



The Cries of the Blind

Here I am, trying to give an account of something, and as soon as I pause I realize that I have not yet said anything at all. A marvellously luminous, viscid substance is left behind in me, defying words. Is it the language I did not understand there, and that must now gradually find its translation in me? There were incidents, images, sounds, the meaning of which is only now emerging; that words neither recorded nor edited; that are beyond words, deeper and more equivocal than words.

A dream: a man who unlearns the world's languages until nowhere on earth does he understand what people are saying.

What is there in language? What does it conceal? What does it rob one of? During the weeks I spent in Morocco I made no attempt to acquire either Arabic or any of the Berber languages. I wanted to lose none of the force of those foreign-sounding cries, I wanted sounds to affect me as much as lay in their power, unmitigated by deficient and artificial knowledge on my part. I had not read a thing about the country. Its customs were as unknown to me as its people. The little that one picks up in the course of one's

Figure 1: Elias Canetti: *The Voices of Marrakesh: A Record of a Visit*. 2012. [1967]. London: Penguin Books, p. 17. Translation: Marion Boyars Publishers 1978.

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Between the Visual and the Aural: Elias Canetti's *The Voices of Marrakesh*

Abstract This chapter is concerned with the deconstruction of the visual, and by extension visuality, as a hegemonial concept and takes Elias Canetti's *The Voices of Marrakesh: A Record of a Visit* (1967) as its subject. Already in its title, Canetti emphasizes hearing rather than seeing. The book, which is divided into fourteen short-story-like chapters, both fragmentarily and phenomenologically describes Canetti's experiences and encounters in Marrakesh from the perspective of a foreign visitor. Ultimately, *The Voices of Marrakesh* is concerned with language itself, as it poetically displays and enacts the culturality of the senses through a complex web of encounters.

Keywords Elias Canetti, The Voices of Marrakesh, Deconstructing Visuality, Aurality, Fragmentary Perception

In 1954, Elias Canetti (1905–1994) accompanied an English film crew on a three-week trip to Marrakesh, where the latter were producing a fictional drama called *Another Sky* (Görbert 2012, 95). Thirteen years later, in 1967, Canetti published one of his best-selling books, *The Voices of Marrakesh: A Record of a Visit*,¹ recounting in fourteen short-story-like chapters what he had experienced while discovering the city on his own. The book is characterized by a strong interrelation between the visual and the aural. In terms of its autobiographical character, *The Voices of Marrakesh* is consistent with Canetti's oeuvre as a whole; more generally though, it describes a European traveler's encounter with a foreign culture, and because Morocco was still a French colony at the time,² this automatically places the book in a colonial context.³ However, not just the historical circumstances speak of colonial issues, as the book also belongs to the genre of travel writing that has been extensively examined and conceptualized by Mary Louise Pratt (2008). According to Pratt, colonial European travel writing, while meant to bring distant places closer to the European readers as an experience, *de facto* produced asymmetrical power structures, "creat[ing] the imperial order for Europeans 'at home'" (2008, 3). Moreover, such travel writing recounts the experiences of a paradigmatic figure, pointedly dubbed by Pratt as the "seeing-man": "He whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess" (2008, 9). Seeing and writing are thus intertwined with each other, meaning that what is described is not neutral observation, but a socio-culturally constructed visuality (► **Visuality**).

Pointing towards the concept of an expanded contact zone (► **Expanded Contact Zone**), this object distinguishes itself from the others in this volume as it transcends the more traditional notions of the object as material and visual—especially within the discipline of art history. The narrative, which takes the form of a phenomenological exploration, is here approached from a perspective of cultural analysis that aims to unhinge established relations in order to point towards alternative relationalities and methodologies. Bridging the apparent disparity of this object, it is the notion of visuality that serves as the starting point for our discussion of *The Voices of Marrakesh*. The very title of the book emphasizes hearing rather than seeing, and throughout its chapters the visual and the aural are continuously foregrounded and juxtaposed, pointing to an awareness of the cultural pitfalls of sight while simultaneously offering a counter model. *The Voices of Marrakesh* incorporates, thematizes and explores the status of objecthood on a more abstract level, *enacting* both its own and its object's cultural and historical entanglement.

1 It was first published in German as *Die Stimmen von Marrakesh: Aufzeichnungen nach einer Reise* and appeared in English in 1978.

2 Morocco would regain its independence just a year after the events described in the book.

3 For an extensive overview, see Görbert 2009 and 2012; for a discussion considering issues of interculturality, see Durzak 2013, and Fetzi 2009.

Visuality is closely linked to power structures. Especially in colonial contexts, the visualization of a colony through, say, travel writing is an “imaginary, rather than perceptual” process which entails the manifestation of “the authority of the visualizer” located in the alleged cultural center (Mirzoeff 2011, 2). This can be glimpsed in the chapter “The Dahan Family”, when Canetti meets the aunt of Élie, a young man he encountered: “She put me in mind at first glance of the kind of Oriental women Delacroix painted. She had the same elongated and yet full face, the same eyes, the same straight, slightly overlong nose” (1978 [1967], 67–68). This reference to the painter Delacroix testifies to the workings of imperial visualization, revealing Canetti’s own vision as constructed. Delacroix, whose paintings are generally thought to be accurate depictions of what he saw, in fact often painted from memory and pursued a literary aesthetic ideal (Noon 2015, 27). North Africa was thus regarded as a source for narrative material that implicitly produced a cultural hierarchy, one ultimately taking the form of the imaginary (► **Orientalism**). Canetti acknowledges this by referring to an instance of such an aesthetic ideal.

A kind of assimilatory reversal of this notion occurs in the second chapter when Canetti visits the souks: “Their activity is public, *displaying* itself the same way as the finished goods” (1978, 19–20, emphasis original). The narrator is amazed by all the goods the market offers and describes how the trading itself becomes an object on display. He continues by drawing a comparison: “In a society that conceals so much, that keeps the interior of its houses, the figures and faces of its women, and even its places of worship jealously hidden from foreigners, this greater openness with regard to what is manufactured and sold is doubly seductive” (1978, 20). Canetti highlights the visibility of the open and explains how it is in fact the visible itself that is enticing. What is more, he is wary of the fact that what he sees is a (self-) representational staging of goods for visitors: It is imaginary. What happens at the market is thus a broadly defined visuality: “[...] the ways in which both what is seen and how it is seen are culturally constructed” (Rose 2012, 2). Canetti questions the visible he is offered, for he realizes its artificiality as visuality.

In offering itself, the open thus stands in stark contrast to the hidden in the city of Marrakesh. While “neither doors nor windows” obscure the visitor’s gaze in the streets, “[t]he houses are like walls” (Canetti 1978, 20, 35). What is inside is isolated and hidden. The availability and perceptibility of the city is therefore discontinuous and fragmentary (► **Fragment**). *The Voices of Marrakesh* mirrors this in its structure, for each of the fourteen narrative threads is a fragment, a totality in itself but characterized by a discontinuous relationship to the whole. It is not meant to represent the whole, but rather a facet of what Canetti has encountered there, revealing him as the perceiver. Sibel Bozdoğan (1988, 41) calls such an approach an “experiential sequence” (► **Affect**). Referring to Le Corbusier’s *Voyage d’Orient*, she explains that “[h]is primary preoccupation is less the Orient than the harmony of place and time and the understanding of his own

self in it" (1988, 38). This also applies to *The Voices of Marrakesh*, as Canetti thinks *about* the city rather than picturing it. Through the discontinuous, he considers both his relation to the city and the manner of representing it. Thus, the spatio-temporal discontinuity that constitutes the city meshes with visuality, as the impossibility to perceive a totality is acknowledged.

While Bozdoĝan (1988) refers to a visual source, Canetti takes this notion a step further and away from the visual. This is already suggested by his verbal description of Marrakesh, which effectively creates a tension between verbalization and visualization. By making *voices* central to the title of his book, moreover, Canetti points to sound as offering an alternative, immediate, and subject-related mode of perception, thereby implying a critique of the predominance of the visual. Because sight does not require "incorporation [of] or a physical contact" to its object, it is considered to be the most objective sense; linked to rationality, it involves a hierarchization of the perceiver and the perceived (Hertel 2016, 184). By contrast, Hannah B. Higgins (2017, 218) puts forward the notion that sound is not so much associated with "translation or interpretation" as itself a thing to be perceived. This idea is conveyed when Canetti encounters the blind ("The Cries of the Blind"): "I wanted to lose none of the force of those foreign-sounding cries. I wanted sounds to affect me as much as lay in their power, unmitigated by deficient and artificial knowledge on my part" (1978, 23). Here, he realizes the immediacy of perception potentially inherent in hearing that is affective rather than illuminative. Yet, even though he refuses to understand the Arabic or Berber languages, "the word 'Allah' remain[s]" (1978, 23), providing him with his most pervasive experience:

They begin with God, they end with God, they repeat God's name ten thousand times a day. [...] The calls are like acoustical arabesques around God, but how much more impressive than optical ones. [...] Repetition of the same cry characterizes the crier. You commit him to memory, you know him, from now on he is there; and he is there in a sharply defined capacity: in his cry. You will learn no more from him; he shields himself, his cry being also his border. [...] But the cry is also a multiplication; the rapid, regular repetition makes of him a group (1978, 24).

It is in this encounter that the tensions between vision, knowledge, and language become evident (► **Expanded Contact Zone**). The blind are deprived of their vision and reduce themselves to the aural and the transcendental; and they do so in an organic, infinitely expandable manner that both defines and augments them. Their cries are perceived as an approximation to God taking the abstract form of an ornament. The directness of the aural thus allows for absorption and experience, for interpretation, however, only after the fact. In describing the above, Canetti exemplifies how the blind men's aggrandizement of God becomes an abstraction transcending meaning.

In *Die Provinz des Menschen* (first published in German in 1973 and in English as *The Human Province* in 1978), Canetti notes after his return from Marrakesh that “Since my trip, a number of words have been charged with so much new meaning that I can’t utter them without provoking major turmoil inside myself” (Canetti 1993, 199). He speaks of meaning language cannot grasp, for the experiences in Marrakesh have unhinged familiar meanings and conventions. As a representational medium, then, language is reevaluated, and the mode of perception is questioned insofar as the dominance of the visual is destabilized. In this regard, *The Voices of Marrakesh* anticipates postcolonial writing in being marked by a sensory focus that counters the visual and disrupts literary genre conventions (Hertel 2016, 192). Voices belong to individuals; they are polyphonic and perceived not as detached but as immediate. It is this immediacy that reveals—albeit often from within—the pitfalls of a visuality which, tellingly, emerged precisely in order to overcome great distances. The focus on the other senses as exhibited in *The Voices of Marrakesh* thus points towards a decentering of visuality with the promise of creating a balance in which the subject and its relation to its surroundings is foregrounded, in order to allow meaning to proliferate.

Figure

Fig. 1: Photo: Isabella Krayer.

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