

# Room for Noise in Soviet Sound Recording

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In 1981, the theorist and critic Viktor Shklovskii spoke with two visitors to his Moscow apartment. One was the journalist Vladimir Radzisheskii, and the other was a machine. As the men talked, the machine listened, and it pressed each sound they made onto a moving strip of cellophane tape. This process is commonly called tape recording, and Shklovskii was no stranger to it: Radzisheskii's mentor, the literary scholar Viktor Duvakin, also brought a *Reporter-3 magnitofon* reel-to-reel recorder to Shklovskii's apartment in 1967 and 1968, hoping to add their conversations to Duvakin's growing, unofficial archive of Soviet oral history.<sup>1</sup> Duvakin's grandson, Dmitrii Sporov, has now published these recordings and many others through his internet-based Moscow Institute for Oral History, where several hours of Duvakin's audio documents are freely available.<sup>2</sup> Sporov's virtual pantheon of voices from the Soviet Union has opened exciting and crucially important frontiers for any scholar of twentieth century Russian intellectual history, but some users of the website might encounter a problem: because several tape recordings deteriorated for decades before researchers recovered them, the tantalizing *Real* that sound documents promise ("so that's what they *actually* sounded like!") is sometimes deferred. For example, at one point in his conversation with Radzisheskii, Shklovskii declares that "[in the 1920s] the human voice became a tool. . . to organize people into groups that know where they're going and what they're doing," but the tape warbles and breaks, replacing

1. See Sporov, Dmitrii. "Zhivaia rech' ushedshei epokhi: Sobranie Viktora Duvakina," *NLO*, 2005: 4, at <https://magazines.gorky.media/nlo/2005/4/zhivaya-rech-ushedshej-epohi-sobranie-viktora-duvakina.html> (accessed January 9, 2024). Duvakin was motivated to preserve hundreds of Soviet voices in response to a sudden change in his professional life: in the spring of 1966, he was fired from Moscow State University's philology faculty after publicly coming to the defense of his former student, the writer Andrei Siniavskii, at a widely reported show trial. Duvakin joined forces with university students like Radzisheskii and his future wife, Marina Radzisheskaiia, who helped the professor record, catalog, and transcribe some three hundred interviews. Radzisheskii's personal account of his time spent with Duvakin can be found in his article, Vladimir Radzisheskii, "Izgoi s dopotopnym magnitofonom: Zhizn' posle katastrofy," *Znamia*, no. 12 (2004), at <https://znamlit.ru/publication.php?id=2531> (accessed January 9, 2024).

2. The Institute's website can be accessed at <http://www.oralhistory.ru>; it features nearly 100 interviews conducted by Duvakin and several other notable sound recordings. Many of the site's recordings have now been transcribed and translated into multiple language, and Shklovskii's interviews with Duvakin and Radzisheskii (<https://oralhistory.ru/talks/orh-814>) were recently translated into English and annotated by the scholarly team of Slav Gratchev and Irina Evdokimova as *Dialogues with Shklovsky: The Duvakin Interviews 1967–1968* (Lanham, MD, 2019).

Shklovskii's voice with what many would perceive as meaningless, interrupting, or extraneous noise.

How should we evaluate these imperfectly embalmed voices, and is there anything significant about their imperfections? What is the distinction between hearing this noise and reading an otherwise tidy transcript? This essay re-contextualizes the role of what is often called "noise," and it does so by offering a more detailed historical account of the reception and theorization of noise within practices of Soviet sound recording. In what follows, I argue that noise in Soviet recordings can and should be heard as an indexical marker of alternative modes of perception that rival official, state-sponsored narratives. I am thus suggesting a particular value that this noise can have for listeners today. Doing so departs from familiar misconceptions about sound recordings' relationship to reality, which have treated vocal recordings as the reproduction of an authentic, live presence, or which have framed sound recording as the capture and storage of an unadulterated truth (such approaches unintentionally reproduce utopian desires the Soviet state had for the use of this technology).<sup>3</sup> Instead, making room for noise allows us to grapple with the *failures* of sound recording, and to rediscover important features that a listener might at first interpret as defects or accidents. This micro-case study thus shows that Soviet sound recordings can be heard as much more than a struggle between noise and information: they are spaces that blurred the lines between artistic or imaginative creation and historical documentation, and which facilitated a larger encounter between amateur recorders and their state counterparts.<sup>4</sup> The first half of this essay clarifies precisely what I mean by "noise," and shows how Soviet ideas about sound recording

3. There are many sources for these misconceptions. Walter Ong's *Literacy and Orality* (London, 1982) is probably the most well-known work to have argued that the "liveness" of voice rivaled the powers of the "literariness" of the written text, a tendency that Mary Ann Doane identified in her essay, "The Voice in Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space," *Yale French Studies* 60 (January 1980): 33–50. There, Doane shows that advertisements for both cinematic sound and home stereo systems in the 1970s "aimed at diminishing the noise of the system, concealing the work of the apparatus, and thus reducing the distance perceived between the object and its representation." In Soviet intellectual history, Lev Shilov's books *Golosa, zazvuchavshie vnov': Zapiski zvukoarkhivista* (Moscow, 1987) and *Ia slyshal po radio golos Tolstogo* (Moscow, 1989) were some of the first works of literary criticism to consider what it might mean to listen critically, but they assumed that vocal recordings could stand in as nearly perfect representation of the voices of Russian authors. Oksana Bulgakova in *Golos kak kul'turnyi fenomen*, Moscow, 2015, has recently tempered this claim by naming the recorded or broadcast voice as a "media double," thus rejecting the idea that the mediated voice is superior or at all comparable to an original. Most recently, Tom McEnaney, "Rigoberta's Listener: The Significance of Sound in Testimonio," *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 135, no. 2 (March 2020): 393–400, has examined the Hoover Institute's prized collection of *Testimonio* cassette tapes from Latin America and Cuba, but he critiques the institute's blunt interpretation of these tapes as evidence for the failures of socialism, and argues instead for the value of listening closely to the texture of each recording.

4. To some degree, the blurring of this distinction has also been explored in discussions of well-known *magnitizdat* recordings of Soviet bard songs, which achieved a cult status through an underground distribution network. These recordings strived (but often failed) to uphold sonic clarity and intelligibility after multiple re-recordings and copies, an unintended effect that has been discussed at length in J. Martin Daughtry's

differed from those that emerged in other contexts; the second half re-introduces Shklovskii's theories of language, perception, and art to better frame the value of Duvakin's project and noise for amateur Soviet sound recording.

### The Noise of Tape

Working conceptually with noise is often made difficult by the vague quality of the word itself. At its broadest, "noise" refers to the physical contact of sound waves with an eardrum, regardless of the content of that sound. But "noise" can also speak to a more specific, metaphorical notion of unwanted, undifferentiated excess, as it does in philosophical writings associated with figures as far afield from each other as Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Kittler.<sup>5</sup> These negative characterizations have done little to prevent the emergence of niche communities that appreciate contemporary noise music, but they undoubtedly motivated urban noise abatement leagues from the early twentieth century to call this type of sound a social nuisance.<sup>6</sup> While the poet Aleksandr Blok embraced the sounds of "music of the revolution," Osip Mandel'shtam wrote about his own tumultuous age and biography as if it were trailed by a "noise of time." This proposed pairing of noise and sound as that which is undesirable versus that which is inevitable has stayed with us: in correspondence with me, Sporov characterized his work for the Oral History institute as a rescue mission that saved sound recordings from "dust and garbage," thus dividing extant recordings into those that were salvageable and those permanently ruined.<sup>7</sup>

For some recordings in which noise or other interrupting factors become prominent, the Oral History Institute's transcribers have compensated by inserting the phrase "[нрзб]" ("nerazborchivii," or "unintelligible") into each textual accompaniment, thus designating noise as a feature that does

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"Sonic Samizdat': Situating Unofficial Recording in the Post-Stalinist Soviet Union," *Poetics Today* 30, no. 1 (2009): 27–65.

5. Schopenhauer's essay "On Noise," is more of a diatribe than a serious discussion on sense perception, but it has reached its popular culture apogee with a recent mention in Todd Fields' film *Tár*; Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford, 1999), has influentially argued that phonography permanently introduced noise into twentieth century discourse and sense perception. Jonathan Sterne's recent book (*MP3: The Meaning of a Format*, Durham, 2012) on the history of sound recording formats put Kittler's ideas into practice by exploring the gradual habituation of listeners to damaged, diminished, or "masked" audio production that incorporates noise as a cost-saving technique.

6. On noise abatement, ideas about the potential for noise to communicate, and a variety of cultural responses to noise in the Soviet Union, see Matthew Kendall, "Boisterous Utopia: Dziga Vertov's *Enthusiasm* and Soviet Sonic Culture" *Russian Review* 81, no. 3 (July 2022): 528–48.

7. This fate was not unique only to private collections, but became an endemic problem for the treatment of sound recordings even in official Soviet archives. A 1975 state investigation into the central Soviet archive of sound recordings, now known as RGAFD, Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Fonodokumentov (Russian State Archive of Sound Recordings) found piles of decaying, uncategorized recordings in stairwells, and discovered that many catalogued recordings had gone missing. See GARF (Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii) Fond (f.) P8131, opis' (op.) 39, delo (d.) 2.

not deserve encoding.<sup>8</sup> Using these four letters as a placeholder, however, expresses something quite different from a listener's encounter. For example, the placeholder does not give a clear indication as to why or how the noise of each recording fails to signify: did the tape rot? Is the recording apparatus malfunctioning? Has the recorded subject become upset, distracted, or otherwise turned away from the microphone?<sup>9</sup> If we want to name the significance of this noise more precisely than [нрзб], we can take a strategy from scholars working in affect theory, who reject the idea that noise is an exception or negation within signifying acts. Marie Thompson has argued that treating noise as a negation proposes an artificial category of "natural" sound versus unnatural noise, and Thompson has instead characterized noise as a kind of middle ground that overcomes binary oppositions between meaning and non-meaning (or natural/unnatural), thus imbuing semiotic systems with "greater complexity and variety, increasing their capacity to act."<sup>10</sup> For the purposes of this short essay, I follow Thompson's lead by using the word noise to refer to those moments when a sound recording meaningfully indexes the medium of recording itself, particularly in a way that surpasses a simple, phatic form of self-referentiality. The noise that interests me thus communicates supplementary information about the context, intentions, and political positioning of the recording and recorder(s) in question, and carries the possibility of radically reframing our perception of both.

Part of this task requires that we listen to old recordings with new strategies. To better understand what this type of listening entails, it is helpful to consider another sound document stored at Moscow's RGAFD, the Russian State Archive of Sound Recordings.<sup>11</sup> While speaking into the microphone of a *Shorinofon* system in 1936, the actress Alla Tarasova announces that "together with leading academics and inventors, our government recognizes and commends those who make our art and literature."<sup>12</sup> Just moments after uttering the phrase, a recording technician interrupts Tarasova to tell her that she has mistakenly transposed the word *deiateli* (creators) in place of *deiatel'nost'* (activity), thus personalizing the phrase and deviating from the

8. Radzishevskii's interview with Shklovskii, and its accompanying transcript, can be accessed at: <https://oralhistory.ru/talks/orh-814> (accessed January 23, 2024).

9. On multiple occasions while speaking with Shklovskii, Duvakin verbally references the device itself (many of these have entered the transcripts: "Well, now is the end of the tape . . ."; "Is it already recording?"), showing that sound recording yielded its own type of manufactured and premeditated verbal responses and behaviors.

10. See Marie Thompson, *Beyond Unwanted Sound: Noise, Affect and Aesthetic Moralism* (New York, 2017), 55. In a similar vein, David Novak has called noise a "crucial element of communicational and cultural networks," see Novak, "Noise" in *Keywords in Sound* (Durham, 2015), 125. Other notable integrations of noise with aesthetic activity and appreciation include recent works from John Melillo, *The Poetics of Noise from Dada to Punk* (New York, 2021); and Ross Chambers, *An Atmospherics of the City: Baudelaire and the Poetics of Noise* (New York, 2015).

11. At the archive's 1932 opening ceremony, the Soviet minister of enlightenment, Anatolii Lunacharskii, declared that sound recording could offer yet another Soviet means of triumphing over death, celebrating how "living speech recorded on the gramophone will stay with us as long as we want." *Chelovecheskoe slovo moguchee*, RGAFD, f. 193, op. 41902-I, d. (Doc-3444)

12. RGAFD, f. 1, zapis' no. 138, "*Deiateli nashego iskusstva i nashei literatury*."

script assigned to her. A second take is required, but the tape screeches forward instead of backwards, inserting a high-pitched squeal in between both versions of Tarasova's speech. The recording is thus divided by noise that separates two slightly different sentences, forming a sonic tear that prompts the listener to hear competing versions of Soviet history: one is constructed and restricted by the bounds of the scripted word, while the other accidentally reveals by the features, demands, and flaws of the recording apparatus—the tool of historical production itself—through a single squeal.

But such observations or techniques of listening are not unique to our contemporary moment. By the 1940s, Soviet officials started to grow concerned that the state's faulty, noisy sound recordings (like those featuring Tarasova) were not up to par with those produced by the rest of the world. In response, they coined phrases to describe and enforce a desired quality of Soviet sound recording, aiming for sound that was "brighter" (*iarche*) and never "harsh" (*rezkii*).<sup>13</sup> Eventually, the state even smuggled home microscopically enlarged photos of grooves in vinyl records pressed in West Germany, so that they could compare foreign craftsmanship with domestic, Soviet products.<sup>14</sup> Doting over the quality of a sound recording, however, was not a pastime reserved exclusively for Soviet officials. No one thought and wrote more about it than the amateur photographer, ethnographer, and recording hobbyist Leonid Volkov-Lannit, who in 1964 published a book of popular science, *Iskusstvo zapechatlennogo zvuka* (The Art of Sound Recording). The book appeared in Soviet libraries the same year that Marshall McLuhan's wildly influential *Understanding Media* filled western bookshelves, and although he was wholly unaware of McLuhan's approach to mediation, Volkov-Lannit put forward a McLuhan-like lineage of media: he suggested that sound recording in particular had reached the vanguard of mechanical recording by inheriting strategies from other media (photography, phonography) for reducing noise and interference.<sup>15</sup> Somewhat counterintuitively, Volkov-Lannit prized the successful mastery of noise reduction, because a pristine recording could index the human hand that facilitated the illusion of noise-free mechanical capture. Sound recording was thus always noisy, and it was the operator's task to "naturalize" it, which became particularly important after consumer-grade magnetic tape democratized the recording process, but introduced much more noise into the system: "Tape isn't inferior to a vinyl record because it is a cheaper medium, nor because its spinning reels can have variable speeds.

13. RGALI (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva), f. 962, op. 3, ed. khr. 1936. This aspiration for the future precision of sound recordings was likely influenced by the conversely freewheeling culture of Soviet radio, for which live events and speeches from the early 1930s were littered with errors, mishaps, and unexpected interruptions that are passed over or ignored—it is only in their recorded counterparts where the goal for sonic perfection can often be found at every turn. See Stephen Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age: A History of Soviet Radio, 1919–1970* (Oxford, 2015).

14. RGALI f. 962, op. 3, ed. khr. 1936.

15. See Leonid Volkov-Lannit, *Iskusstvo zapechatlennogo zvuka: Ocherki po istorii grammoфона* (Moscow, 1964). Throughout Volkov-Lannit's narrative, he insists that "noiseless material" (*bezshumnyi material*) is the ideal vector for sound recording, but acknowledges that there is no such material available.



Instead, it's because when a user duplicates a recording, it greatly raises the level of noise (*shum*). No copy has ever surpassed an original."<sup>16</sup>

What at first seems like Volkov-Lannit's aversion to noise in general is made more complex by his concluding remarks about copies and originals. Unlike the state's critics, Volkov-Lannit anticipated that noise would linger in recordings by design, and throughout the book he demonstrates a muted acceptance of its enduring role in recording. His biography might explain why: Volkov-Lannit was arrested in 1941, sent to a labor camp, and eventually imprisoned in a psychiatric institution until Iosif Stalin's death. While imprisoned, sound recording produced objects of immense personal value for Volkov-Lannit. In 1952, he wrote to the writer Lev Kassil', a close friend with powerful connections, hoping to expedite his release: "You very likely know that I have lost absolutely everything—my health, my drawings, my manuscripts (among them two manuscripts by Vladimir Maiakovskii), and half of my sound recording archive (*fonoteka*), including the entire card catalogue that accompanied it."<sup>17</sup> Volkov-Lannit would spend the rest of his life rebuilding and writing about that interrupted archive.

This embrace of noise management would have been somewhat unfamiliar to intellectuals outside of the Soviet Union. There, the New Left in France eventually laid the groundwork for what remains the most widely cited theory of noise to this day, the economist Jacques Attali's 1977 book *Noise (Bruits)*. Attali suggested that historical changes we can observe in the appreciation of noise were not merely expressions of a shifting cultural base, but that they actually prophesied the *future*, because the combative nature of noise had forcibly, on its own, changed that very cultural base.<sup>18</sup> *Noise* inspired generations of musicologists and cultural historians, but Eric Drott has recently disputed Attali's legacy by levelling a common-sense critique: the idea that futurity can be found in only sonic objects too simplistically flips Marx's base and superstructure model and conveniently overlooks the particular cultural and technological reasons for that noise's production in the first place.<sup>19</sup> Instead of simply applying Attali to the Soviet situation, we can find a compelling, alternative theory of noise had already appeared in the Soviet Union seven years before Attali's book was published, in one of Yuri Lotman's central works from his Moscow-Tartu school, *The Structure of the Artistic Text* (1977). Lotman did not comment specifically on sound recording, but he indirectly developed Volkov-Lannit's writings by metaphorically embracing the inevitability of noise as a strategy that allowed listeners, readers, or observers to resist narrow modes of perception:

16. *Ibid.*, 227.

17. Letter from Leonid Volkov-Lannit to Lev Kassil', 1952. RGALI, f. 2190, op. 2, ed. khr. 92.

18. At his most straightforward, Attali writes: "in noise can be read the codes of life, the relations among men in musical structure, and more precisely, what is elided from musical structure demonstrates the workings of culture." Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis, 1985), 6.

19. See Eric Drott, "Rereading Jacques Attali's *Bruits*," *Critical Inquiry* 41:4 (Summer 2015): 721–56.

Noise [*shum*] drowns out information. All forms of destruction—the muffling of a voice due to acoustic interference, the destruction of books from mechanical causes, the distortion of a text’s structure due to the censor’s interference—all these are noise in the communication channel.

... there is no difference between an extra-systemic [*vnesistemnyi*] fact and a fact belonging to another system. For a Russian who does not understand French a conversation in the latter will be just as much a disturbance as mechanical noise.

Art—and here it manifests its structural kinship to life—is capable of transforming noise into information.<sup>20</sup>

When Lotman concedes that noise can never *not* be present in a world now reliant on mechanical reproducibility and censorious state apparatuses, he develops a major theme already present in Volkov-Lannit’s thinking. “Acoustic interference” does *not* jeopardize perception, nor does it diminish appreciation. Instead, recognizing the management of noise (or its lack thereof) enables a listener to perceive the decisions that go into the process of sonic capture, thus transforming it into a multivalent and interpretable art, as Volkov-Lannit specifically called it. In Lotman’s schema, the process of recording is much more than the capture of information, but a technique for managing undesirable noise that reveals a great deal about that very manager. It is a site where noise can distinguish the official from the unofficial—and thus the artistically productive—in Soviet culture. Tarasova’s recording, for example, demonstrates how by forcibly interrupting, noise reveals the rules for the construction of an official document; Duvakin’s recordings persist through their noise, ignoring these rules.

### *Obshchii shum*

What might Shklovskii, one of the most influential Soviet thinkers on topics ranging from modern perception to the social utility of art, have thought about the tape recorder’s reels spinning in front of him? And why did three men who devoted their lives to the study of literature (Duvakin, Shklovskii, and Radzisheskii) decide to put their voices on noisy, fallible tape instead of the page?<sup>21</sup> On the day Shklovskii met with Radzisheskii, the two were discussing Volkov-Lannit’s photography, and while it is only a coincidence that he became a topic of the interview, Volkov-Lannit and Shklovskii undoubtedly shared an interest in early forms of Soviet medium-specific thinking. We might recall a phrase Shklovskii used to describe his early days of working in Soviet cinema, when he claimed that the film studio was “processing” him (*obrabatyvaet menia*) just as much as it processed its subjects in front of

20. See Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, trans. Ronald Vroon, Ann Arbor, 1977, 75.

21. Relatedly, the film director Mikhail Romm put his own oral memoirs independently to tape throughout 1966 in the spoken word record, *Ustnye rasskazy*. Although likely unaware of it, Romm recorded his recollections contemporaneously with Khrushchev’s own set of audio memoirs, which were clandestinely put to tape to avoid their potential, politically motivated destruction.

the camera.<sup>22</sup> Shklovskii had long participated in a form of non-mechanical sound recording as well: he dictated much of his writing and criticism to his wife, and later to his secretaries.<sup>23</sup>

But Shklovskii's thoughts about noise were complicated. In the same memoir where he described himself as an object processed by larger, mediating forces, Shklovskii warned that it was easy to confuse noise (*shum*) with the real deeds (*rabota*) of history.<sup>24</sup> He developed this seeming aversion to noise in one of the final essays he wrote, where he discussed the promise and potentially deleterious effects of television:

[Before television,] Writing contained living sound (*zhivoi zvuk*) within the box (*korobochka*) of the word . . .

But we now read without even noticing words, we read automatically, not reading words in their entirety—by now we've been saying “*zdra*” instead of “*zdravstvuite*” for a very long time . . .

All of that noise (*shum*) and chaos falls right onto the heads of children.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the gloomy pronouncements at the heart of this essay, there are many reasons to question how serious Shklovskii's aversion to noise and chaos really was. For one thing, Shklovskii's attitude towards sound and listening significantly changed during his lifetime. In a retrospective essay from 1963, Shklovskii wrote that he regretted his misinterpretation of the significance of non-linguistic noise in Dziga Vertov's early sound films, admitting that he was “deaf” before a later moment of recognition.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Shklovskii began and ended his intellectual career by writing about *Zaum'*, a Russian and Soviet nonsense poetry movement that blurred the lines between signifying language and seemingly meaningless sound. In the same year he wrote about television, Shklovskii made a statement similar to Lotman's ideas about noise, where he acknowledged that the dividing line between noise and information is where the potential of art emerges: “Our perception of the world is not linguistic. The language of *Zaum'* is the language of pre-consciousness, it is the rustling of the chaos of poetry, it is a proto-literal, proto-linguistic chaos, from which everything is born, and unto which everything will return.”<sup>27</sup> Here, Shklovskii obliquely endorses the power of noisy systems, in which the medium can never be the *only* message. Instead, it is the *breakdown* of the medium itself, and all the noise that might result from it, that allows for the possibility of a significant signal. Of course, we should not be surprised to find a hint of Shklovskii's

22. Viktor Shklovskii, *Tret'ia Fabrika* (Moscow, 1926) in the essay “Ia pishu o tom, chto bytie opredeliaet soznanie, a sovest' ostaetsia neustroennoi” (16).

23. Shklovskii's stenographic reliance is often noted, but it is explicitly stated in an interview with Liubov' Arkus, who worked as his secretary at the end of his life (at <https://seance.ru/articles/shklovsky-125/>).

24. See “*Vechera u Brikov*” (64), in *Tret'ia Fabrika*.

25. See Shklovskii, “Nerazgadannyi son” (1984), in *Za 60 let: Raboty o kino* (Moscow, 1985), 508.

26. From “*Poiavlenie slova*” in *Za 60 let*, 162.

27. See Shklovskii, “*O Zaumnom iazyke. 70 let spustia*” (1984), in Shklovskii, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 2018), 1:281.



famous concept of *ostranenie* (defamiliarization) in this maneuver, in which an encounter with noise refreshes the message it interrupts.

Finally, we should consider what it would mean to listen to noisy recordings *without* considering their complex abilities to signify that I have discussed above. In 1919, the popular Soviet writer Efim Zozulia explored this form of listening by publishing “Gramophone of the Ages,” a short story about a device that can replay the sonic history of any space, but which repels listeners. The inventor of the failed device is crestfallen to hear his audience complain that the noise of time is too grim, too boring, and too painful to hear, calling it a cacophony of “cruel sounds” (*zhutkie zvuki*): “your invention is fantastic,” explains one listener, “but it’s completely useless. The old world should be damned, forever! We don’t need its cries, we don’t need its horrors. We don’t want to listen to its cruel voices!”<sup>28</sup> More destructive than anything else the machine emits is a torrent of indecipherable noise—“*obshchii shum*,” Zozulia writes—that muffles voices of protest and change trying to escape from underneath it.

Zozulia’s story presciently mirrors the dilemma we face as listeners today, but I have suggested that we should not dread the “*obshchii shum*” that hangs over this damaged, noisy, and fragmented recording of Shklovskii and Radzishevskii. When the source material to sift through is a pile of damaged recordings, how else could we meaningfully answer calls for more serious considerations of listening, audio culture, and sound? Noise tempers our unrealistic expectation that tape will simply deliver the past to us unmediated, and the noisy artifacts of sound recording—many of which are still waiting to be acknowledged in scholarship—demonstrate how amateur recorders challenged the production of historical memory in the Soviet Union. Making room for noise allows a listener to do much more than acknowledge a recording’s proposed contents: it indexically points to the specific context that yielded these recordings, and if we follow Lotman, the interference that hovers over (and sometimes structures) these documents is a salient, important marker of the recording’s unofficial qualities. It is only by embracing the entirety of these difficult artifacts, noise and all, that we can begin to adequately understand the achievements of Duvakin, his group, and other recordings waiting to be found.

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28. See Efim Davidovich Zozulia, “Grammofon vekov” in *Masterskaia chelovekov i drugie grotesknye, fantasticheskie i satiricheskie proizvedeniia* (Odessa, 2012), 170–71.