

# Afterword: Resonant Objects

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«В старой телефонной книжке имена людей, к которым уже нельзя позвонить»<sup>1</sup>

—Виктор Шкловский, Тетива: о несходстве сходного

“Maintaining and joining, the telephone line holds together what it separates.”

—Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*

The papers in this cluster—and sound studies more broadly—attune our ears to hearing and listening, to paying attention to that “other” important sense of modernity: the aural or sonic that so often is asked to play second fiddle to the visual. The challenge of sound studies, Jonathan Sterne reminds us, “is to think across sounds, to consider sonic phenomena in relationship to one another—as types of sonic phenomena rather than as things-in-themselves—whether they be music, voices, listening, media, buildings, performances, or another other path into sonic life.”<sup>2</sup>

In this case, we are pushed to think about the importance of the voice (and *sound* more generally) in socialist cultures, from the cinema—at first, silent, deaf, mute, unable to speak (but speaking all the time; all those intertitles and actors mouthing words we cannot hear)—to sound recording devices capable of preserving memory traces and restoring them to us in some form (usually distorted by technology, by history), but nevertheless, indexing a certain kind of authenticity, fidelity, a certain kind of imaginary presence. The voice on the phonograph, tape recorder, plastic disk or radio, like Proust’s grandmother on the telephone,<sup>3</sup> the voice haunts us, catches us off-guard. It is an acoustic (or catacoustic) echo of a time before, reverberating in the present.

1. Viktor Shklovskii, “In the old telephone book, the names of people (to) whom one can no longer call,” in *Tetiva: O Neskhodstve skhodnogo* (Moscow, 1970), 15.

2. Jonathan Sterne, ed., *The Sound Studies Reader* (New York, 2012), 3.

3. Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past, Vol. II: The Guermantes Way*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York, 1982).

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“Ever since the invention of sound recording technology,” writes Yoko Tawada in her essay, “The Art of Being Nonsynchronous,”

it’s been just as easy to preserve the human voice “as a manuscript.” Not only can a voice be recorded and played back again as often as desired, it can be copied, cut, and edited as well. The voice is no longer something that must be produced on the spot from a living body. It’s now become commonplace, one can say, for the owner of a voice not to be physically present when the voice is heard.<sup>4</sup>

Whereas Friedrich Kittler reminds us, “Plato, as a lawmaker for an ideal city, proposed that its size be limited to the range of a voice, which would broadcast laws or commands.”<sup>5</sup>

But whose voice? What matter who’s speaking, or for that matter, hearing? (to paraphrase Foucault paraphrasing Beckett).<sup>6</sup>

We might think of modernist city symphonies—as Daniel Schwartz does—organizing the world by means of sound (both recorded and not); utopian attempts to turn an entire city into a performance space specifically *by means of sound*, to amplify the din of factories and the clanking of machines that would have already been a part of the urban scape and experience of modernity into something *symphonic* (what Dziga Vertov also tried to do with his first sound film, *Enthusiasm: The Symphony of the Donbass*) rather than what they would have actually been heard as: cacophony. The opposite of this utopian project is precisely the Italian futurist “Art of Noises” that does not try to bring out the unifying, synchronization of sound into a melodic whole, but instead, revels in the chaos of all the sounds at once:

With evocative names like Howlers (*Ululatori*), Roarers (*Rombatori*), Cracklers (*Crepitatori*), Rubbers (*Stropicciatori*), Bursters (*Scoppiatoris*), Gurglers (*Gorgoliatori*), Hummers (*Ronzatore*), and Whistlers (*Sibilatore*), these hurdy-gurdy like contraptions produced and “tuned” noises by accentuating their dominant pitch.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, we might say that the west / capitalism is about visual and sonic division, while socialist utopia imagines their unification. This might be why western media scholars often focus on visual phenomena like glass houses, which were instrumental in the articulation of “modern conceptions of transparency.”<sup>8</sup> But the early fears for the Crystal Palace or the auditory space

4. Yoko Tawada, “The Art of Being Nonsynchronous,” trans. Susan Bernofsky, in Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin, eds., *The Sound of Poetry, The Poetry of Sound* (Chicago, 2009), 187.

5. Friedrich A. Kittler and Matthew Griffin, “The City is a Medium,” in “Literature, Media, and the Law,” *New Literary History* 27, no. 4 (Autumn, 1996): 717–29, cited from 717.

6. Samuel Beckett, “What matter who’s speaking, someone said, what matter who’s speaking,” in Samuel Beckett, *Texts for Nothing*, trans. Samuel Beckett (London, 1974), 16; Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Third Edition (New York, 2018), 1396.

7. Daniel P. Schwartz, *City Symphonies 1913–1931: Sound and the Composition of Urban Modernity* (forthcoming, Montreal, 2024)

8. Scott McQuire, *The Media City: Media, Architecture and Urban Space* (Los Angeles, 2008); quoted in Shwartz.

of Sergei Eisenstein's *Glass House* (sometimes, rarely, referred to as *Glashaus*, but never written in Russian) to the degree that we can imagine it from his notes,<sup>9</sup> was of too many voices speaking at once, which would create the effect of the Tower of Babel, a pure cacophony that could shatter glass. (But of course, is it not actually vibration—in other words, sound produced in rhythm and unison—that shatters glass? Or, collapses bridges when soldiers walk across them?)<sup>10</sup> In this vein, it is interesting that Fedor Dostoevskii's observations of the Crystal Palace point in the opposite direction: toward total silence; the visitors of the Crystal Palace are stunned into silence by the transparent structure, their voices muted rather than amplified by its optical properties. (Not unlike silent cinema, I guess.)

"Socialist" sound on the other hand, is about unity, not just Evgenii Zamiatin's OneState, but OneVoice—the voice of Lenin / the leader / the nation. The "muzhik listening through headphones" is not an image of the atomized isolated individual (as it would be in the land of Capitol), but rather, of connectivity, of participation in the larger utopian project of building socialism. And this is done through collective listening (as Gustav Klutsis's "kiosks" with their transparent screens and gramophone pipes make so clear).<sup>11</sup> We might say—following a lead from the Crystal Palace to the *Glass House*—western capitalism is imagined in visual terms (as beautifully transparent structure housing sonic chaos or deafening silence within) while Soviet socialism is imagined through sonic collectivity, a collective listening, an echo of the OneVoice that unites us and that delineates and defines socialist space through embodied hearing.

But either way, prosthetics are necessary and the distance between bodies and voices should give us pause. Martin Jay reminds us that according to Edward T. Hall,

Up to twenty feet the ear is very efficient. At about one hundred feet, one-way vocal communication is possible, while a two-way conversation is very considerably altered. Beyond this distance, the auditory cues with which man works begin to break down rapidly. The unaided eye, on the other hand, sweeps up an extraordinary amount of information within a hundred-yard radius and is still quite efficient for human interaction at a mile.<sup>12</sup>

There is something complicated in the relationship between sight and language: "the ability to visualize something internally is closely linked with

9. Sergei M. Eisenstein, *Glass House: Du projet de film au film comme projet*, trans. François Albera (Dijon, 2009).

10. Mechanical resonance: structures like bridges and buildings, although they appear to be solid and immovable, have a natural frequency of vibration within them; when a force is applied to an object at the same frequency as the object's natural frequency, it will amplify the vibration of the object, potentially shattering it.

11. On the history of Soviet radio and "the muzhik listening through headphones," see Stephen Lovell, *Russia in the Microphone Age: A History of Soviet Radio, 1919–1970* (Oxford, 2015); on Gustav Klutsis's kiosks, see Ana Berdinskikh [Cohle], "Wireless Transmissions: Early Russian Radio and Modernist Poetics" (PhD diss., Yale University, 2021).

12. Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension* (Garden City, 1969), 42–43; as cited in Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, 1993), 6.

the ability to describe it verbally”; there is a link between vision, visual memory, and verbalization, which point to the ambiguities surrounding the word “image” that can signify graphic, optical, perceptual, mental, or verbal phenomena.<sup>13</sup> The eye, in other words, is radically different from the ear; which is not to say the ear is an inferior organ, especially when aided by “exosomatic” prostheses, such as the telephone, loudspeaker, stethoscope, or hearing aid (or microphone and other “listening” devices).

Speaking of Plato and “the denigration of vision”: in his famous essay on the functioning of the cinematic apparatus, Jean-Louis Baudry notes that the strangest thing about the whole apparatus (as imagined by Plato in his “Allegory of the Cave”) is that instead of projecting images of natural / real objects, of living people, etc. onto the wall / screen of the cave as it would seem only natural to do for simple shadow plays, Plato *feels the need*, by creating a kind of conversion in the reference to reality, to show the prisoners not direct images and shadows of reality but, even at this point, “a simulacrum of it.” He is “led to place and to suppose” between the projector, the fire, and the screen, something which is itself a mere prop of reality: “figures of men and animals in wood or stone or other materials.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, the prisoners’ access to reality / the Real is one more step removed from what is already, after all, a play of shadows: it is not the shadows of the figures of the men behind them that the prisoners see projected on to the cave wall in front of them, but puppets made in the image of humans and animals. The visual register is one of double deceit.

But not the sonic. In Plato’s cave the image is doubly removed from “reality,” which speaks to the way Baudry and others have come back again and again to Plato’s cave as an allegory for the cinema. But here is a curious thing. As Baudry goes on to note, “all that is missing is the sound,” in effect “much more difficult to reproduce, to copy, to employ like an image in the visible world; *as if hearing, as opposed to sight, resisted being caught up in simulacra.*”<sup>15</sup> Yet, while “*real voices will emanate from the bearers,*” they too will give themselves over to the apparatus thanks to reverberation (that thing that Russian philosophers wanted not to exist).<sup>16</sup> “And suppose their prison had an echo from the wall facing them?” asks Plato. “When one of the people crossing behind them spoke, they could only suppose that the sound came from the shadow passing before their eyes.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, the apparatus integrates into itself “these excessively real voices” by taking over the voice’s echo. The shadows “speak” with real voices that echo from the wall in front of them.

13. Robert Rivlin and Karen Gravelle, *Deciphering the Senses: The Expanding World of Human Perception* (New York, 1985), 53; Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 8.

14. Jean-Louis Baudry, “The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches to the Impression of Reality in the Cinema,” in Philip Rosen, ed., *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (New York, 1986), 299.

15. *Ibid.*, 304.

16. Nikloli Fedorov and Vladimir Solov’ev both rejected the contemporary science of sound as a vibration, suggesting instead that sound was the purest art of feeling that was borne of a divine truth, not physical phenomena, see Matthew Kendall, “Sound Works: Model Listeners in Soviet Art, 1929–1941,” (PhD diss., University of California – Berkeley, 2019).

17. *Ibid.*

For Baudry, this places sound in an entirely different relationship to reality than the visual image. For him, in cinema—“as in the case of all talking machines”—one does not hear an *image* of the sounds but the “sounds themselves.” Only their source of emission partakes of illusion, but their “reality” cannot. In procedures for recording, sounds are “reproduced, not copied,” even if / when playing them back distorts them. This, he says, is one of the basic reasons for the privileged status of voice in idealist philosophy and in religion: voice does not lend itself to “games of illusion,” or confusion between the real and its figurative (because voice cannot be reproduced figuratively) to which sight seems particularly liable.<sup>18</sup>

A conventional notion of echo suggests a “mere” repetition or copy of the original, without its full acoustic richness (which is how I imagine Baudry is theorizing it here). But we might think here instead of what Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe calls the “catacoustic,” a kind of “inner echo,” an archaic term for the science of reflected sound that for Lacoue-Labarthe is “comparable to all the phenomena of reminiscence.”<sup>19</sup> In catacoustics, the subject perceives itself as haunted by a melody or a voice, caught up in a rhythm. Not an artificially imposed rhythm (everyone marching in lockstep), but in the natural rhythm of the reverberation or echo. Catacoustics (and indeed the modern study of acoustics) tells us that echo is never (just) a partial and degraded repetition of some true and rich original: while it is true that an echo repeats only a portion of the original signal, it does so in a way that conveys an enormous quantity of additional information that was not in the original signal. This is why we can *always* tell when sound has been rerecorded for a film—its echo / reverberations are entirely new and different. This is why you cannot simply add “diegetic” sounds to a recording that did not previously have it or to overlay Lenin’s voice recorded in a studio with a recording of an audience that was not there to hear it. Like rear-projection, a recording of a recording, it produces a jarring sense of the non-synchronicity of sounds, spaces, voices, and bodies.

Sound (through echo) *demarcates and defines a space*. In our case, it defines *socialist* space.

Which brings us to Lenin’s voice, to recordings of the “real Lenin” and the need to found an archive to preserve his voice, as well as to this voice’s reproduction and projection via gramophone pipe and loudspeaker (*rupor*) throughout the USSR. In the 1920s, the spoken word, as Stephen Lovell has argued, “received new kinds of amplification, both literally (in the form of the loudspeakers that were set up in public places in urban areas) and metaphorically (in the form of broadcasting).” Radio offered a way of “projecting the voice of authority into every workplace and communal flat in the USSR and of showing Soviet people exactly how to ‘speak Bolshevik,’” writes Stephen Lovell—but also, to listen and to hear?<sup>20</sup>

18. Baudry, “The Apparatus,” 306.

19. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Christopher Fynsk, ed., *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, introduction by Jacques Derrida (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 150–51.

20. Stephen Lovell, “Broadcasting Bolshevik: The Radio Voice of Soviet Culture, 1920s–1950s,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 48, no. 1 (January 2013): 78–97; here: 80.

It was specifically sound recording technology and optical sound-on-film technology that enabled the transmission of Lenin's voice from beyond the grave, from beyond their original, hardly adequate recordings. "During work on our previous film in Leningrad our group attempted to transfer Lenin's voice to film," wrote Vertov in 1934,

because of the imperfection of the sound camera, the results obtained were not very satisfactory. Work in 1933 (done by sound engineer Shtro) turned out more successfully. Lenin's voice came out better on film than on the phonograph record ... In this way we found it possible to preserve Lenin's voice on film and to present Vladimir Ilych speaking from the screen.<sup>21</sup>

For the Soviets, the preservation of Lenin's voice on film took on almost mystic qualities. "Science and technology," wrote E. Yaroslavsky in 1932, "have preserved Lenin in motion on film ... Science and technology have preserved Lenin's voice: eighteen gramophone records, eighteen Lenin speeches."<sup>22</sup> Yaroslavsky calls on all the workers' clubs and reading rooms to save these records, so that Lenin's voice will sound its call from "beyond the grave ... And then, Lenin's words, the voice of the long dead leader will sound like a military command from the far past: do not stop! Continue working, perfecting, making life better!" Celebrating the advances in science and technology, Yaroslavsky nevertheless bemoans the fact that sound film technology did not come soon enough: "What an immense impression we would have now, if the development of sound cinema had not come too late."<sup>23</sup>

Sound on film pushed Soviet socialism as a whole toward synchronization. For a cinema professional, such as Viktor Shklovskii, writes Irina Sandomirskaya, the advent of sound cinema made cinematic time extremely complex, since the development time of sound, such as speech, is much slower than that of the image. Cinematic mimesis would now be achieved by the more complex work of combining two illusions: visual and audial. "Inconsistencies" were no longer possible: "there must be complete synchronization between the visible and audible components of the realist illusion."<sup>24</sup>

The new synchronization demanded a clarity of speech that "avant-garde practice had muddled," calling for "sensitivity and intelligibility (e.g., hearing, acoustics)."<sup>25</sup> Apologizing for his earlier formalist, avant-garde, futurist tendencies, Shklovskii wrote:

We abolished the cornice, the column, the rustication of walls, ornamentation. By abolishing the aesthetic, we violated the design—the corners of

21. Dziga Vertov, "Kak my delali fil'm o Lenine" (1934) in Stat'i, dnevnik, zamysli (Moscow, 1966); Vertov, *Iz naslediia*, tom. 2 (Moscow, 2008), 261–62; here 261; "How We Made Our Film about Lenin," *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O'Brien (Berkeley, 1984), 115–17.

22. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva (RGALI, Russian State Archive of Literature and Art) f. 2091 (Vertov), op. 1, ed. khan. 92; see also E. M. Iaroslavskii, *Zhizn' i rabota V. I. Lenina* (Leningrad, 1925).

23. *Ibid.*

24. Irina Sandomirskaya, *Past Discontinuous: Fragmenty restovratsii* (Moscow, 2022), 482–83.

25. *Ibid.*, 483.



our houses became wet, and the voice in our buildings, without meeting the discord of ornament, slid, as cars sometimes slide on ice. The voice became muddled, the word became blurred, the art of simplicity and asceticism became inaudible.<sup>26</sup>

Speaking at the First Congress of Soviet Writers, he said, “We. . . former LEFists, removed the useful from life, thinking that it was aesthetics, we, being constructivists, created such a construction, which turned out to be unconstructive.”<sup>27</sup> Sound recording devices separated voices and bodies, while optical sound-on-film technology reassembled them through false synchronization. But the traces of that non-synchronicity can still be heard; the individual’s voice haunts us from beyond the grave, breaking through the unifying, terrifying OneVoice, OneState.

Written (or dictated, or compiled) toward the end of his life, Shklovskii’s *The Bowstring* (Tetiva, 1970) is a primer on talking to ghosts. It is a book about muteness and stuttering, about the failures of speech and a lack of articulation, but also, and at the same time, the desire and the need to look at everything closely, in “slow motion and as if through a magnifying lens.”<sup>28</sup> We might note that these all have something in common: film cameras, telephones, and magnifying glasses are technologies meant to extend our sensory organs, allowing us to hear and see things at a distance, to bring closer things that are far away. They speak to a failure or incompleteness in/of the body that requires technical and technological support—a prosthesis to make good on lack.

But *The Bowstring*, like its taut title, is also a book about reaching out into the world; it is about connection and disconnection, and, ultimately, about the impossibility of linking the past with the present and the future. Telephones connect people, places, they cover long distances, but the threat of a lost connection, of a dropped call, haunts the caller. The telephone exists, the telephone book exists, the names in it are organized alphabetically, the phone numbers are written down next to the names, the call can be made, the telephone will ring, but the people on the other end of the line are gone. The telephone rings in a void. (Or worse: the call is picked up by someone else.)

“When does the telephone become what it is?” wonders Avital Ronell.<sup>29</sup> “It presupposes the existence of another telephone, somewhere, though its atotality as apparatus, its singularity, is what we think of when we say ‘telephone.’ To be what it is, it has to be pluralized, multiplied, engaged by another line, high strung and heading for you.”<sup>30</sup> Alexander Graham Bell was not inventing the telephone, she notes. He was trying to reach the dead, trying to communicate with his brother who had passed away.

26. Viktor Shklovskii, “O klassitsizme voobshche i o klassikakh v kino” in *Sobranie Sochinenii* (Moscow, 2019), 1:940.

27. *Pervyi Vsesoiuznyi s’ezd sovetskikh pisatelei: Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow, 1934), 155.

28. *Ibid.*, 26

29. Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology—Schizophrenia—Electric Speech* (Lincoln, 1989; reprint, London, 1991), 4.

30. *Ibid.*, 3.

For Shklovskii in 1970, his telephone book holds the names of people he can no longer call. Like the power lines evoked throughout the book (his grandmother's *toque*, «ТОК» / electrification), or the metaphor of the bowstring, there is a high wire tension to this work that attempts to think back, think together, speak to, reread, and rethink the past in order to connect it to the present and imagine it a future. But it is clear that this desire for futurity has come full circle; the avant-garde has become the *arrière-garde* (as Mikhail Epstein once put it)<sup>31</sup>; the future imagined by the past is no longer connected to any present.

How vital, in that case, for us to listen to / for the interruptions, the inconsistencies, the mistakes, the noise of the system. How lucky we are to have someone's (an individual, not necessarily identifiable or known—could be Lenin, could be Shklovskii, but could be someone else) voice preserved on record, plastic disk, or magnetic tape, with all the incomprehensible [нрзб] inaudible material sounds, or interrupting a pop song to communicate a banal, personal, unnecessary message. It is this interruption of official discourse, this moment of unclear speaking that directly counters the transparent (think Klutis's *transparent*, the screen onto which messages would be projected) address of the state, socialist or otherwise. "What is appealing about art is not achieving good synchronizations," Tawada concludes. "It is precisely through visible discrepancies that the voice gains its poetic independence."<sup>32</sup>

31. See Mikhail Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (Amherst, 1995).

32. Tawada, "The Art of Being Nonsynchronous," 194.