly of the opening where the black screen invites us to open our ears to Beirut's soundscape and the subsequent night-time visuals of cars teeming on the highway to a percussive beat, which is actual percussion, I think?

RE: Yes, it is music.

10- WALDEN, Jennifer, "Crafting the Stirring Sound of Costa Brava Lebanon – with Rana Eid & Peter Albrechtsen", *A Sound Effect*, 31 August 2022 [online]. Link: https://www.asoundeffect.com/costa-brava-lebanon-film-sound/ (accessed 9 August 2023).

11- LYNCH, David and RODLEY, Chris, "Ants in My House: *Lost Highway*", in RODLEY, Chris (ed.), *Lynch on Lynch*, London: Faber, 1997, p. 242.

12- See SCHAEFFER, Pierre, *In Search of a Concrete Music*, op. cit.

13- For further discussion of *Panoptic* as a city symphony, see CHAUDHURI, Shohini, *Crisis Cinema in the Middle East: Creativity and Constraint in Iran and the Arab World*, London: Bloomsbury, 2022, pp. 110–15.

SC: It's part of the orchestration with the sounds of the city. And in Mounia Akl's dystopian drama *Costa Brava Lebanon* (2021), where a family retreat to the mountains to escape the polluted city only to find a new landfill site starting on their doorstep, it seems that the sounds of the monstrous, fly-infested dump are partly made with instruments, striking sinister chords. You can hear cellos, ukulele and drums.

RE: We recorded all of that as sounds with the foley artist rather than using them as instruments. Especially in this scene, we wanted to have the audio perspective of the little girl, Rim. You know, when you're a child and there's a huge clock with a big pendulum that you're afraid of? I wanted to treat the dump as a huge, old, frightening clock for this little girl. So it was all sounds of old clocks recorded in the studio, with metal sheets, and with some enhanced sound. It's like *engrenage* [gears winding], like something is going to kill her at the end.

SC: Oh, so they are sound effects! In *Costa Brava Lebanon*, Nadine Labaki's character Souraya, who has abandoned her musical career for her family's self-sufficient mountain idyll, picks up her guitar to sing one of her songs again, "Beirut Hobbi" ("Beirut, my love"). When she pauses, sounds of the 2019 protests can be heard, as if carried on magical nocturnal winds, and become a melody in themselves before disappearing into the night. So, you have the commemoration of those protests through audio recordings. We don't *see* the 2019 protests, but we *hear* them as a kind of collective audio memory of that time.

RE: Exactly. This was due to perfect timing, showing how extremely important it is to be there from the beginning. It was a miracle that *Costa Brava Lebanon* could be filmed at all, with Covid, the explosion and everything. They couldn't bring many people to re-create the revolts on the streets. So, I immediately said to the director, "It's much more powerful if we only hear it, we don't see it. Because you're giving another perspective on the protest and our point of view. It's not a protest that ended happily. On the contrary, it didn't go well. So, when you put it as a trace, you will still commemorate it, and love it, but you know that there is something wrong in it. You can hear it with echoes, and it fades away. This is what we feel about it: it's traces of protest. It's traces of what is left of us.

SC: As well as your own film *Panoptic*, which deals with memories of the Lebanese Civil War, you've worked on numerous other films that are set during the war or that recollect it, from *Bosta* (2005) and *Stray Bullet* (2010) to *Heritages* (2013), which reflects on the director Philippe Aractingi's memories of the Civil War (and those of his wife and producer, Diane Aractingi), and, more recently, *Memory Box* (2021), which is based on the directors' personal archives – Joana Hadjithomas's notebooks and tape recordings and Khalil Joreige's photographs. In the fictional drama *Memory Box*, a box containing such items turns up at Maia's home in Canada, stirring her memories and her adolescent daughter Alex's curiosity;

secretly, Alex pores through the notebooks and photographs and listens to the tapes that Maia sent to her friend Liza, vividly evoking her mother's own teenage years in Lebanon. From a sound perspective, the film is particularly interesting because it draws on Joana Hadjithomas's tape recordings. During the war, people would make tape recordings and post them to Lebanese friends and relatives abroad to keep them in touch with what was happening at home.[14] Those tapes are a material history of the war. *Memory Box* stresses its teenage characters' attempts to live a "normal" life, underscored by a 1980s pop music soundtrack reflecting that the characters were listening to the same music that other people around the world were listening to at the time (Visage's "Fade to Grey", Kim Wilde's "Cambodia" and so on). The war is happening, but the music is, literally, playing on. What was it like to work on the soundscapes of these films?

RE: It's difficult, emotionally, to distance yourself from the traumatic childhood that you had, and be a professional sound designer, who wants to think about composition and sound. I have worked with Khalil and Joana for years. With *Memory Box*, when I discovered that Joana had cassettes as well, I told her about my relationship with tape recorders. In those sessions with Khalil and Joana, it was like digging into our memory to remember those details that a tape recorder could record: "Do you remember this shop which had a metallic sheet that would make some strange sounds?" "Yes, I remember." "You know those lamps that we used in the shelters that had a strange noise, like interference?" Because there was no electricity or phones, neighbours would shout, "Can you pass me the oil?" or "Do you have any sugar?" to each other.

When we started working on *Memory Box*, it was the second week of the 2019 protests. We were living a paradox. What do we do? Do we close the studio, do we go onto the streets with the people, or do we continue working? We closed the studio for several days and then, when I sensed that the protests were turning into something else, I said to Khalil and Joana, "Let's do what we do best. Let's do cinema and sounds, and let's leave protest and politics for other people." It was a political way of saying that "Okay, we exist. There's something happening in the region, and especially in the country, to change, maybe, the geopolitical map. But we exist and this is what we do, and we are doing something good." This was the main challenge with *Memory Box*. That's another reason why, psychologically, it was a bit difficult. But working with archives is important for me, especially when it comes to Beirut, because it's about understanding cities. Even

14- Eid refers to these tapes, in a general sense, in her 2015 School of Sound lecture: "Much of our history now exists in the form of tape recordings, which have sadly been ignored and tossed aside." MISHLAWI, Nadim and EID, Rana, "The Soundscapes of Conflict", op. cit. Another work that makes use of cassettes from the Lebanese Civil War is the audiovisual performance "Goodbye Schlöndorff" (2012) by the musician Wail Koudaih (aka Rayess Bek) with Yann Pittard. It combines musical composition with found recordings of audio letters to loved ones and extracts from Volker Schlöndorff's film *Circle of Deceit* (1981) which was made in Beirut during the conflict. See "Goodbye Schlöndorff" [online]. Link: https://rayessbek.net/good-bye-schondorff/ (accessed 15 August 2023).

when I've worked on Yemeni or Sudanese films, I've tried to make a homage to those cities and understand them.

SC: Were Joana's original tape recordings used as research or were they actually used in the film? The story is, obviously, fictional, and the film plays with fiction and reality.

RE: I listened to some of Joana's cassettes but we couldn't recreate her past and, in the end, we took the decision together to fictionalize her past. So, we based our work on the cassettes, but did something completely different.

SC: Feras Fayyad's *The Cave* (2019) is a documentary that has some parallels to your own experience. Set in a hospital with subterranean tunnels and chambers, it attempts to immerse the audience in the characters' audio experience of the Syrian war, hearing warplanes and bombing from underground, to understand what it was like to care for the injured there amid airstrikes and scarce resources. What was your role in the sound design in that film? And what's the difference, from your point of view, between sound for a documentary and sound for fiction? Indeed, are there any differences?

RE: On *The Cave*, I wasn't the main sound designer. I was one of the sound editors, and I was responsible for everything related to war, because it's my experience – underground and all! And how to create immersive sounds and the ambiences of war. When airplanes and tanks are bombing, you *feel* the bombs more than you hear them. I have experience of that, unfortunately. In *The Cave*, I gave the bombs this quality of visceral reverberation.

There are a lot of questions about morality and ethics and the difference between documentary and fiction.[15] I don't think there's a difference. A film is a film. There's nothing objective about a documentary. Even the most objective documentary is not objective. The director Werner Herzog has said that the observational, fly-on-the-wall style of cinéma vérité is a bureaucratic approach to documentary, like putting up a surveillance camera.[16] This we don't do. We're not the police. We don't survey. For me, there's no difference between working on a documentary or an essay-film or fiction. They all have a creative aspect: a point of hearing, a point of view and subjectivity. You can't be objective. Documentaries that seek to be objective are reportage. They're not artistic documentaries. For

15- For an overview of debates about the ethics of documentary sound, and the extent to which the use of sound and music differs in documentary in comparison to fiction, see ROGERS, Holly (ed.), *Music and Sound in Documentary Film*, New York: Routledge, 2015.

16- Werner Herzog's words are as follows: "for me, the boundary between fiction and 'documentary' simply does not exist; they are all just films … I fight against cinéma vérité because it reaches only the most banal level of understanding of everything around us … Through invention, through imagination, through fabrication, I become more truthful than the little bureaucrats". HERZOG, Werner and CRONIN, Paul, "Fact and Truth", in CRONIN, Paul (ed.), *Herzog on Herzog*, London: Faber, 2002, p. 253.

me, everything has a point of view. Even if you decide to put the camera there, why did you decide to put the camera there and not here?

SC: You're absolutely right that, even in an observational documentary, there are choices about where to put the camera. Even the presence of the camera alters the way people behave. Together with the editing, sound effects and music added in post-production are very obviously external, subjective elements from beyond the filmed world because they weren't present at the time. They highlight how much the *whole* of cinematic storytelling, whether documentary or fiction, is reliant on fabrication and imagination.

RE: Sometimes, you don't agree with the director's decisions. Peter [Albrechtsen] and I discussed what we were doing with *The Cave*: is it ethical or not?[17] What we do know, is that war – killing people – is unethical. Stop war, so we don't have to film it. But recreating it, so that people know about it, this is a huge question, to which we don't have the answer. Even Susan Sontag, who spent all her life asking about the ethics of images of war, didn't have an answer.

SC: Yes, towards the end of her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, after much ethical deliberation, she appears to retract some of what she has said, and declares, "Let the atrocious images haunt us".[18]

In *The Cave*, one of the team of doctors, Salim Namour, plays Western classical music on his phone while he operates: "We don't have anaesthesia, but we have music!" he states, urging those around him to listen. And there are moments when we see the characters listening to the sounds of warplanes overhead. The sounds that they heard at the time are not the same that the audience hears, but we are obviously being encouraged to place ourselves into a position of concentrated listening. In another film, Philippe Aractingi's fictional drama *Listen* (2017), a sound engineer, Joud, tries to communicate through sound recordings when his girlfriend Rana falls into a coma and her parents prevent him from seeing her, due to religious and class differences. "She can hear you, but she may not listen", a man tells him, intuiting that Joud has a loved one in that state. So, several of the films that you've worked on highlight listening as a focused act, along with a distinction between hearing and listening. What are your thoughts on this and what was your input into this dimension?

RE: This is *the* question of my life: the difference between listening and hearing. Because everyone – unless you have a problem – can hear, but very few people can listen. Of course, if you put a mic under a bomb, you won't hear it as you heard it in *The Cave*. But, as we discussed with Feras, when I was a kid, under the Israeli bombs, I didn't hear them objectively; I was hearing them with my

17- Peter Albrechtsen is credited as the supervising sound editor and sound designer on *The Cave*.
18- SONTAG, Susan, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, London: Penguin, 2003, p. 102.

skin. I was a little child, but even my parents, though they were grown up, we all heard them with our senses, being afraid of dying. Everything is multiplied by a hundred. The frequencies of the planes are extremely high. So, this is what I tried to do with the sound of bombs in *The Cave*, and how Peter re-did things during the mixing process. Everything you hear, as we said before, is subjective, and you don't only listen to it with your ears. It's with your eyes, with your soul, with your body, with your skin. When something is distant, you only listen with your ears, but when there's something *really* touching you, you listen with everything.

On *Listen*, because we worked with Philippe on the script, I was asking him, "What are the sounds in the city that you want to hear and to listen to? What are the sounds that are important to you?" So, he reflected and related all the sounds to me. I said, "Okay, these are the sounds that your character, the sound man, is going to record in the film. Because these are your sounds. This is you listening, and the audience will listen through your ears." I also tried to put in some sounds I liked.

SC: In the film, Joud gathers the sounds of the city, the sea and the mountains. The mountains are where he is from, the sea is what Rana loves, and the city is their home. Which were the sounds that you inserted?

RE: I put in a lot of the city sounds. At the time, there were billboards that turned – *swish* – like that. There are the rumbles of the generator, and I love helicopter sounds. You know, this *wu-wu-wu* sound. So, the act of listening is about *how* you want to listen, or *what* you want to listen to, especially. It is focusing on specific sounds, guided by your desire.

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ملخص | هذا المقال عبارة عن مقابلة بين مصممة الصوت رنا عيد والباحثة السينمائية شوهيني تشودري. يستكشف رحلة عيد الشخصية والمهنية في مجال الصوت وعملها للأفلام في منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال إفريقيا و للأفلام الدولية، مع تسليط الضوء على الأبعاد الأخلاقية والسياسية والفنية لتصميم الصوت في رواية القصص السينمائية. تشرح عيد الأدوار والعناصر المختلفة لما بعد الإنتاج الصوتي، وممارسات العمل المفضلة لديها والتحديات المختلفة للعمل على الأفلام اللبنانية والعربية والعالمية. يتناقش عيد وشودري معًا أخلاقيات وجماليات تصميم الصوت في الأفلام الروائية والوثائقية، وأهمية الاستماع اليقظ لبيئتنا ومع بعضنا البعض. تم توضيح المناقشة بأمثلة من مجموعة واسعة من الأفلام الروائية الطويلة والوثائقية الطويلة والقصيرة والمسلسلات التلفزيونية التي عملت عليها عيد ، بالإضافة إلى فيلمها الوثائقي الذي أخرجته پانوپتيك (٢٠١٧).

كلمات مفتاحية | رنا عيد، تصميم الصوت، ما بعد الإنتاج الصوتي، السينما اللبنانية، السينما العربية، أخلاقيات الفيلم، الصوت في الفيلم الوثائقي.

Notice biographique

Rana Eid is a sound designer and filmmaker based in Beirut. In 2006 she opened DB Studios with composer Nadim Mishlawi, and went on to offer new services in 2017 in partnership with the French company HAL Audio. For over twenty years, Rana has worked in the sound department on films and documentaries from the MENA region and around the globe. Her debut film *Panoptic* premiered at the Locarno International Film Festival in 2017, and has since been screened at over twenty other festivals internationally, winning several awards. In 2020 she became a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Shohini Chaudhuri is a professor in the Department of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies at the University of Essex, UK. Her current work builds on her research and curatorial interests in Middle Eastern cinema over the last twenty years, as well as her scholarship on world cinema and film and human rights. She is author of four books, including most recently *Crisis Cinema in the Middle East: Creativity and Constraint in Iran and the Arab World* (2022). Among her other recent publications are chapters in the edited collections *Documentary Filmmaking in the Middle East and North Africa* (2022) and *Global Humanitarianism and Media Culture* (2019).