Introduction to Critical Discussion Forum: Socialist Sound Worlds

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A lot happens when we press play. To prepare, we select a particular format of sound storage—maybe vinyl, magnetic tape, polyethylene, or an mp3—for the parsing, processing, and amplification of that format's content. Once things start moving, we inaugurate a listening experience that may seem effortless, but which has undergone meticulous social conditioning, and which is informed by our own deep histories of listening, aurality, and attention. In the long term, this process is not as rigid as it sounds: listening has always been flexible, and historians of the concert hall have told us a twisting and turning story about audiences who did not always think it was proper to stay silent, and who did not always feel the need to pay much attention to what took place in front of them.[1] But today, anyone who chooses to play a spoken word compilation instead of a jazz LP (long-playing record) at a cocktail party might not find such a receptive crowd. Facilitated by internet streaming and downloading, this relatively new ability to amass intensely personal sonic archives often clashes with the contextual demands of where, when, and how certain forms of listening are meant to be enacted: the cocktail party often dictates a particular aural accompaniment, one more amenable to music than an audiobook. For such a widely practiced activity, why do the modern activities of storing, distributing, and amplifying sound, which have grown kaleidoscopically complex in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, remain undertheorized in Slavic studies? What would it mean to think about these questions and their repercussions in east European modernity? And what might listening to east European history and culture tell us that our other senses cannot?

We organized this Critical Discussion Forum, "Socialist Sound Worlds," to demonstrate some of the many benefits that can be gained from a materially

1. These works have largely described the historical development of what Pierre Bourdieu famously called *habitus*, and the most exemplary is James Johnson's *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berekley, 1996)

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grounded approach to the histories of sound, sound recording, and the distribution of these documents during the long twentieth century. To suggest that culture developed in tandem with state socialism is nothing groundbreaking on its own, but we want to dig in a little deeper: as our contributors show, sound reproduction evolved from a technique for playing music or capturing voice memos into an intimate exchange of personal documents, a method for capturing unofficial oral histories, or a vehicle for the state to embalm and manipulate political memory. To study the history of sound reproduction in socialism thus brings to light a variety of overlooked agents and catalysts within the broader histories of these spaces, which conjoins "Socialist Sound Worlds" with a longer tradition that elevates the importance of material relationships and everyday life in the eastern bloc.[2] While other scholars have certainly asked about the role played by song, music, or (to a lesser extent) sound, we bring these discussions into dialogue with the understanding that material conditions and constraints always structure sonic practices, and how this world of ever-changing things has been reified into the affective and intellectual relationships with which we are much more familiar.[3] In our contemporary moment, when public memory of life under socialism comes under intense revisionism from a re-invigorated global right, we hope that grasping and listening for the past can bring new clarity to a story that has grown increasingly fractious.

A reader of this journal might ask how our specialized interest could help other scholars sift through archives that seem (at first glance) silent, or which seemingly have little connection to the history of sound reproduction in state socialism.[4] We pursue the material histories of sound neither as an excuse to cordon ourselves off within an intellectual burrow nor to claim that the concerns of our work are relevant for every type of project or inquiry found under the umbrella of Slavic studies. Instead, we want to explore specific problems that plague sound and listening's treatment in scholarly literature: how objects for sound storage and playback have long teetered between legitimate document and novelty, how they blur the lines between technological

2. See, for example, works like Alexey Golubev, *The Things of Life: Materiality in Late Soviet Russia* (Ithaca, 2020); Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005); Anne E. Gorsuch, *All This is Your World: Soviet Tourism at Home and Abroad after Stalin* (Oxford, 2011); Stephen V. Bittner, *The Many Lives of Khrushchev's Thaw: Experience and Memory in Moscow's Arbat* (Ithaca, 2008); Paulina Bren and Mary Neuberger, eds., *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe* (New York, 2012); and Susan E. Reid and David Crowley, eds., *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe* (Oxford, 2000).

3. See, for example: Katerina Clark, "Aural Hieroglyphics? Some Reflections on the Role of Sound in Recent Russian Films and its Historical Context," in Nancy Condee, ed., *Soviet Hieroglyphics: Visual Culture in Late Twentieth-Century Russia* (Bloomington, 1995); Stephen Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age: A History of Soviet Radio, 1919–1970* (Oxford, 2015); Lilya Kaganovsky and Masha Salazkina, eds., *Sound, Speech, Music in Soviet and Post-Soviet Cinema* (Bloomington, 2014); Oksana Bulgakowa, *Golos kak kul'turnyi fenomen* (Moscow, 2015); Kristin Roth-Ey, "Listening Out, Listening For, Listening In: Cold War Radio Broadcasting and the Late Soviet Audience," *Russian Review* 79, no.4 (Fall 2020): 556–77: Daniel Schwartz, "Between Sound and Silence: The Failure of the 'Symphony of Sirens' in Baku (1922) and Moscow (1923)," *Slavic Review* 79, no.1 (Spring 2020) 51–75.

4. On listening to written archives, see Ana María Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Durham, 2014).

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breakthrough and pop culture errata, and how their reputation in scholarship has performed a similar balancing act. It is only through addressing these micro-histories that their lessons might be seen (and heard) in expected or unexpected spaces across the macro level.

Our decision to privilege the histories of sound and listening to break through the myopia that results from these scholarly horizons is no accident. The articles in this discussion forum build on the historicization and theorization of the human senses that has flourished over the last thirty years, which has argued that the human sensorium's malleable quality makes it both the subject *and* object of history.[5] Indeed, it is now uncontroversial to assert that feeling is always contingent upon political and cultural forces that inform subjects how they *should* and *could* feel. Many histories and theories of sensory experience, however, have prioritized *vision*—a side effect of what Martin Jay has called the "scopic regimes of modernity."[6] In response to this somewhat lopsided focus, aural experience has recently become a lightning rod for scholarly interest, which in turn has led to a variety of new claims filed under the broad subfield of "sound studies."[7] Some have argued that sound is a powerful tool for the reconstruction of historical identities[8]; that sound engages mind, body, individual, and community at once, and thus blurs distinctions between people, places, and things[9]; that noise (dis)organizes ways of being and experience in the world[10]; that spanning the phenomenological and epistemological, listening collaborates with the other senses to shape

5. Jacques Rancière, for example, argues that the audible is inextricably linked to both the experience and formation of power structures. See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill, intro by Gabriel Rockhill (London, 2004).

6. Martin Jay, "Scopic Regimes of Modernity," in Hal Foster, ed., *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle, 1988).

7. On the history of sound studies as a discipline, see Jacek Blaszkiewicz, "Will Sound Studies Ever Emerge?," *Journal of the History of Ideas Blog*, at https://www.jhiblog.org/2021/02/10/will-sound-studies-ever-emerge/ (accessed November 16, 2023)..

8. See, for example, Alain Corbin, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the Nineteenth-Century French Countryside*, trans. Martin Thom (New York, 1998); Sarah Keyes, "'Like a Roaring Lion': The Overland Trail as a Sonic Conques," *The Journal of American History* 96, no. 1 (June 2009): 19–43; Mark M. Smith, "Still Coming to 'Our' Senses: An Introduction," *The Journal of American History* 95, no. 2 (September 2008): 378–80; and Richard Cullen Rath, "Hearing American History," *The Journal of American History* 95, no. 2 (September 2008): 417–31.

9. Richard Leppert, *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation and the History of the Body* (Berkeley, 1995); Michael Bull, *Sounding Out the City: Personal Stereos and the Management of Everyday Life* (Oxford, 2000); Andra McCartney, "Soundscape Works, Listening and the Touch of Sound," in Jim Drobnik, ed., *Aural Cultures* (Banff, 2004), 179–85; Tom Rice, "Listening," in David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, eds., *Keywords in Sound* (Durham, 2015); Michelle Lewis-King, "Touching as Listening: Pulse Project," *Journal of Sonic Studies* 4, (2013), available online at https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/290934/290935, (accessed November 27, 2023).

10. As Jacques Attali writes, "With noise is born disorder and its opposite: the world." See Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1985), 18. See also Niall Atkinson, "Sonic Armatures: Constructing an Acoustic Regime in Renaissance Florence," *Senses and Society* 7, no. 1 (March 2012): 39–52; and Michael Bull and Les Black, "Introduction: Into Sound," in Michael Bull and Les Black, eds., *The Auditory Culture Reader* (Oxford, 2003).

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identity and form subjectivities.[11] "Socialist Sound Worlds" builds on many of these claims, but it also complicates them. For example, Jonathan Sterne has coined the phrase "audio-visual litany" to describe a well-entrenched, misguided division of sensory experience that draws fundamental, epistemological distinctions between the senses of vision and hearing, as some of these claims do.[12] Sterne cautions against two outcomes of the audio-visual litany: that hearing has often been associated with a kind of lesser-than, primitive, or diminished quality of observation, and also that hearing can be fetishized and siloed, treated as a special sense that gives access to special knowledge in and of itself. To call hearing and listening a sensory experience associated with a *different* way of experiencing the world is to overlook how it is just as imbricated within the world of material things and social experience as the other senses. Sound is not just sound, nor does it speak only to aural experience: the culture of sound and listening entangles aural, material, visual, tactile, and social relationships, and its history is as expansive, complex, and revealing as visual culture.

Thus, in this forum, we promote a renewed awareness of the conditions that undergird both the production and imagination of aural experiences. Accordingly, we argue that re-evaluating and re-contextualizing the role of the ear in space can challenge our typical interpretive outcomes—not because we actually *hear* something different, but because the process forces us to think differently, however briefly, about *how* we hear and listen. To that end, each case study in this forum complicates many of the distinctions and assumptions that have structured a cultural studies field largely committed to specifically periodized histories of literature, cinema, and music. We hope reaching across these boundaries will draw readers from an interdisciplinary crowd to the forum—not just Slavicists, but also historians, musicologists, and anthropologists who are interested in the intersections between aesthetics, politics, and aural experience.

In order to keep our analyses firmly afoot, each author in our forum chooses a particular material for sound recording to use in a specific case study—ranging from vinyl, magnetic tape, and polyethylene—as a jumping off point for deeper discussion. Bringing a diverse methodological frame to bear on its subjects, each article enriches our understanding of east European aural history by bringing to light new stories of socialist experience that often diverge in meaningful ways from those that have been prioritized by literary, cinematic, and cultural historiographies of state socialism. Drawing on archival documents and a rich trove of sound recordings, Matthew Kendall develops a lineage of Soviet noise in the works of Viktor Shklovskii and other

11. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Minneapolis, 1997); Peter Szendy, *Listen: A History of Our Ears*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York, 2008); Holly Watkins, "Response to Peter Szendy's *Listen: A History of Our Ears*," *The Opera Quarterly* 31, no. 1–2 (Winter-Spring 2015): 145–49. Avoiding the normalization of sound in sound studies, recent work in disability studies has made strides in nuancing the idea of listening as the single or primary sense in the construction of subjectivity. See, for example, Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor, 2008).

12. Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, 2003).

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literary scholars. He sets the deterioration of magnetic tape recordings—the crackle and hiss that hi-fi enthusiasts or archival purists might otherwise decry—into dialogue with the voices it obscures. Rather than hear this noise as a defect, Kendall argues that it is precisely in this space between decay and information that amateur recording enthusiasts and state sound engineers experienced a broader social encounter. Ultimately, his article ends with a call for greater attention to this archival noise by historians and literary scholars alike.

Like Kendall, Gabrielle Cornish listens beyond the "message," to play with McLuhan's phrasing, to pay special attention to the "medium": gramophone records. Following state recording efforts to remix and remaster recordings of Lenin's speeches, she traces a genealogy of state power across expanding media formats. Attempts to "revive" Lenin's voice in the decades following his death necessarily involved the imagination of both audio engineers and listeners, which in turn reveals changing conceptions of power over the Soviet epoch. Using archival sources alongside LPs and flexidiscs, Cornish's essay traces the connections between voice, format, and mythology across the Soviet epoch and proposes a new understanding of socialist realism in audio media.

In her essay about "sound postcards," Andrea Bohlman pulls our cluster westward, to socialist Poland. These postcards (*pocztówka dźwiękowa*), often homemade, were shared in intimate social gatherings. Their "hand-to-hand" circulation, Bohlman argues, speaks to both broader lacunae in the Polish recording industry and a fickle relationship to both state socialism and western capitalism. Part ethnography, part documentary research, part mixtape, Bohlman's essay ultimately advocates for a new understanding of the sound archive: one that includes repair, recycling, resurrection, and audible intimacy.

Finally, Lilya Kaganovsky provides a response to our three studies, sitting in a metaphorical mixing booth and playing with levels to orchestrate what sounds, materials, and, most importantly, voices can offer the field of Slavic studies more broadly. She asks whether a "socialist sound"—a utopian quest for coherence—is possible at all and, if so, what that reveals about east European socialism that the visual cannot. Her emphasis on the voice—be it real, imagined, or metaphorical—is a fitting end to our cluster. If the first three essays focus on sound's materiality, it seems only fair that her response focuses on academia's materiality—the written, printed words of a journal article.

Taken together, Kendall's, Cornish's, and Bohlman's essays alongside Kaganovsky's response position sound in its multiple ontologies—material, audible, metaphorical, cultural—as formative components of identity under state socialism. Yet much like the sound objects of our study, we, too, are bound by format. The geography of our studies is limited to the Soviet Union—and, more specifically, Soviet Russia—and Poland, but there is much more work to be done to more fully explore the lived realities of socialist sound in the eastern bloc and beyond. As materials, some of these sound recordings traveled far and wide. In so doing, they entered into a globalized system of exchange that already challenges their specific placement within a particular

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time and place. Our hope is that presenting this work here can motivate future research in those spaces that lie beyond our areas of expertise—but which remain crucially important to understanding the rest of eastern Europe, Siberia, Central Asia, and spaces under the Soviet sphere of influence in the Global South. Rather than suggest our cluster is the final word, we hope our work provokes further study that nuances and, indeed, complicates our conclusions. Consider these essays as the start of a conversation; as new voices join the dialogue, we are eager to listen.

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