

The Sonic Operative:  
Sound, Activism, and the Politics of Response to Post-Soviet Crises

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## Abstract

The Sonic Operative: Sound, Activism, and the Politics of Response to Post-Soviet Crises

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The sonic operative is a propositional formulation of what the dissertation outlines as a situated, implicated, and contextually grounded work of sound by which to craft activist response. I come up with this formulation to think with possibilities emerging in practices invested in a sonic format of justice seeking action. Using the post-Soviet contexts of dictatorship, imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, and ecocide, I examine the ways in which labours of change extend to a field of sonically working efforts. Specifically, I study sites of activist involvement through which sounded actions perform the force of revolt against what is broadly defined as the Russian regime in its predatory formations and ecologies of harm.

The argument is laid out through a set of four operational modalities differentiated as the offender, the carer, the magician, and the prophet to approach sounds in their ways of performing political participation. I gather evidence from a range of case studies that share an activist stance and space of ethics, and that reveal an existing arena of insurrectionary activity. Each case gives expression to the experience of crises directly linked to Russia's authoritarian, imperial, and capitalist politics and to the potency of the contingent moment of sounded resistances committed to causes and consequences of these politics. Spanning the spaces of activist presence across Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and Russia, the dissertation makes a claim to an ecology of sonic deeds, a politics of participation by which to collaborate and craft a form of caring relation.

## **Dedication**

*For my Ukrainian family, survivors of ruscist crimes*

## **Cultural Acknowledgment**

I am deeply aware of tensions between Ukrainian and Russian cultural elites, and the politics of sensibilities in the current moment of Russia's war against Ukraine. By drawing from case studies that connect the act of resistance across the Ukrainian and Russian activist cultures, I do not mean to suggest that these cultures are always already together in their difference. Rather, I mean to create an account that gestures toward the ways in which different activist sound emissions leave invisible footprint from which a political space of the sonic operative could be discovered. The dissertation is inspired by an ongoing effort within this space, and the ecology of its agitation.

## Acknowledgements

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Some chapters of this dissertation began as papers, and the people who commented on them contributed to an overall development of my arguments. I must

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and sisters who are still in war-torn Ukraine, you are my heroes. You do not deserve any of what you had to endure. My life in Canada would not be the same without the Ukrainian-Canadian family who adopted me and helped me pave my way through most uneasy times: Nina & Dave, all my accomplishments are yours too. My Montreal family: Mimi and Avo, Ivan and Myriam, Ara and family, thank you for welcoming me and celebrating every step of motherhood with me. And Nobi, my computer “wizard”, thank you for standing by my side and never doubting that I would finish. It is with your patience and love, and your share of responsibilities for our daughters that I was able to complete this project. Lastly, Maya and Alina, you joined me when I was in the murky middle of the doctoral program, looking for light at the end of the tunnel. You became that very light that gave me strength and called me into living.

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## **Introduction: The Sonic Operative**

### **Defining a concern**

In the early morning hours of February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine by land, air, and sea. Explosions rocked peaceful Ukrainian cities, waking up the entire country to Russia's war. Russian president Vladimir Putin called the offensive a "special military operation", authorizing the mass murder of Ukrainians. Russian troops made attempts to storm the Ukrainian capital, the city of Kyiv, dropping paratroopers and laying siege to the suburbs of Irpin, Bucha, and Hostomel where they committed war crimes and carried out a genocide. Failing to take Kyiv, they unleashed a continuous bombardment on the residential areas in eastern and southeastern Ukraine. As a result, entire towns and villages were wiped out in strikes.

Claiming that Ukraine is ruled by "neo-Nazis", Putin framed Russia's war against Ukraine as a "denazification" campaign and laid bare his plan to make Ukraine a part of Russia. Thinking and acting like a Nazi himself, he urged the destruction of a Ukrainian state and its people to create a greater Russian imperium within which Ukrainians did not exist. Russia's armed forces deliberately targeted Ukraine's heritage sites, churches, libraries, museums, theatres, and educational institutions, launching an attack on Ukrainian culture, history, and identity. Millions of Ukrainians left their homes, fleeing to safety. And those who stayed lived under a constant threat of Russian airstrikes.

On the other side of the Ukrainian-Russian border, Putin's government enforced repression and warned of a violent crackdown of anti-war protests in Russia. To delegitimize Ukraine as a nation-state in the eyes of Russian publics, Kremlin propaganda invested in the narrative of a new Russian civilization, so-called the "Russian

world” (russkii mir). Like the former geopolitical formation of the Russian empire and Soviet Union, the Russian civilization was imagined as an archetypal colonial space within which non-Russians were to be assimilated into one Russian people. Offering a justification for Putin’s actions, the “Russian world” became a doctrine that qualified the war against Ukraine and Ukrainians as Russia’s historical mission.

The attack on Ukraine for the sake of Russia’s civilizational necessity exposed the old Russian superiority complex and the Putin regime's ambitions to subjugate Ukraine. It also showed that Russia’s transition to democracy was unsuccessful, and Putin’s autocratic and authoritarian leadership pushed Russia toward an imperial-style war of colonialist and capitalist expansion. Russian society failed to stop Putin, just as it failed to set into motion political and social changes that would lead to the formation of a post-imperial state. Today’s Russia is isolated in its revanchist neo-imperialist remaking, its nostalgia for the Soviet Union, and its reckless course toward a Russian dominance.

Historically, Russian political power in the borderlands entailed the exercise of control over non-Russian populations and their resources. Russia’s predatory politics in the former Soviet countries had a lasting impact on local peoples and natures. It was marked by Russian exceptionalism, economic inequality, social injustice, and environmental violence. Victims of Russia’s atrocities range from nations and marginalized communities to ecosystems and habitats. Inside Russia’s formal borders, centralized authoritarian regimes – from tsar to Putin – invested heavily in creating a metropolitan Russian center and a dependent Indigenous periphery from which to draw resources and labor. Russia’s internal colonies essentially served the imperial nation that

the regimes had been ceaselessly building, mobilizing on patriotism, militarism, and allegiance to the ruling authority.

This dissertation names and locates in the Russian regimes the origins of crises and emergencies of the present-day reality that victims of Russia's politics had to face. It refers to the regimes as a unified whole, as one Russian regime that has been continuously emerging through the exertion of capitalist, imperialist, colonialist, militarist, and ecocidalist powers that aimed to do violence. The dissertation engages with various accounts of the plight of those living with this violence, discussing current situations and experiences of Russia's state politics as unjust and oppressive. Addressing Russia's existence as an imperial state that sustained its predatory systems of power throughout the pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet eras, it distinguishes present crises from past and future ones by referring to them as post-Soviet. With post-Soviet crises, I want to give attention to wider effects of the Russian regime's aggressive actions in their cumulative intensity.

I address the Russian state and its systemic streams of harm by presenting a scene of political struggles that are supported by sounded actions from which an insurrectionary demand in the post-Soviet space may persist and intensify. I study sites of activist involvement that are demarcated by sound's contribution to a particular cause. These sites of sound-full response to post-Soviet crises (as approached in the immediate realities of Soviet-style oppression in Putin's Russia, Russia's war in Ukraine, Russia's ecocidal politics in Uzbekistan, Moscow's environmental crimes in the colonial periphery and the advancement of capitalist interest) form an ecology of performing a situated sonic doing,

an action that engages with the collective making of a visible rebellious community through the invisible labors of sound.

I distinguish these labors as a force of change that animates the protocols of dissonant life, the ways of moving away from what is predicated upon the post-Soviet experience of tolerance to different forms of Russia's ruling and ruining authority. The dissertation calls attention to moments of a growing dissonance that is challenging to the current system and its narratives of the dominant order that proliferates the Russian regime. It seeks to gather and resound the "noises" of those who refuse to be contained and governed by fears of going against the predicament that signals a defeat for marginal activist projects that offer the imagination and sonority of a resilient collective action. In this sense of obligation, the dissertation itself is an activist cause.

### **Proposing a notion of sound as a doer: theoretical alliances**

The project invites an exploration of a political ecology of ethically charged sounds that gather around a common concern. The task of these sounds is not limited to representing a dissenting or struggling community but is extended to a formative involvement in doing the actual work that is imprinted and channelled with consequences. I propose to think of such a work as a situated, implicated, and grounded response to the needs of the communal condition as defined by a sense of togetherness. Setting up an imagination of sound as a doer and asking how sound's hidden labours are instrumentalized for the goal of dealing with the urgencies of a given political moment, I write to register a particular mode of action committed to the promise of new possible becomings (versions of oneself as a local and global community) able of an obligation to practices of an ecologically sustainable and socially egalitarian society.

Focusing on situations and experiences of political conflict by which one contends with dominances and imbalances that constitute realities of local crises with further global reach, I examine projects of involvement from which to think the composition of sound's political ecology in its oppositional force. Taking as my field of inquiry activist sounds within the arena of post-Soviet realities, I think from the perspective of sound as force that extends into a larger field of political participation. While acknowledging the material dimension and agentic reach of sound, a world in vibration and formation, I rethink sound toward an activist condition that I call the sonic operative, one marked by intensities of disruption, the disordering and reordering ways of concrete doings. In developing an argument for the sonic operative, I take guidance from theories that are grounded in a new materialist conception of care and aim to extend relational ontology to other than human agencies.

The dissertation comes in conversation with the work of Brandon LaBelle, which engages the notion of sonic agency to grasp radically different ways of collective assembly. Labelle locates within a vibrant milieu of sounds and sounded experiences an ethics of entanglement that enables involvement in processes by which the world takes the form and a formation. His theoretical project aims at understanding sound as a vital material force from which “we learn of the entanglement of worldly contact, one that extends from the depths of bodies and into the energetics of social formations and their politics,” and at the same time, at articulating a sonic sensibility as a way of relating that is deeply ecological, emancipatory, and powerful.<sup>1</sup> Taking sounding and listening as modes of caring involvement, Labelle constructs a new sense of possibilities to join and

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<sup>1</sup> Labelle, *Sonic Agency*, 7.

hold together in sharing a space, a life, and a collective vulnerability. In arguing for a vibrant and vibratory model of alliance that is thick with political potential, he imagines a world on sonic terms, beyond values produced by visual references. According to him, to appear in sound and listening is to operate within a space of “deep ethics” enabled by the conditions of “worldly contact” that is specific to “complex ecologies of matter and energy, subjects and objects” of which life is composed.

I take inspiration from the scenes of encounter “beyond the face” that LaBelle creates by a set of sonic figures, thinking of his theoretical project as propositional of how one can enter politics in a democratic fashion through territories of invisibility and logics of contingent engagement. I imagine this process of negotiating and reordering the world through sound as tapping: tapping as carrying a double meaning of striking against something with quick blows and secretly accessing, interrupting, hacking what is at work. Tapping as an action of disquiet, something of which LaBelle writes, gathering from Étienne Balibar, as “insurrectionary foundation.... a steady drumming that resides amidst the conditions and experiences of life with others, and that lends, through its potent animations and punctuations, to expressions of critical and creative togetherness: the making of new freedoms and responsibilities”. It is apprehended in awareness of an “insurrectionary sensibility – a potential found in the quiver of the eardrum, the strains of a voice, the vibrations and echoes that spirit new formations of social solidarity.” (5)

What can yet be known in our coming together through the “forcefulness of one’s singularity”, the echoing of one’s sound across? (7) One’s life is shaped by the invisible volume that weaves the intensities of the collective world, the interconnected whole ought to be a space of an ongoing contact and exchange.

Tapping as crossing into the world bears witness to the breath of sound, to the forces of restlessness from which “‘energetics’ of being in the world” become graspable. (8) I try to attend to these forces of entanglement that move the struggling communities of which I write into the world. I think along the lines of new materialist ethics, finding support in LaBelle’s approach to the invisible condition of collective sharing, as well as in Jane Bennett’s theory of vibrant matter that opens the way to think of sound’s vital share. Bennett’s theory proposes an all-inclusive understanding of the world. It holds to the idea that the ecology of life is composed of entities and beings, human, nonhuman, and other materialities in their vital force. It argues for a collaborative, ecologically oriented model of living in which collective making of the world emerges in vibrant matter and lively things existing alongside humans, producing effects, and altering the course of events. Bennett decenters human agency, giving power to “nonsubjects” circulating along the human bodies and ordering spatio-temporal, socio-material, and ethico-political interventions. Her model of the world as manifoldness of vital forces offers a critique of a humanist framework by exposing a wider arena of agency and attesting to an ethics of interdependency in a heterogeneous space of collective living. It stands as a radically democratic way of rethinking inclusion and reimagining connection. (Bennett 2001; 2010) LaBelle’s expansion on Bennett’s “enchanted materialism” to recenter sonic agency invokes a deeper ecology, one that entails that we *listen* to the cry of the world steeped in inequalities and power struggles to recognize the violence of histories and realities and seek ways to resist. It gives the force of sound its due and space of listening its power, calling for a sonic cohabitation through listening with care as a way of being among others.

To give the work of sound a political value, I take up the notion of ‘care’ – care as a vital politics shaping the ecologies that we live in. From a new materialist perspective, care is redefined outside the boundaries that set the human realm. It is understood as a force distributed across a multiplicity of agencies involved in a material vital doing within a relational milieu that takes the form of an ecology. The relationality of being part of this ecology is essentially a caring relationality. Care here is not coordinated to a moral intention, but rather to an ethico-political involvement in a world where lives are enmeshed in webs of relations, being implicated by alliances and conflicts, and agitated by transformative connections.

This kind of ethics is not based on justice but on a collectively arranged and ecologically oriented participation in re/making the world. A commitment here starts not from moral orders or individual intentionality but from responsibility as a form of relation that is “always already integral to the world’s ongoing intra-active becoming and not-becoming”<sup>2</sup>. In her book *Matters of Care*, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa elaborates on this posthumanist vision of care as disseminated force, interrogating the “worlds of entangled concerns” in technoscience and naturecultures. From a human-decentered perspective, care is understood as an organizing condition of relational ecology. It is “passed on” through entities and agencies, circulating in an embodied and embedded way in the worlds that are mutually formed, or co-created. Puig de la Bellacasa reflects on operations of care as enabled by a “vital necessity” to hold together. Care serves the purpose of “gathering” around a common concern, which can be as practical as earthly survival or as critical as transformative knowledge making. Ways of caring are presented

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<sup>2</sup> Barad, “Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance,” quoted in Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 123.

as concrete situations in which obligations are actual laborious conditions rather than just affectionate connections. Speculating on how care is immanent to the ecological field of formation and transformation processes, Puig de la Bellacasa argues for a shared and distributed work of care that exposes a “web of labors” in their material and immaterial, visible and invisible, acknowledged and dismissed manifestations. Her argument is crafted around soil care as an example of more than human care circulating through multiple agencies, but her inquiry is not exactly tailored to environmental ecology. It is held by an open statement about care and its doings in a relational field: how it gets practiced in the “ecology of practices”, in settings of knowledge and work with its ethical, social, political, and cultural implications. Situated material conditions of caring of which Puig de la Bellacasa writes are the conditions of living and knowing, interacting and intervening, relating and involving. These are the conditions of thickness and messiness by which an obligation to a common world is nurtured. (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017)

It is from this insight into care that I begin to think about ethico-political role of the sounded projects that I study, asking how sound’s relational force is absorbed into effects – how it becomes part of the politics of concern not only for reasons announced in the needs to hear and to be heard, but also in the labors, in the material space of sounded actions, which move bodies into the world, working for a *change* from what any given situation of neglect promises now. In a very real sense, I set myself on a journey to write against neglect by studying what I see as an ethos that is rooted in a collective obligation. The dissertation exposes the laboring of change through ethical doings of sound, through situations of involvement in a worldly task of care. It reads with Puig de la Bellacasa’s

activist project that directs attention to work that remains neglected, but it takes the vision of care ethics to a different site of inquiry, to the conditions of worldly participation defining the vitality and vibrancy of sounded journeys, bodies and things, entangled in what LaBelle has called the “thickness of relations.”<sup>3</sup> Bringing into resonance the work of Puig de la Bellacasa and LaBelle, I bridge the two complementary perspectives that their theories deliver in mapping a notion of deep ethics and worldly labors on the plane of ecological participatory experience. I sketch out an account of caring involvement as that of the sonic operative, developing from an understanding of the world as generativity, as life in the making in which everything, including sound, participates.

“The world, in short, appears as a common experience in which all things matter and from which one dimensionality erupts into multiplicity,” as LaBelle writes. (135) Envisioning this space of relations to be governed by an ethics of mutuality, as based on the perception that everything is intertwined with everything else, and that one is in need of others, LaBelle talks about the experience of being in the world as that of one’s living-with, shaped by “cohabitations”, “interdependencies”, and “collective sharing”. His entire book reads as an endeavor to conceptualize the conditions in which care takes place. And his theory of formations – those of power, community, and solidarity – too is led by a vision for care ethics that enables collective transformation. I am particularly interested in this arrangement that carries with it a sense of a possibility for thinking with sound and care. The dissertation is structured to articulate this sense of critical insight, elaborating on sound’s caring involvement in a “world of entanglement and conflict”, to speak in LaBelle’s terms. (13) The work of sound and the laboring of change that I examine

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<sup>3</sup> Labelle, *Sonic Agency*, 6-8; 18.

demand attention to a shared urgency, to vulnerabilities of those who are touched by today's crises and who seek to mobilize into a sounded response. The sounded response affords a means for carrying through prophecy and insurrection toward instances of relatedness that compose a world one seeks to live, a world of collective empowerment essentially defining what is to come.

### **Registering the sonic operative: methods of listening activism**

Claims made in this dissertation could not be made if I were not adapting myself to listening situations as possible ways of thinking with the intrusive conditions of the sonic operative. My listening connects activist sounds and what can be heard in these sounds, the worlds of sounds and the struggles carried through them. I approach listening through its manifold action, attempting to do more than to listen *to* the sounded projects that I research. I try to listen *for* what these projects are part of and listen *into* how they are made part of what comes to matter. I take up listening as an act of seeking and coming to know, making it an alternative to the act of looking for or looking into so as to attend to what could be exposed beyond an aesthetic construct of the projects, what could be understood from within the depth of conditions, in specific situation and situatedness, and in the space and context to which the projects are in close.

My listening is not informed by a sounded event alone but by a broader context of event's emergence. It aims to be performative and exploratory, playing with and gathering from a range of sources, and maneuvering across an extended field of information. As I study histories and political realities, and research agendas of the artists, and as I attempt to grasp a particular sonic engagement with the world that I define as the sonic operative in its conditional uncertainty, I devote more thought to a

contextual profile of sounds. The contextual profile of sounds is one that places sounds in relation to what they do as matters of resistance, matters of care, and matters of common world. With this profile, I want to imagine a politics and impact of what I seek to articulate as an ongoing valued doing, a kind of ecological footprint that is a trace of sound's actual work specific to situation in which obligation of care becomes at stake. The dissertation is my attempt to locate this trace, mapping out terrains of a disseminated collective force that the sonic operative animates.

Each of my exploratory journeys into the political work of sound starts from learning in listening to the sounded event that carries itself into socio-political realities. I take listening as inhabiting not only the space of auditory world created through my percept, imagination, and reflexivity, but also the space of a common world into which the sounds that I study draw me. I want to think of this process as an intervention inspired by a scholarship of listening activism and accountable to approaches in research that are integrative of sensory methodologies. Even though the dissertation reads as a contextual piece of writing that relies on historical analysis, secondary literature, and interdisciplinarity, its discursive field strives to be integrative of more than acts of reading from others. It tries to narrate from the perspective of me as a researcher of contexts that I could deeply relate through my post-Soviet Ukrainian body, sensing and speaking from the struggles waged in spaces of the Russian regime's ongoing aggression.

The dissertation is then a research affair that gathers insights from a subjective contact with the world. It starts from the premise that I am the listening body that thinks with what it strives to hear in the cry of those who refuse to be contained by their fate and violent effects of which they witnessed. It develops around this premise creatively,

seeking a process of invention in a listening across the sphere of insurrectionary activity within existing situations of collective struggles. The sonic operative as a term and an intellectual project that is engaged through the notion of sound's doing is born out of this process of invention in the moment of my encounter with sounds and their contexts.

I want to argue that what is produced in my inventing opens a path to tracing what otherwise may be left untraced for its effects in what the world may become. I think here along theorists Samolé Voegelin and Holger Schulze, who in their idiosyncratic way advocate for what I understand as performative listening, the kind of listening that meets imagination in a generative process. Voegelin renders it through radical realism of sonic possible worlds and Schulze through adventures in sonic fiction. In the case of this dissertation, performative listening pertains to an experiment in registering the work of sound not as an abstract sphere but as a concrete situation of labouring, as a making of what I imagine as a sounded revolution to which anyone can join.

I follow from the assumption that the listening body necessitates a participation that is different from that of a detached observation. It perceives an invisible volume, a groundless ground and formless form, registering what is not presented to the eye in a familiar, complete, and known way. Writing through the *real* of invisibility is what connects Schulze's work to Voegelin's, in their larger tasks to unperform visual ideologies. Schulze's aim to settle the confrontation with visuocentrism into a concept of sonic persona is defined by his critical engagement with the politics of inequality at the heart of a gendered, racialized, class-based, ableist society. By conceptualizing the listening body as a body of fluid identity, which he imagines as a "humanoid alien", the body the main reference of which is its sensory being, Schulze creates a new contract

with the world, that which places difference at the material, situated, mingled relation to others, troubling the existing forms of visual organization by a possibility of non-regulatory framework of a “humanoid’s corporeal sensorium”. He posits listening as a path to breaking the conditions of identity, to encountering the world differently, in the sonic persona’s experience of differing, its corporeal generativity, sensory traces and sonic fictions. I take Schulze’s texts not only as processes of attending to experiences of one’s listening self, but also as examples of thinking and writing with the trope of alternative politics. (Schulze 2018; 2020)

Same goes for Voegelin’s work that expands into a form of critique of existing norms of a “visual and mute thinking of the world” from which tendencies to seek mastery become developed. Taking up feminist theory and experimenting with new materialist ideas, Voegelin puts forth an argument for the political possibility of sound and the invisible. Being in the world is essentially relational, interconnected and interdependent, or, speaking in materialist vocabulary, inter-actively co-constitutive. It is not bound to the laws of a geometrical optics but to those of a physical optics, enacting an alternative sphere of difference through material inter-activity. (Voegelin 2014; 2019)

Voegelin draws on the work of Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, and Donna Haraway to propose a politics of sonic regime that is feminine at its core, meaning that it violates mastery and control, which visual ideologies foster, instead enabling the invisible instability and plurality of the unseen, building toward a greater responsibility of togetherness. Making the case for a sonic sensibility that unperforms authoritative gaze and offers “the real another truth”, that of “the mobile and the inaudible simultaneity of interbeing that cannot be observed from a distance but has to be generated in the

encounter,” Voegelin invites to listen into the process of forming the invisible connection from which a possibility of the connected and collaborative world is invented.<sup>4</sup> Being on sonic terms opens to the concept of sonic materialism, which helps to take hold of what remains outside the frame of ocular knowledge. As Voegelin writes: “I understand sonic materialism to be feminine materialism. Both the feminine and sound do not speak in the dominant tongue, whose representational schema falsifies their material reality. They are both failed by the prevailing theoretical models and have to forge a different sensibility to promote the inclusion of the invisible and make themselves count”. (162) It is with sonic materialism that Voegelin imagines an ethics of a collaborative world, void of dominance and hegemony, and invested in mutual inhabiting, a world of “sonic cosmopolitanism”. (53-59)

My using of the sonic operative is inspired by a concept of sonic togetherness that Voegelin develops in her theoretical project of sonic cosmopolitanism, which affirms that sounding and listening labours are world-making. To sound and listen from an individual position into the interconnected world means to make “the world’s performative contingency” sensible, to nurture a sensibility of a deeper recognition, that “without a recourse to a certain identity or intention of a colonial charge’ but of “a value in the between-of-things”. (56-57) In its reimagining of what a new common may be, Voegelin’s philosophy of coming together in sounding and listening as inhabiting in cohabiting is not only a project of political participation and resistance, but also of a pedagogy of living. It calls upon a new order in the collective “inter-invention”, as that which can move us away from an exploitive relation to an exploratory existence in which

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<sup>4</sup> Voegelin, *The Political Possibility of Sound*, 158.

shared fragilities, vulnerabilities, uncertainties, invisibilities, and contingencies are honoured. For her, the order of sonic cosmopolitanism is that of equal participation, mutual inclusion, and regime of care. It is an imagining of a living beyond entitlement and hierarchy, a living in sound and listening that makes one aware of the “asymmetries of the world” and responsibilities to a collective effort.

This dissertation is in no way a consistent referential guide to Schulze and Voegelin or a further development of their theoretical insights, but it is an elaborate alliance with these thinkers in a completely different context and case studies lineup. I take listening as a mode activism through which the invisible and the “indivisible”, to reference Voegelin, can be made accessible, and through which new sites of contestation can be enabled. The project gives manifestation not so much to what is heard but to what can be heard as made possible. It asks how sounded attention is a form of participation that affords a capacity to act within and beyond the local sites of collective gathering. The sonic operative makes no promise of a prophecy one tries to create by negotiating the conditions of living toward those of egalitarian, sustainable, and mutual obligation, but it seeds hope that every act of insurrection through sound and listening builds toward a joint reality, which can become a new pathway of collaboration and resistance.

### **Positioning against the primacy of vision: hearing the dissonance**

Framing the political condition of sounded action as a site of insurrection, I think with ways of appearance that unsettle visibility and objectivist representation, and give a lived sense to vibrancy of restless agitation of which Serres writes as the “noise of

organization” or vortex “at the bottom of the world”: that what is *always there* to rise up.<sup>5</sup> This dissertation is invested in an attempt to write into detecting this noise and what is carried through it, in rage and tragedy, and in collective passion. It seeks to discover and expose the “clamours” of struggles, as that what cannot be seen but fathomed in deep actuality of situated response and responsibility to one another in today’s crisis conditions. The sonic operative through which the dissertation approaches the disruptive power of this commotion, the “fury” of the world that sounds to be heard, opens out onto the experience of a shared sounded state.

Writing into hearing the dissonances that generate a rebellious collective body is a stance that I take to register the current state of agitation, a gathering by sonic strategies through which one witnesses the breaking forth of new energies that may drive the world against the givenness of the terms. I study the workings of performative sounds and their hidden sphere of power, imagining beyond a muted relationship with the world toward a situation of participation that is driven by ongoing sonic efforts. My proposition is that the sonic operative as workings of sound’s work fosters an ethics of entanglement that gives agency to the noise of rising and what begins in it, in the Serresian sense. The noise of rising, as I write of it, is not the sound of storming crowds holding the space of fight, but the totality of collective effort felt through the sounded actions across communities that bring to expression disruptive powers of their sonorous force. To attend to the sonic operative is to hear what may emerge in this force.

This dissertation takes hearing as a model of understanding, which guides the process of argument assembled from insights into sound perceivable in ethos that does

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<sup>5</sup> Serres, *Genesis*, 7.

the political. It is therefore grounded in the invisible volume of evidence that the studied sounded situations provide, while directly engaging with the context that produces these situations in the first place. To take hold of invisibility of the performing sounds, I think along the lines of critique of objectivist (Cartesian) perspective that fosters a visual model of the world and leaves a geography of invisible sonic volumes unaccounted. I imagine a political possibility emerging in the sonic invisible and a new freedom from the constraints of a visual thinking determining the construct of reality. The sonic operative as a link to the forcefulness of invisible gestures around us is meant to reveal what remains out of sight but is made accessible in hearing, defying our expectations of knowability defined by ideologies of representation.

Among other sources, I follow David Howes and Constance Classen whose work challenges the existing Western sensory paradigms, the visual and that of the five senses on top of which is sight. Howes and Classen write against the dualistic tradition of Western philosophy by rethinking the sensory experience from multiple non-Western standpoints. They call for a sensory awakening of Western societies long repressed by visuocentrism as a consequence of the historical privileging of sight, a standard for knowing. Their work reclaims the neglected world of the other senses, helping displace the established values and hierarchies that sustain the myth of male authority to which sight plays part: *voir – savoir – pouvoir*. The ordering sense that carries masculine investments, sight pledges allegiance to dominance, attaining its status of evidence and measure of truth. It is tied to power, enabling some and preventing others. If sight loses its hegemony and nonvisual sensibilities become central to knowing, the world may gain more dimensions, Howes and Classen argue, critically challenging the limits of the

Western visual imagination. Their work helps expose gender ideologies and hierarchies of values in the politics of the senses, to which one may become vulnerable. (Howes and Classes 2014; Classen 2005)

This dissertation takes what is explored in the studies of the senses to a different frame, seeking to bring a sensibility to invisible visibility, to appearance in sound and listening, while finding possibilities in hearing, which essentially emancipate from a logic of the gaze. The study articulates the experience of the sonic operative which delivers as a distinctive contribution to the critique of visual access in a politics of knowing. It is grounded in thinking with the sense of hearing as providing entry to what emerges in a swirling vitality of the world. Hearing is a channel through which the world's capaciousness can be apprehended in terms of reverberance and volume, and intensity of appearance that defies the power of a look, description, and representation. "I begin to fathom the sound and the fury, of the world and of history: the *noise*," as Michel Serres writes.<sup>6</sup> By noise Serres speaks of a tense and constant cacophony one can access in hearing, the world's conflict and complexity that is always there to meet the ear. It is a way of breaking with prejudices and assumptions created by those conditions of recognition, visual focus and certainty, that we have created by putting trust in the sense of sight as a model of knowing, the sense that turns us "cloaked". (60-61) And ultimately, it is a way of incessant learning, of feeling the throbbing pulse of the world that never stops, a proof of living too, which one gets only in reaching out, in touching the life of others in hearing. For Serres, hearing is knowing in touching. The reach of the world and into the world is an obligation of reciprocity called upon as an experience of immersion,

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<sup>6</sup> Serres, *Genesis*, 7.

the process of situated possibility ordered by noise that takes charge. He writes: “The indistinguishable returns to the continuous, the continuous returns to the indistinguishable. No difference or complete difference both produce the undifferentiated. The sense of hearing is lost in silence and also in pure noise.” (118-119)

In its larger scope, the dissertation is guided by Serres’s philosophy, not to seek the acoustic truth or explore the experience of hearing as such, but to mobilize hearing as a way of moving through the space of interference it tries to locate. I think of this space as a recurring trope woven through the fabric of my writing, as what helps me bring into focus a distributive agency of sounded resistances, the persistent presence of energies that remain impossible to quell and difficult to grasp. I build upon what LaBelle formulates as the “space of appearance” that functions in the political.<sup>7</sup> Borrowing the term from Hannah Arendt, he redefines the notion of appearance in relation to sound, speaking of the excluded bodies that are forced onto invisibility to negotiate their presence. Specifically, he talks about the experience of the “unlikely publics”, the publics that “hover unsteadily and ambiguously in the open, shaping themselves within quotidian spaces and locations often between communities, languages, and even nation-states, to form volatile coalitional frameworks”. (15) These are the bodies that are rendered illegible by the logics of the public sphere: migrant, exiled, displaced, lost bodies that are in need of a “collective shelter”. They figure in sound, seeking to be heard, breaking onto the space of appearance in a struggle for recognition and acceptance. They are “the erased and the disappeared – ‘non-citizens’”, whose very survival is made possible through “moving ahead of and around the fixtures of power”. (16) LaBelle takes this

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<sup>7</sup> Labelle, *Sonic Agency*, 5.

condition of trespass supporting one's need for appearing as the basis for reordering the political, the social, and the legal, which are deeply entangled with visibility. He asks how listening to what emerges "from below", a force of the sounded bodies that struggle their way to appear, can open onto a process of equality. "The urgency of this equality comes to interrupt the acoustics of assembly with expressions of the dispossessed and disenfranchised, the desire and the longing of those out of place; instead, a *poor acoustics* defines the vitality of unlikely publics, to reorient the demarcations of the heard and the underheard, and the properly sounded," as he writes to conclude. (159)

For LaBelle, reordering the world through hearing directly allies to the project of redemocratization, responsibility, and compassion. It sets up a mode of contact that is productive of knowledge we currently need to understand and elaborate on what is expressed in the insurgent sounds of those that struggle to be seen and recognized, being pushed to the edges and peripheries, of those consigned to the dark. These sounds from the bottom of the world, so to speak, is a sphere of resistances "from below" of which LaBelle makes us aware, proposing a "listening from below" as a way of coming to act. (154) To hear the unlikely publics, whom one encounters through the movement of their performance in sound, is to register the world in its roaring presence, in agitation and violation, in what can grow in the space as an invisible volume. The ethics of participation in hearing is an ethics of deeper recognition, one that allows for a fuller grasp of the whole, opening us toward a knowing of what may remain shut in seeing.

LaBelle writes to mobilize a real sense of grasping the truth of that which cannot be identified on the visual plane or run on a clear given promised by another's gaze. He maps out the conditions of being that call for a greater field of one's worldly engagement,

beyond the façade of visual reality in which our lives are enmeshed. The dissertation takes guidance in LaBelle, delving into a world of opacities – “the dense strata of memories and histories, conflicts and imaginaries”, from which to elaborate on “the *thick* of” being, the hidden sphere of what listening from below brings to appearance. (6) I present research material in a seemingly disordered fashion, journeying from historical accounts to theoretical elaborations to my activist listenings, hoping that together these manifestations of critical attention may allow for studying the space of interference by *fathoming* it rather than scanning. I do not see how otherwise the worldly labors of sounded resistances that I set myself to discuss can be understood in their specific situated way, confronting, pressing, and altering from the midst of the noise that they become. In writing into hearing this noise, I hope to create a conversation with politics and history, and map into appearance the sounded efforts through which insurgent expressions of political participation are initiated.

### **Creating an account of interventionist participation**

As a research and activist endeavour, the dissertation responds to the present state of crisis, calling for a mode of address that does not exclude inconvenient truths. It calls out by name and process, bringing evidence through which to journey into the world of tragedies, struggles, and visions with attention to the logics of refusal in which resistance operates. The case studies are assembled from a rebellious position not to make into a destiny an assumption that nothing can be done to what is in the process of happening. They are held together by acts of struggle that push against the pressures of impossibility felt in every catastrophic narrative out there. Each case is conceived as a scene in which the operating conditions for the world to be different are created through the work of

activist soundings that do not always aim to deliver a political message but come in act co-compositionally with what is already collectively activated as a countertendency.

In charting a going against the predetermined trajectory as a field of performative operations that make a different world possible, the dissertation enters in conversation with the philosophical work of Isabelle Stengers who writes to expand our sense of the possible. Her book *In Catastrophic Times* has been central to my thinking about activism as that which does not have to be always ordered by loud voices, visible bodies, and transgressive actions, but come de-regularized by invisibility and imperceptibility, and strengthened by co-compositional efforts and collaborative conditions through which the possibility of a future that is not what it is being created now can be imagined. Stengers's standpoint on crisis is a position from which to trouble conformity to utopianism and catastrophism, and to start thinking in the logic of a third thing – a disruptive relation, an intervention that is distinguished by a divergent engagement. Stengers writes of responsibility as a practice not to protect and guard, but to participate and contribute from “one's own routines”. Responsibility is grounded in, rather than abstract from a commitment to what is lived and experienced. It is a situated action bringing us together in a mode of active probing into creating “responses on which the possibility of a future that is not barbaric depends”.<sup>8</sup>

For Stengers, an ethics based on responsibility is a way to be involved that sets us against the utopian tale of progress shaped by the productionist drive and against the apocalyptic narrative of the end delivered through the scenarios of us “heading straight to the wall”. She turns us toward a destiny that is different from the one brought about by

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<sup>8</sup> Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times*, 73; 117.

the seductive promise of capitalism and the one learnt from the “nasty little song” that holds humanity hostage to the guilt of complicity. It is neither denying nor reconciling with the current crisis that moves us away from what is believed to lie ahead of us. It is our trying “to make exist” the possible, our learning to compose a response to what is imposed on us as inevitable, our own asking if going elsewhere than previously imagined can be led to happen. “Learning to compose will need many names, not a global one, the voices of many peoples, knowledges, and earthly practices. It belongs to a process of multifold creation, the terrible difficulty of which it would be foolish and dangerous to underestimate *but which it would be suicidal to think of as impossible,*” she writes. (50) Stengers speaks here of staging an intervention into our capitalist time, calling for a collective reciprocity in dealing with the issues of climate crisis and the “coming barbarism” of nature. In her formulation of intervention as a gathering of heterogeneous knowledges, it is made clear that we need to stay united by a cause and be affirmative and inventive as an ecological community of active participants. Stengers calls for a power of collective intelligence, a practice of participation that is carried by a “collective reappropriation of the capacity for and art of paying attention”. (77) Advocating for an order of inclusivity where practices benefit from each other to strengthen their own force – an order of ecology, she insists on giving equal attention to the creation and experimentation with activist forms and formats of shared acts of response. Something as artistic and spectacular as ritual magics of neo-pegan activism can be as necessary for responding to the crisis as a staging of scientific or technoscientific mediations. (Stengers 2005) Expanding on the scope of what counts as an interventionist manner, Stengers’s larger

project frames the field of participation as extensive to all possible efforts of a responsive action.

With its emphasis on the collective reenactment of the situated and committed heterogeneous knowledges, Stengers's statement on responsibility and the "art of paying attention" comes close to the idea of caring relationality that I explore. It summons an ongoing maintenance of a relation to the world we live in, a practice dedicated to the continuation of life, a form of recognition of a "tolerance that is not to be abused".

(Stengers 2015: 45) It is the work of many that counts, an act with and from a politics of collaborative ecologies to which sound as a vibrant matter and relational force is also bound.

I think of my dissertation as one that offers an account of an interventionist participation involving a disruptive care of sounded actions, an involvement in the third position which affords an intervention into what is in the process of happening. In this sense, the actions are presented as enabling what I imagine as a *politics of refusal* to accept what is predetermined and meant to happen, ultimately counteracting the tendencies that are brought to expression by the historical conditions of power and control and that are newly mobilized to sustain colonial, imperialist, and capitalist privileges formative of neo- movements. I inquire into the furtherance of power-driven processes, exploring historically grounded determinations to be fulfilled afresh in the current situations of war, ecocide, and failed democracy characterizing the post-Soviet conditions of Russia's past and present politics. I try to foreground resistance to scenarios pre-designed through the work of the politics of refusal. My study of post-Soviet crises to which a response is desperately needed is also a study of an active operation in

engendering a different trajectory, alter destiny, and new future. It is a study of invented conditions necessary for divergent directions to be created. My conception of the sonic operative as a mode of responding to the appeal made by those who were exposed to the violence of the Russian regime is also a conception of action from one's possible routines, that which Stengers defines as a relational position of facing up to the realities of contemporary crises in an involving way, a position of noise if you wish, a steady perturbing force.

### **Assembling case studies around the concept of the sonic operative**

It is from within the despair of others being heard in the sounds of those who chose to respond that I write this dissertation, thinking with the politics of refusal and relational involvement that does its work through the force of the sonic operative. The concept of the sonic operative that is defined by the value-creating work of sound is explored through a set of operational modalities differentiated as the offender, the carer, the magician, and the prophet. I come up with these modalities to create a field of inquiry for framing an ethics in which sounds from the scenes of struggle that I study are implicated. I want to give these sounds their full significance, both in terms of activist variety and modes of doing, by focusing on their participatory quality.

Sound is configured as the offender to account for the terms of its involvements that are potentially deregulatory of the established order. I discuss the situational experience of this deregulation, exploring the disruptive and noninnocent ways by which sounds contour themselves onto a particular scene. Specifically, I draw from the contextual profile of noisy interferences of the nonconforming sounded actions in Putin's Russia as subversive of the assumed norm of silence that settles into a politics of

silencing. The offensive work of sound that I go on to explore is understood as an unauthorized mode of intervening, one that connects to the necessity to remain in confrontation and negotiation with the patriarchal and authoritarian regimes. It makes itself count as a cacophonous act and tends to be recognized for its violating and turbulent effects.

The figure of the carer is imagined in the implication in a doing that obliges to a life-sustaining activity. Its presence is expressed by the work that is done to create the condition of alterity to which one can be exposed, in the effects or consequences of its orderings. I think of the carer as an involved relation that enables the affirmation of life, while disabling the politics of fear, destruction, and death. To give an account of such enabling, I examine two activist missions that operate the disruptive potential of sound in spaces composed by struggles to make life possible where it remains threatened by violence and violation. In exploring a specific mode of care as a mode of relating to a threat event from within destructive processes in the war zone in Ukraine and frontlines of the Shiyes protests in Russia, I want to trace the workings of the sound's work in performances that deliver in the order of life out of spaces ordered by one's violent force. With the carer I try to elicit a life-valuing involvement at stake.

The magician is designated by what defies description and remains in the realm of the ineffable. It is a figure by which sound in its capacity to heal, restore, or rehabilitate comes to act. I want to think of it as a more generalized therapeutic procedure of sounding that puts a community, a place, or a world on the way of rehabilitation. It brings a shift towards conditions of wellbeing, cohabitation, and one's sense of recovery. I write of it as being timed for human, ecological, social, and political benefits in a particular

situation of loss, trauma, neglect, and disconnection. This inquiry is presented by focusing on the situated and sonically defined responses to ecological crises in Uzbekistan and Russia. I ask how ethical obligation passes through sonic doings involved in recovering the lost connections, gone worlds, and denied experiences by examining what exactly it entails in the situations of crisis that I study. A magic trick of sound to which the process of rehabilitation pertains is discussed in terms of a shamanic care ethics that joins environmentalism.

The figure of the prophet stands in for a mode of prophesying into which sound delivers compositionally. It carries into a level of programming of what is yet to come, constructing toward a project of reinvention that is already under way in a historically, culturally and politically specific context. This is how sound is taken up in Kodwo Eshun's project of radical envisioning through black sonic fictions and their generative processes. The prophetic work of sound is of involvement in destiny, of coming in rebellion against the given. It takes a form of participation in the making of futures one wants to live. It is my intention to give this work its due in the case of a Ukrainian struggle for conditions that support Ukrainians' will. The involvement of which I write is aligned with resistance to the idea that one is confined to their fate, by what is promised to happen in the here and now, in the there and then. It is driven by ambitions to make the making of "alter" thinkable, to stop reconciling one's being to the only possible choice, chance, or truth. In the Ukrainian context from which I narrate, it lends support to the Ukrainofuture effort post-Euromaidan, one made to rid Ukrainians of the burdens of their colonial past mapped onto a process of the neo-imperial present through which the coming future is profiled.

With the four figures that help me explicate the concept of the sonic operative, I want to call attention to a particular care-full involvement that I identify with the sounded actions. These actions become mechanisms of accountability and collective deliberation of the needed response to politics that sustain the existing asymmetries. To take account of this process, I follow from Salomé Voeglin's proposal for a care-full listening as one marked by awareness of space in-between, of what emerges in the coming together, in the possibilities of the being-with.<sup>9</sup> Care-full listening is an attitude and an act. It is an engagement in the processes of togetherness. It makes itself count in the recognition of positionality and reciprocity, vicinity and feedback, contingency and uncertainty that the very possibility of staying-with opens up. Methodologically, this dissertation is a process of care-full listening that yields the idea of the sonic operative as one enabling me to conceptualize an entangled position from which a care-full involvement in pushing the world toward a different order is composed.<sup>10</sup> It allies with Voegelin's philosophical work that ultimately makes an argument for a way of connecting in sound that builds toward a project of global empowerment on sensibilities of care and intensities of compassion. (53-67)

With the situated configurations of involvement through which I pay attention to what the sonic operative may enable, I ask how the project of response to today's crises – from local participation in a global sphere of the political – is created by sonic action as a mode of relation and activism. If we think of sounding out into the world as connecting

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<sup>9</sup> Voegelin, Samolé et al. "Online talk: Care-full listening," published on *YouTube* channel by Rupert on 10 December 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6dhUSCCxPI>

<sup>10</sup> On "asymmetries of the world" as a display of inequality, injustice, and lack of collaborative effort, see Voegelin, *The Political Possibility of Sound*, 54-55.

the world from one's individual position, or from one's "locality on the indivisible index of sound" – in Voegelin's terms, then it makes sense to imagine the political possibilities of such connecting. (57) I write this dissertation with these possibilities in mind, thinking with Voegelin to point to the significance of the sounds that I study in their capacity to negotiate as contingent differences in the mutual space of struggles from which a plurality of voices, noises, rhythms, and movements are heard in a "continuous simultaneity". By focusing on what is heard from within the post-Soviet experience, from the invisible volume of sounds shaping the acts of collective struggle, I write toward a collaboration of a global world where experiences of capitalism, colonialism, imperialism, post- and neo-, remain distinct, but nevertheless shared.

The sonic operative invites imagination of this possibility, as a force of connecting through sonically working efforts by which bodies of noise are brought to act together. In seeking to listen out for this performative operation, a gathering by sonic strategies, I am led by Voegelin's account of ethical participation in "the volume of the world" as that of one's "expanse", or one's "power and influence or marginality". I want to suggest that sonic involvement of which I write is one of responsibility to join the political project that recognizes asymmetries of the world and embraces a common vulnerability to the expressions of capitalist, imperial, colonial, and state violence, as well as to the effects of environmental emergency that ground not only the struggles of the post-Soviet subject but that of a shared humanity. In its pressing concerns around today's state of the world, the dissertation is as much of a journey into the depths of conflicts shaping the post-Soviet space, the powers at play and lives at stake, as it is of a survey of effortful sounds making operative an activist mission. It builds around an endeavour to

counter a grim sense of inevitability and despair with risks, commitments, and demands of taking up responsibility as a sounded practice.

### **Addressing responsibility: acting in the local, connecting to the global**

The writing of this dissertation is meant to value the experience of being with the world, of reaching and being reached, of knowing through hearing a vital dissonance to which I initially referred as a disruption that makes way for a change. I construct the project by its purpose of registering this disruption through situations, events, and logics which may arise from the invisible, yet present, materialist agitations of the sonic operative. The dissertation lays out the process of what I imagine as an ongoing, contingent but inexhaustible, moment of insurrection against the Russian regime, one that brings a power in the sounds of resisting gestures coursing within frames of post-Soviet life drawn by a shared experience of violence implicit in Russia's predatory politics inside and outside of state borders.

I narrate from the position of critical attention to Russia's past and present geopolitical thrusts and internal policies that work to instil the vertical power structure within which manifestations of authoritarianism, imperialism, and Eurasian expansionism are to be detected, and expansions of the capitalist relation are to be recognized. The dissertation brings to focus a greater field of the post-Soviet struggles, gathering case studies that stage a critique of Russian hegemony, the Putin regime, and the politics that prioritize and normalize war, state violence, and the maximum accumulation of capital. Each case argues for a continuing character of Russian regime's complicity in crimes against peoples and natures, and for a critical capacity necessary to recognize our responsibility to respond. While formal response is often grounded in immediacy and

positive outcomes, alternative forms of responsibility require other modes of responsiveness. I envision the sonic operative as one of such modes.

I bring the reader into situations where Russia's authoritarian, imperial, and capitalist involvements have led to various crises of the post-Soviet time. I examine the cause of these crises and the crafting of response and resistance in practices of performative engagement by which a shared stance against the Russian regime is taken. All the case studies speak in and around issues that contain the question of the post-Soviet condition in which one remains exposed to the ongoing reproduction of dominance, status and authority, as pertinent to the terms of the repressive, militarized, and extractivist regime. The dissertation reads as a study of a collective activist endeavour to confront the consequences of this regime and take up the ambition of intervening.

With the Pussy Riot and Party of the Dead case discussed in chapter The Offender, I examine anti-Putin activism and the politics of dissent in Russia. With the "Music there, where war is" and Shiyes siege case in chapter The Carer, I explore forms of resistance to Russia's external and internal colonial politics settling into the Kremlin-led war in Ukraine and Moscow-authorized environmental crime in Russia's far east. With the Stihia and Sowers of Space case in chapter The Magician, I study unorthodox responses to situations of environmental neglect directly related to Russia's former and latter models of colonial capitalism, its external and internal vectors. And finally, with the Volya, Construction and Atom case in chapter The Prophet, I account for creative attempts at intervention in what is to follow from Russia's project of "rebuilding" a historical empire. It is through these ways of engagement with crises of which the

Russian regime is part that I develop an understanding of a shared urgency and sensibility tuned to insights of being in the post-Soviet world into which Russia entered as a successor to the fallen empire.

In addressing the issue-based and region-bound contemporary struggles mentioned above, the dissertation also draws attention to broader concerns with failed democracies, capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, and environmental crisis. It stands with the post-Soviet community grappling with these concerns and coming into alignment with a global world now facing the consequences of abuse, neglect, and injustice arising from a profound lack of accountability. It aims to speak – through the post-Soviet realities – of the global present as a place where one gathers from a locale of experience, connecting one’s world with the shared world, seeking common ground for hope while living the violent effects of recent times. I write to deepen a view onto the post-Soviet struggles as uniquely affixed to the regional politics yet still operative within the current global context defined by threats and emergencies that are locally actualized but broadly shared. In attending to sonic resources with which one can empower struggling communities and strengthen resistance to injustices, I want to ask how opportunity can be gained in the activist conditions of the sonic operative through which a critique of structures of power and systems of control can be uniquely performed and made helpful in the effort to contest the world as it is.

## **Roadmap**

I map out the argument for the sonic operative, starting with the figure of the offender as one of involvement in a violation of publicly upheld norms. Taking the reader to the post-Soviet Russia in the **first** chapter, I examine how certain sounds are treated as

increasingly offensive means within the scope of the moral project of silence into which the Putin regime has been heavily investing. I begin with the Pussy Riot case that exemplifies possibilities and potentialities of dissonant noise through which the group operated. My discussion is structured around the notion of noise as unwanted sound that is deemed complex and non-musical, and noise as transformative force that does the political and activates a change. I draw from the work of Marie Thompson whose in-depth exploration of noise serves my goals to position Pussy Riot's noise within and beyond the dichotomy of good and bad. Charting out a general understanding of noise as a negative affective condition, I ask how judgements about Pussy Riot's sonic actions were made and how they were supported by the morality politics and its ideals around which Pussy Riot were framed as violating the values of "peace and quiet". I delve into the details of Putin's ambitions to silence the "noisy" body and mobilize on a greater obligation to the church-state project of collective control. Seen as the obedient servants of god and dutiful citizens of the Putin regime, Russian publics are expected to act in accordance with a normative standard of the silenced self. I show how silence becomes a political condition that meets the needs of Putin's politics, which, as I argue, pertains to a noise-abatement campaign. Grounding my argument in Serres's philosophical account of noise, I formulate Pussy Riot's larger performative operation that is characterized by punk aesthetics and guerrilla tactics as a project of parasitic perturbations. In conclusion, I suggest that Pussy Riot's subversive noise was perceived as harmful, if not dangerous, because it was generative of a turbulent space in which a transition to a different political order could be made possible.

I then proceed with the discussion of my second case study, the cacophonous action #vernisebegolos (#ownyourvoice) by which a group of engaged artists protested the authority of silence and the culture of submission, staking a claim to their voices and the sounded self. I outline the contextual schema of their performance, showing how acting in noisy excess to the established order is also launching an offensive strategy. I delve deeper into what this entails by examining the way in which the safeguarding powers of the deadened, the dead, and the immortal, which constitute the authoritarian reality of Putin's leadership, operate. Positioning immortality as a desired collective condition through which the current regime is mobilized, I bring attention to the project of making *neo- Homo Sovieticus*, a new and ideal "Putin's Man" whose humanity is owned by the state. It is within this project that I locate the experience of the body forced into silence from which the gone-mute subject emerges. I explore the expressions of muted subjectivity by discussing the Immortal Regiment movement to which the Party of the Dead counter-movement stood up in a series of gestures performed around the idea of loss – that of body, voice, and human agency. The action #vernisebegolos is seen as part of this counter-movement, bringing into focus emancipatory struggles that derive their intensity from the operations of noise, both as sound and force.

In the **second** chapter, sound is posed as the carer, being defined by its capacity to intervene in the crisis conditions and create a scene of alterity. The account of such intervention is developed through two case studies that are contextually different, yet tactically similar. It highlights the ecological aspects of what I call a sonic mission, an undertaking that orients participation to intervention in which sound is always already entangled with what the mission lends itself to: an act of life support. More specifically, I

examine sonic approaches of two activist projects, those of Ukrainian poet and vocalist Serhii Zhadan and Russian poet and musician Kirill Medvedev who perform on the frontlines of current conflicts in the war-hit regions of eastern Ukraine and the protest-driven Shiyes landfill site in Russia's far north, respectively. Zhadan plays with his band "Zhadan and the Dogs" for local audiences who are shaken by the violence of war. I analyse his performance as a disruption at acoustemological level and its recuperative effects, following the work of J. Martin Daughtry on belliphonic violence, to direct attention to sound's involvement in unmaking violence. I conceive of this involvement as life-sustaining, juxtaposing it to life-destructing forces at work. I draw from Étienne Balibar's philosophical account of antiviolence as a form of response to violence that is not reduced to the way of avoidance or attack but extended to a third option, that of confrontation, to propose an understanding of Zhadan's sounded action as an encounter that probes the im/possibility of peace. A sonic quest for peace, as I refer to this performative probing where antiviolence takes hold, recognizes the necessity to stay with the possibility of impossibility on practical terms, convening a space where a collective knowing in struggle can be forged. I locate in the sonic procedure of practical engagement a quality of caring obligation of which I write as in/forming and re/forming the experience of war. I go into more detail with Zhadan's performance in an underground bomb shelter, discussing its acoustic nonconformity to the aboveground norm and its creation of the liveable conditions from which involved participation in generating positive outcomes can be performed.

I then move on to examine the operability of Medvedev's sounded actions in the Shiyes crisis. This is a different ecological involvement, which I study for a

contractual obligation with the world, drawing from Serres's proposition for a politics of symbiosis. A symbiotic art of living, as I frame it after Serres, entails fostering a space of relations upon which a promise of alliance with the struggling world can be sustained. Holding onto the idea that the ecology of symbiotic relations is a process of contributing forces and material behaviours, including those of sound, I discuss an account of intervention the effects of which can be found far reaching. What made it possible for life to exist in the Shiyes region may reside in the messy entanglements of which sound is part. To explore these entanglements, I situate the Shiyes crisis in the context of Russia's larger capitalist and colonial politics implicated in the ongoing neglect of environmental warnings that come from disaster projects like Shiyes landfill construction. I study resistance movement formed around Shiyes, examining the conditions of solidarity created across protest communities uniting the indigenous Komi people, environmental activists, and the young New Left to which Medvedev allied. I discuss Medvedev's involvement by focusing on his song "The Walls" [Steny] in its mobilizing capacity and ecological presence – what I additionally refer to as the songwork. Engaging with T. J. Demos's term "the artwork-as-mass-mobilization" by which he speaks of the artwork's potential consequences, I go on to conceptualize Medvedev's project in its ecological implications as essentially making a difference in the region's life.

In the **third** chapter, sound is figured by the promise of the ineffable, as the magician. The sonic ineffable, in my account of it, is what generates therapeutic conditions that support activist needs. I inquire into these conditions, highlighting ethical aspects of radical shamanic approaches to dealing with local ecological crises. These approaches aim at extending sonic experience to practical responsibility and deem it

conducive to wellbeing. The two case studies that serve my inquiry are projects that invest in the ritual act, making “shamanic sounds” an operative reality that affords an arrangement of cohabitation with the living environment. The first case is the 2018 Stihia project, conceived by the Uzbek DJ Otabek Suleimanov as a ten-hour long electronic music installation in the desert of the Aral Sea. Stihia was a rave-themed event pertaining to ritual performance that mobilized technoshamanic and ancestral magics to revive the dead Sea. Attending to what can be grasped as a sea made of sound, I explore the project across the modes of ritual, material, and spiritual participation and extend its experiment of rehabilitation to situated contexts. I draw from Voegelin’s radical realist philosophy to consider the “sea of sound” beyond the figurative frame and symbolic language, as a possible world that can be inhabited and experienced as a place of recovery. To speak of recovery in a broader sense, I attend to the traumatic experience of the Uzbeks and native Karakalpak people of the Aral basin, examining the colonial, capitalocentric, and ecocidal politics that conditioned their life. I then steer my discussion to rehabilitation as the continuing process shaping the regional politics and ask how Stihia makes itself part of these politics, embracing a call for historical and ecological justice. Reconnecting Stihia’s involved commitment to positive transformation on practical levels, I finally refer to the project as an engagement in a critique of apocalyptic thought.

The second case that I study is the “Pushkin Laboratories” project, and the Sowers of Space action allied with it. I draw on the Situationist framework of the project to unpack its initial motivations for a set of interventions in St-Petersburg suburbs. Taking the reader back to the political realities of post-Soviet Russia, I examine the consequences of Russia’s corrupt crony capitalism for regional communities and local

natures by addressing the issues of illegal privatization, large-scale construction, and environmental degradation in the Pushkin-Pavlovsk townships. I ask how “Pushkin Laboratories” are involved in these local concerns, resorting to “eco-instituting” as a form of protest. Addressing the Sowers of Space action within the activist scope of the Laboratories, I inquire into its coupling of activism with sound therapy experiment and outdoor poetry reading. I discuss the use of Tibetan singing bowls as technologies of positive affect engineering, glean insights from various therapeutic investments and neo-shamanic endeavors nurturing a deeper connection with the self, environment, and the world. Setting the Russian neo-shamanism as a background context for the Sowers of Space experiment, I explore how the action extends to an activist practice that operates from an *occulture* of care, employing numinous strategies specific to the ineffable domain of sound. Expanding on the work of Donald Tuzin and Paul Jasen who locate the magics of vibration, I study Sowers of Space for an audiogenesis of caring and bring attention to its etho-ecological aspect.

The final **fourth** chapter of the dissertation elaborates an operational modality of the prophet by which sound acts from a prophetic stance and sets into existing countertendencies. With the prophet, I am interested in constructing a sense of the programmatic work of sound in the context of the Ukrainian struggles and freedom dreams. I explore how sound is implicated and determined by the alliance with the future to which Ukrainians participate with a share of anti-neo-imperial passions. I refer to this participation as the making of Ukrainofuture, using neologism inspired by the term Afrofuture as one enabling me to argue for an activism mobilized around the rejection of futures already composed, destinies determined, and identities assigned. Engaging with

the project of Ukrainofuture, I explore an activist politics that pushes against what governs the course of history and invents with the visions of a different future for Ukraine, one that is not bound to Russia's past and present imperial schemes. I draw from the work of Myroslav Shkandrij and Timothy Snyder to rethink the Ukrainian experience around the deeper colonial trauma and survivorship and locate the impulse that fuels the Ukrainofuture-making process shaped by the desire to rid oneself of the othering that colonial mentality has fostered. My case studies serve to qualify this radical sharing of a collective mission determined by the promise of a divergent tendency that resonates across time and space, and that gestures away from where the politics of Russian aggression might settle. I gather projects around their share of enthusiasm for a different Ukrainian future to come.

I begin with "Volya", the electronic music project of Kateryna Zavaloka which was released in response to Russia's 2014 war in Ukraine. I discuss how the project was made and what it turned out to be, drawing on its activist strategies, mythopoetic character, and ideological significance. I think of "Volya" as a mode of activist undertaking that couples sound with the process of Ukrainian reinvention. Referring to this process as a compelling expression of Ukrainian insurgency post-Euromadan, I research further in its unfolding being governed by the logics of violation with which the projects of Ukrainian community festivals, Construction in Dnipro and Atom in Zhytomyr, engaged. I start my account of Construction with a general understanding of the initiative in the context of Ukraine's larger decommunization movement with which it allied. I discuss the ceremonial replacement of Lenin statue for a white geo-textile egg as an event that both marked a grand opening of the festival and presented its activist

agenda. I then move to TSEKH: RAVE in the former palace of Ilyich, addressing its way of violation as sonic vandalism and locating it against the politics of imperial past and future. I finally present the case of Atom, building on my discussion of Construction to foreground a way of Ukrainian revolt in which the project of the future is shaped through actions that relieve Ukrainians of pressures and seductions of empire, and release from duty to preserve historical memory of the Russian regime. I locate a break with the imperial past that Atom shares with Construction as potentially productive of a proposition for unliving the present of the (neo-Soviet) future that Russia's most recent potentialization of the imperial tradition promises to bring forth. Atom's electronic sound production is discussed as a site of insurgent imagination and technique of dissent. Toward the end of the chapter, I turn to the theoretical work of Szulze and Eshun with which I develop my own registering of the Ukrainofuture effort that radically manifests through sound's disruptive operation.

I conclude by elaborating on the political operability of insurgent sounds from which the concept of the sonic operative is developed and formulating a thesis on the study of sound perceivable in ethos. Following from Voegelin's deliberation on sound's cosmopolitan dimension, I ask whether the sounds that pull us into a response to crises of local political and ecological systems also move us closer to taking a cosmopolitical action imagined on the insurrectionary capacity found in the sounding and listening world.

The chapters of the dissertation can be read in any order, following this introduction. They are meant to be an assemblage that organizes the argument into encounters with the work of the sonic operative that persists in different contexts, and

that engages with the ongoing struggles defined by a demand for a justice to come. In the post-Soviet space, justice essentially connects to one's radical goal to end the Russian regime in its various manifestations, the regime as such, with or without Putin. In its activist dimension, the dissertation is an effort to trace political actions through which one attempts to move toward this goal.

## The Offender

All of a sudden, without warning, the noise, a noise coming from the sky, a sound like that of the wind when it blows hard. It is produced locally, in a single direction and soon it fills the space, the whole space. In an unforeseeable fashion, it passes from the local to the global. It was a noise, a sound. It was an event in a corner of the system; it penetrates, invades, and occupies the whole house. It was heard; it is seen. They saw it appear. The noise is a chance occurrence, a disorder, and the wind is a flow.

Michel Serres, *The Parasite*

### Introduction: Unwanted sounds

On 21 February 2012, five members of the Pussy Riot punk collective entered Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. They ran up the stairs to the altar and took it for a stage. Shouting over silence the lines “Virgin Mary, Mother of God, Chase Putin Away!”, the performers fell to their knees, bowing and crossing themselves frantically. The show quickly transitioned to a cabaret style dance. Pussy Riot punched and kicked the air in an even more provocative gesture of defiance. A few church attendees who happened to make up the audience were struck in the middle of praying with a raw sound of DIY hardcore that ruined the atmosphere of lofty serenity. Grotesque choreography, flashy outfits and colorful balaclavas maximized the effects of transgression created by joining punk sounds to a parody of a church service that Pussy Riot’s Punk Prayer radically pursued. As panic set in, security guards rushed to the stage, attempting to put a stop to the “devilish” deeds of “indecent” women of which the Pussy Riot’s performative act was made characteristic. The group was accused of “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred” and formally prosecuted for what the Russian court saw as an inexcusable

profanity.<sup>11</sup> The footage of Punk Prayer was made into a video, inviting a new imagination of what else Pussy Riot's sound could do in this updated format and position of agency.<sup>12</sup>

I listen to the recording years later, seeking to register the effects of punk sounds, their way of perversity made operative in the Russian political space. Lyrics matter. They attest to the anguish and hope of activists willing to take risk by publicly cursing Vladimir Putin and demanding that he be cast out. Yet, there is more to it than the use of coarse language to pressure one's attention. In its transgressive act, Pussy Riot's sound enacted a form of involved participation that was no longer bound to the event of Pussy Riot's performance in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior but open to a process of agitational activity, one that enabled a lasting perturbing presence.

Identity obscuring balaclavas and guerrilla theatre tactics used by the group certainly contributed to how the conditions of perturbation were created, but sound too was taken as a site from which Pussy Riot lodged its political action. With a corporeal performance of female voice wrapped in the abrasiveness and controversy of punk sound, Pussy Riot were immediately confrontational with a patriarchal institution of the Russian

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<sup>11</sup> As quoted in "Too Punk for Putin: Moscow Court Finds Members of Pussy Riot Guilty," *Der Spiegel*, 17 August 2012, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/pussy-riot-band-members-found-guilty-in-russia-a-850655.html> For a more detailed account of the trial see the site of Russian Legal Information Agency, or RAPSI (Rossiiskoe agenstvo pravovoi i sudebnoi informatsii) in Russian: [http://www.rapsinews.ru/judicial\\_analyst/20120806/264111401.html](http://www.rapsinews.ru/judicial_analyst/20120806/264111401.html)

<sup>12</sup> Video was originally published on *YouTube* and linked to Pussy Riot's *LiveJournal* before their account was deleted. It then appeared across different platforms and can be accessed here: "Pank-moleben – Bogoroditsa Putina progoni," *YouTube* video published on 1 March 2012 by Vladimir Liadov, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=72&v=tq25vu7jy\\_0&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=72&v=tq25vu7jy_0&feature=emb_logo)

Orthodox Church and dismissive of the established socio-political order equated with quiet.

As I listen out for what was evoked and jeopardized by the subversive force of the group, I discern the ethical character of a sonic encounter into which loyalty to authority has been written. Sounding in defiance of harmony, or in defiance of silence so to speak, and breaking free from all elements of control, Punk Prayer came against an expected mode of behavior. It deviated from a collective normative standard through which patterns of untroubled citizenry had been shaped in Putin's Russia, and through which a formula of an absolute (harmonious) state had been commonly prescribed.

This chapter starts with an inquiry into Pussy Riot's way of sounding that entailed a violating doing and became the basis for a disruptive operation, one that risked opening onto a breach. I write to register the persistence of the offensive gesture that Pussy Riot crafted in each instance of appearing through sound, asking how this gesture was carried off noise. Noise, both as unwanted sound in the strict sense of the word and as force never exactly abstracted from such sound, is understood as productive of conditions in which an opportunity for transformation may arise. Punk Prayer, from which I develop my argument, is taken as exemplary of noise-making approach involving the creation of enabling conditions under which a new way of ordering could be attempted. Emerging as a site-specific intervention and becoming an unspecific force, the project made noise, and it gave rise to noise, investing in a politics of power relations.

I explore the work of Pussy Riot alongside a more recent #vernisebegolos (#ownyourvoice) action by a group of Russian artists who supported Pussy Riot and continued to build on what Pussy Riot left as a legacy. On 8 September 2019, they

gathered in front of the Chkalovsky-22 polling station in the city of St. Petersburg on the day of municipal elections. Their faces were covered with black and white designs as if in a futurist style of action. Each performer sounded forward, pushing their voice through messy clumps of other shouting voices, joining and disjoining to a strange off-key unison. The event turned out external to the existing order of things, becoming a noisy excess to what was in the process of happening.

Election day in Russia is framed by distinct patriotic signifiers bound to be everywhere, including the streets which are typically turned into an entertainment venue. The area around Chkalovsky-22 polling station was no exception. Voters had a good dose of *pesni-pliaski* (musics deployed for entertainment and propaganda) from a concert held right by the station. Mobilized on nostalgia for the Soviet era, they then headed to cast their vote for the one and only candidate, a select appointee of Putin. The sonority of propaganda followed voters right to the door of the polling station where they were unexpectedly met with a confrontational sound of #vernisebegolos performance. The performance was perceived as a threat, attracting local police that found it out of sync with the course of patriotic spectacle.

I listen to the recorded excerpts of #vernisebegolos posted online by Roman Osminkin, detecting its unregistered nuances and invisible expanse into politics.<sup>13</sup> Together with Maxim Evstropov (Max Stropov), Osminkin led a team of engaged performers from several interlinked communities who came out to sound #vernisebegolos into the world. Opposing themselves to the Russian voter who turned voiceless, the

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<sup>13</sup> Roman Osminkin published an edited version of #vernisebegolos, integrating excerpts from rehearsal and performances. See “#VERNISEBEGOLOS khorovye praktiki na izbiratelnykh uchastkakh S-Pb,” video published by Roman Osminkin on 10 September 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbDEXcDivvE>

performers strove to reimagine power to the voice, the body, and collective subjectivity. Sounded voice became a site from which a critique of the silenced self was launched.

I think of #vernisebegolos in tandem with Pussy Riot's Punk Prayer, also giving it a stance of noise and situating it in the context of activist politics in Putin's Russia. With the two performances conceptualized around the political task of sound, I delve into the moral project of silence involving the creation of the deadened, voiceless, and dead Russian subject conducive to the formation of a conforming and managed society. I discuss the cultivation of necro-sociality, which some performers of #vernisebegolos ridiculed with the Party of the Dead project, as necessitated by endeavors to control and command through silence. It is in these conditions of suppression that an offensive action of sound is imagined.

### **Pussy Riot's sonic offensive**

In the years of the Putin presidency, we've witnessed a "morality turn" in Russian politics, which has been characterized by support for conservative values, patriotic culture, and new Russian imperialism. As scholars have argued, morality (*npravstvennost'*) and spirituality (*dukhovnost'*) became coextensive with state-sponsored patriotism and motivations to prevent ideological ruptures by which engaged groups like Pussy Riot operated.<sup>14</sup> The popular appeal of moral ideals has been exploited by Russian

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<sup>14</sup> The term "morality turn" is used in Sharafutdinova, "Pussy Riot Affair," 616; Sharafutdinova, "Managing National Ressentiment," 132; and Stepanova, "Spiritual and Moral Foundation," 119. It is refashioned as "moral turn" in Østbø, "Securitizing 'Spiritual-Moral Values,'" 200; and contextualized through analysis of Russia's institutionalized education in Willems, "Why 'Punk'? Religion, Anarchism," 405-406.

propaganda that invested in fostering loyalty to the Putin regime on moral grounds, using Russian Orthodoxy to greater advantage. The Pussy Riot represents a compelling case of such an authorized way of creating false accusations.

Their performance in Cathedral of Christ the Savior, followed by the arrest of the three group members and trial, was at the center of international attention. It showed the world that performing a protest song in a church venue was a serious crime in Russia. While the West celebrated Pussy Riot's activism and anti-Putin sentiment, Russian authorities framed performances of the group as blasphemous and immoral, drawing on the Russian Criminal Code and offended feelings of Orthodox believers.<sup>15</sup> Acting as the moral guardian of Russia, Vladimir Putin publicly linked Russia's decline to the immoral content of Pussy Riot's actions, quickly translating Pussy Riot into a generic, ubiquitous threat. He said: "No one should undermine foundations of ethics and morality and disgrace our country."<sup>16</sup> Morality thus became the perspective through which danger to Putin's political system was defined. Pussy Riot were framed as inherently evil, violating the laws of good.

Apart from reducing Pussy Riot's work to content deemed immoral according to the socio-cultural norms of Putin's Russia, there was another site of negativity animating public discourse. Pussy Riot were defined in opposition to music "proper", and their performances by all manner of cacophony were condemned. Their work was perceived to be threatening to the auditor and disruptive to the sonic order. It was associated with the unwanted non-musical sound that undermined good values in music – in other words,

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<sup>15</sup> Woodyard, "Pussy Riot and the Holy Foolishness," 275-276.

<sup>16</sup> As quoted in "Putin pozhalel uchastnits Pussy Riot," *Lenta.ru*, 19 December 2013, <https://lenta.ru/news/2013/12/19/pussyriot/>

with dissonant “noise.”<sup>17</sup> As music’s opposite, Pussy Riot’s sound conformed to the idea of noise (perhaps more so than the effect of noise) and ultimately reinforced the cliché aesthetic judgment claiming the lack of positive value in noise. Judged by the normative standards of the beautiful (that is melody, as in Western music) and identified with offensive sound repellent to the ear, it displeased the Russian listener. Aesthetic dissatisfaction with the group showed in the negative reviews, which attempted to condemn the anti-aesthetic in Pussy Riot by drawing on the callistic principles of harmony: that what is repulsive to the senses cannot be beautiful to the moral faculty of the mind.<sup>18</sup>

A review in *Russkii Reporter* (*Russian Reporter*) gives attention to the affective spectrum of Pussy Riot’s extreme vocalizations and forceful instrumental sounds, pointing to the maximalist (shocking and violent) aesthetics of Pussy Riot’s performances. Applying a sensory judgement to abrasive and incomprehensible sonority of Pussy Riot’s music, the review talks about the group as sinister and noisy: “the audience is not always sure of what is really being played: the droning sound of inexpensive guitars coming from portable speakers layered with background noise. One can only hear loud and atrocious screams of vocalists in such hissing noise.”<sup>19</sup> Similar review in *Novaia Gazeta* (*New Gazette*) also bases its evaluation on the overall feeling of

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<sup>17</sup> On the “oppositional” aspect of Pussy Riot’s music that was “dismissed” as “mere noise,” see Manderson, “Making a Point,” 25-26.

<sup>18</sup> The word “callistic” (adjective of “callistics,” which means the study of beauty) is borrowed from Liam Dee’s work on the tension between the beautiful and the aesthetic (the sensory), intertwined with the social and ethico-political. See Dee, “Terrible Beauty,” 303.

<sup>19</sup> Vladislav Moiseev, “Bunt feminizma: zachem obrazovannyye devushki provodiat pank-moleben v Khram Khrista Spasitelia,” *Russkii Reporter*, 24 February 2012, [http://rusrep.ru/article/2012/02/24/pussy\\_riot](http://rusrep.ru/article/2012/02/24/pussy_riot)

discontent against harsh and excessive manifestations of Pussy Riot's sound, which, as review claims, do not conform to what music must be and hence cannot be called music as such. What Pussy Riot does "is not music", but an exposure to sound in its capacity to shock, comparable to "a can opener that ruptures one's closed self." The review goes on to emphasize Pussy Riot's engagement with acoustic violence: "Pussy Riot [. . .] is sound that strips your inner self, sound that cracks the shell of your impaired consciousness [...] Pussy Riot is not a music band, but a group of urban guerrillas."<sup>20</sup> Both reviews describe Pussy Riot's use of sound as a form of force, implying that audiences were subjected to acoustic assault intended as a technique of power. They make evident that Pussy Riot's strategies were those of sensory overload, similarly to "the art of war in the art of noise" aesthetics of noise-inspired futurists.<sup>21</sup>

But what is it that Pussy Riot's noise did – at the level of sensation (displeasing the ear) and socio-political register (upsetting the prevailing order) – to become offensive to Russia's conservative politics? A moralistic response condemning Pussy Riot was shaped by the negative encounter with noise and reflective of a value judgment made about noise commonly. Noise is positioned against different forms of conventionality and deemed "the other" by long-standing assumptions. It is "always already bad" according to the aesthetic moralist narrative of acoustic ecology.<sup>22</sup> And it is largely at odds with the

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<sup>20</sup> Aleksei Polikovskii, "V elektricheskikh kolgotkakh i oranzhevom ogne," *Novaia Gazeta*, 14 December 2011, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2011/12/14/47346-v-elektricheskikh-kolgotkah-i-oranzhevom-ogne>

<sup>21</sup> Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, 55. See chapters 2 and 10 of the book where discussion on sonic violence and radical aesthetics traces back to Luigi Russolo's 1913 *The Art of Noises* manifesto.

<sup>22</sup> Thompson, *Beyond Unwanted Sound*, 116. On the moralistic perspective of acoustic ecology, which designates noise as "bad," see pp 87-126.

central tenets of Western music, being made into an “undesirable” sound historically “stigmatized and suppressed”.<sup>23</sup> When finally brought into the artistic intent, it is often associated with dark and evil aesthetics of musical genres that violate ethical and normative assumptions, as in the case of extreme metal music.<sup>24</sup> The link between Pussy Riot and noise too cannot be dismissed, as it underlies both the critical discourse surrounding Pussy Riot’s disruption of conventional musicality and morally coded political discourse of opposition to the group. It helps explain why the group was considered aggressive and hostile, at once transgressing the norm of musical conventionality and perturbing the status quo of the disciplined quiet in Putin’s Russia. As Yngvar B. Steinholt puts it: “When some classify the group’s performances as disturbance of public order and acts of (cultural) terrorism, *sound* is a main basis for their verdict.”<sup>25</sup>

In what follows, I want to show that it is not only in the political content of their work but also in the operationality of unwanted sound that Pussy Riot sought a confrontation with the Kremlin that has been investing in the moral project of silence to pacify the Russian public. I bring into focus sound’s potential to impact, disrupt, and threaten in a particular situation of political action against the administrative authority. For the purpose of my argument, I do not make a distinction between Pussy Riot’s instrumental, vocal, documented, edited, live, and virtual sounds circulating in the public

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<sup>23</sup> Demers, *Listening through the Noise*, 77.

<sup>24</sup> Unger, *Sound, Symbol, Sociality*, 117.

<sup>25</sup> Steinholt, “Roars of Discontent,” 128 (my italics).

sphere of the Internet. Instead, I refer to the lived reality of Pussy Riot's *all sound* (to borrow from avant-garde composer John Cage who thought of sound as a unifying resource) as standing in discordance with the moral project of silence through which the Putin regime has set social norms.<sup>26</sup> Working to trouble the politics of "peace and quiet" and disturb conservative values of the Russian society, Pussy Riot's noisy interventions carried a disruptive force. They were *violating* (breaking the official code of silence) and *violent* (antagonistic to the ear), yet *vibrant* (pertaining to a turbulent milieu), aspiring to catalyze revolt and transform Russia's political system. Grounding my argument in Michel Serres's philosophy that elaborates on noise from the standpoint of its transformative potential and political purpose, I write to propose that the relationship between Pussy Riot and the Kremlin was analogous to a noise abatement campaign in which the Putin regime sought to suppress and combat the threatening noisemaker.

### **Not of music "proper": perspectives on Pussy Riot's performativity**

Despite calling themselves a feminist punk band, Pussy Riot were radically different from a formal punk band performing in clubs. Their project intended to exceed the bounds of space typically reserved for music performance, opening onto a larger arena of engagement. In the artist statement posted on *LiveJournal*, a widely used social network and blogging site in Russia, they wrote: "Our collective rejects an old understanding of musician conformed to playing music in the prescribed spaces, instead we believe that

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<sup>26</sup> Cage, "Future of Music: Credo (1937)." This text by Cage is an example of the larger conceptual framework determined by a non-discriminative and all-encompassing approach to sonic milieu. My attempt is to expand on Cage's methodological practice, staying experientially and conceptually open to all matter that is acoustic, and locating a totalizing effect of exposure to Pussy Riot's panaural (total sound) environment across the varied sites of their performative context.

musician is someone who can turn any space into a performance venue, each time creating a new, immediate audience.”<sup>27</sup> In the interview with *Gazeta.ru*, they expanded on this statement, presenting their project as deterritorialized by the design of a growing, decentralized network: “Pussy Riot do not conform to a typical music band, and we do not have core members. ‘Pussy’ can grow roots and spring anywhere.”<sup>28</sup> Operating as an insurgency network, the group developed strategies for avoiding arrests in Russia’s closely monitored public space. They turned to disruptive tactics of “flash” performance, briefly presenting themselves on site and then restaging their productions for cyberspace.<sup>29</sup> It helped them mobilize a greater listening community and build a new scale of action.

Claiming punk sounds to new political subjectivity, Pussy Riot enhanced ambiguity surrounding their musical input. Scholars of popular music struggled to define the group as Russian punk. Punk sounds worked well as a medium for performing political critique, however Pussy Riot’s performance style did not exactly translate into that of punk, some argued.<sup>30</sup> Others questioned the authenticity of Pussy Riot’s punk delivery. They could not locate in the Pussy Riot project a commitment to the aesthetics of the here-and-now both in concerts and recordings, which is a unifying characteristic of

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<sup>27</sup> Pussy Riot *LiveJournal* entry, “Serii vystuplenii feministskoi pank-gruppy Pussy Riot v Moskve,” 7 November 2011, <http://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/5497.html>

<sup>28</sup> Dar’ia Zagvozdina, “My vyshli zakhvatyvai’ ulitsy,” *Gazeta.ru*, 27 February 2012, <https://www.gazeta.ru/social/2012/02/27/4013957.shtml>

<sup>29</sup> McMichael, “Defining Pussy Riot Musically,” 104-105. I reframe the use of McMichael’s term “flash concerts” in order to address briefness and spatiality of Pussy Riot’s performances.

<sup>30</sup> Wiedlack, “Pussy Riot and the Western Gaze,” 412; Willems, “Why ‘Punk’? Religion, Anarchism,” 403–404.

Russian punk.<sup>31</sup> Pussy Riot stayed true to the aesthetics of “spontaneity, shock and sound” in live concerts, but their performances lost authenticity when post-concert video recordings were meticulously manipulated to trick the viewer with quasi-real performances.<sup>32</sup> The group was also dissociated from the Russian punk scene and seemed to have no ties with punk bands in Russia. Their punk project was inspired by political performance work of collective Voina (War) and was more in lineage with Russian actionism than Russian punk.<sup>33</sup> It was imbued with a strong anti-Putin sentiment and served the insurgent agenda, unlike traditional punk projects which usually did not surge a revolutionary desire. As Hilary Pilkington points out, punk is always already political in Russia because it is “rendered so by the system.”<sup>34</sup> Living life of a punk becomes a form of critique and expression of nonconformity in the country where motivations to undermine the norm are historically condemned. Identifying as a Russian punk means exercising one’s right to be different by resorting to provocation, extremity, and self-marginalization, rather than attempting to change the existent political realities. (9)

Hence from the perspective of a Russian punk, to be revolutionary one does not have to be formally involved in politics, whereas for Pussy Riot, to be on the front line with a bold political statement was imperative to the act of rebellion. These differences make the Pussy Riot music project ever more complex and pertinent to discourses other than those of Russian punk. Once the Pussy Riot affair came to an end and two members

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<sup>31</sup> Gololobov and Steinholt, “The Evolution of Punk in Russia,” 22.

<sup>32</sup> McMichael, “Defining Pussy Riot Musically,” 103, 109-110.

<sup>33</sup> Steinholt, “Kitten Heresy,” 121.

<sup>34</sup> Pilkington, “Punk, but Not as We Know It,” 8.

of the group were released from Russian jail in February 2014, the original Pussy Riot project was brought to a close, eventually evolving into activist projects disjointed from music.<sup>35</sup> The Pussy Riot phenomenon, however, still provoked considerable scholarly interest. In the 2016 special issue of *Popular Music and Society* dedicated to Pussy Riot, scholars reintroduced the Russian context in which the group operated and extended the discussion of the political in the Pussy Riot project to sonic agency.<sup>36</sup> Among several contributions to the issue, Stephen Amico's article on Pussy Riot's interrogation of female corporeality through the agency of voice can be considered the most provocative reading of Pussy Riot's music performativity to date. Amico argues that the voice takes on a political dimension in Pussy Riot's performances (protest live actions) and artefacts (mediated videos of documented performances) by being de-linked from the performing female body and identified as a sign of gender nonconformity. The dis-alignment of voice from the gender-typical body challenges the primacy of a "stable (gendered) corporeality" maintained in Russia's patriarchal culture.<sup>37</sup> Pussy Riot's refusal to commit to dominant cultural values and beliefs carried through the "natural", "proper", or "stable" body (the body as a guarantor of stability) undermines the sense of stability at large, as Amico suggests. (433–436) He then goes on to say that the group's embrace of flux was negatively perceived by majority of the Russians who remained affected by the

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<sup>35</sup> In the latest blog post, which is post-dated by several years, Pussy Riots claims inactivity. See Pussy Riot *LiveJournal* entry, "IA UBILA PROTEST!!!!" 4 March 2024, <http://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/6786.html>

<sup>36</sup> Steinholt and Wickström, "The Pussy Riot Complex."

<sup>37</sup> Amico, "Digital Voices, Other Rooms," 436.

impact of former cataclysms and political and economic instability, seeking a stable and more predictable life under Christian conservatism of Putin's presidency. (437)

Amico's analysis of the voice for the purpose of arguing a necessary connection between Pussy Riot's subversion of the gendered body and negativity of feelings associated with the troubling implications of this subversion (such as destabilization of Russia's politics of conformity and passivity) actually develops from the premise that Pussy Riot's "sonic features" slip out of the realm of the musical. (428) These features are better understood as vocalities and sonorities that play a role in the Russian geocultural and geopolitical space and engender affective states that may contribute to emancipatory changes. While Pussy Riot's work is discussed in the field of popular music culture, it is far more ambiguous in terms of genre. It stands in continuity with early twentieth-century Russian street theatre, early cinema sound experiments, and sound art, reflecting more of a "repudiation of a narrowly defined conception of 'music,' and an embracing of sonorities that might lay [sic] closer to '*noise*.'"<sup>38</sup>

The concept of noise as that which defines the non-musical in Pussy Riot's *oeuvre* is aesthetically and ideologically relevant. It supports the idea of marginalized, non-essential, and unwelcome sounds that Pussy Riot produced to incite hostile feelings. It also provides grounds for Pussy Riot's dismissal from the established idioms of the musical arts and further affirmation of the group as rebellious and disloyal. By subverting categories of Russian punk, music, and musician, and developing a form of sonic protest to enact the disruption of social norms, the gender binary, and stability politics, Pussy Riot's work suggests an attempt at transgression of the symbolic status quo.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 431 (my italics). On the lineage of Pussy Riot's aesthetics that reaches back to experiments in theatre, cinema, and sound art, see pp 427–429.

## Sound as affective force

In one of their last *LiveJournal* entries, the 2014 post that declared the formal break between the collective and two members, Mariia Alekhina and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Pussy Riot restated what was most fundamental to their identity, ideology, and integrity. While reasserting their ideals — “feminism, separatist resistance, and fight against authoritarianism and personality cult”, Pussy Riot also reclaimed their sonic identity and formalized their operational framework at the nexus of politics and sound.<sup>39</sup> In regards to Alekhina’s and Tolokonnikova’s new role as advocates of human rights and their no longer punk-driven appearances, the group wrote: “Our performances are always ‘illegal,’ staged only in unpredictable locations and public places not designed for traditional entertainment. The distribution of our clips is always through free and unrestricted media channels. We are anonymous, because we act against any personality cult, against hierarchies implied by appearance, age and other visible social attributes. We cover our heads, because we oppose the very idea of using female face as a trademark for promoting any sort of goods or services. The mixing of the rebel feminist punk image with the image of institutionalized defenders of prisoners’ rights, is harmful for us as collective, as well as it is harmful for the new role that Nadia and Masha have taken on.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Pussy Riot *LiveJournal* entry “Tak uslysh'te zhe nas nakonets!” 6 February 2014, <https://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/34528.html>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. I use a published English translation of the text, which appeared here: Alex Hudson, “Masha Alyokhina and Nadya Tolokonnikova No Longer Members of Pussy Riot,” *Exclaim!* 6 February 2014, [http://exclaim.ca/music/article/masha\\_alyokhina\\_nadya\\_tolokonnikova\\_no\\_longer\\_members\\_of\\_pussy\\_riot](http://exclaim.ca/music/article/masha_alyokhina_nadya_tolokonnikova_no_longer_members_of_pussy_riot)

In this open letter, Pussy Riot stood by their rebel feminist punk image that remained constitutive of their primary aspiration to foment rebellion in Russia. The narrative of rebellion can be effectively traced in various rhetorical spaces (texts on *LiveJournal*, lyrics, interviews) in which Pussy Riot operated. For instance, it becomes particularly evocative in the performance “Putin Pissed Himself,” which assumes revolutionary solidarity through the lyrics “Rebellion in Russia – riot, riot!”<sup>41</sup> But how does expanding into the context of punk (that is not punk music per se) help advance this rhetoric of rioting it? And how does sound offer a means through which rebellion can be orchestrated?

Already in 2011, Pussy Riot remarked upon the urgency of punk sounds to their “rebel mission”, one influenced by a subgenre of punk from the early 1980s called Oi! music: “We chose punk rock and illegal performance because we could not express resistance in any other way under conditions in which mass media is all conservative and state-controlled. We sought a powerful, ironic, and provocative form that would help us push against conservative impulses. Coming to expression through such a form opened possibilities for us to be heard in a situation of concern which otherwise would be ignored if we acted in a more cultured way. And it is exactly in oi-punk that we discovered the force of this form.”<sup>42</sup> I read this statement as a commitment to get into action through the potency of sound, building toward a moment of rebellion. Sound

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<sup>41</sup> Pussy Riot *LiveJournal* entry “PRORYV I AREST PUSSY RIOT NA LOBNOM MESTE KRASNOI PLOSHCHADI S PESNEI ‘PUTIN ZASSAL’,” 20 January 2012, <http://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/8459.html>

<sup>42</sup> Pussy Riot *LiveJournal* entry “Interv’iu Pussy Riot v *Livejournal*: ‘My voobshche ne govorim ob intensivnosti seksual’noi zhizni’,” 10 November 2011, <http://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/2498.html>

served Pussy Riot's mission to create the conditions for insurgency, carrying the force of anger and acting in the antagonistic mode to peace and pacified existence that the Putin regime promoted and sponsored.

Gripped by a violent urge, Pussy Riot aspired to be an army of superheroes ready to fight the war on Putin. They announced: "We are superhero cartoon characters who emerged from TV screens to storm the streets...".<sup>43</sup> The idea of rebellion here was taken beyond its rhetoric toward the lived experience of fictitious warfare in which punk sounds, delivered through screaming, shouting, and making noise, were used to stage an assault on the harmonic order. By sonic way of posturing toward confrontation with the Putin regime, Pussy Riot came against the deadening effects of pacification strategies. Their "battlefield" extended beyond a symbolic action to an actual world of vibrations and agitations offering the sensibility of threat. Sound in this situation functioned as noise, providing a model of intervention into the spectacle of silence which perpetuated the task of disciplinary policing. It was formative to the militant aesthetics of the group and made the very medium of warfare they embarked on.

This model of attack is suggestive of Pussy Riot's own version of "sonic warfare", in which the goals are to interfere, perturb and transform through sonic process.<sup>44</sup> The group sought a reaction to and action toward the affective powers of their

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<sup>43</sup> Dar'ia Zagvozdina, "My vyshli zakhvatyvat' ulitsy," *Gazeta.ru*, 27 February 2012, <https://www.gazeta.ru/social/2012/02/27/4013957.shtml>

<sup>44</sup> I use the term "sonic warfare" in the extended sense here, drawing on Steve Goodman's study of the politics of affective mobilization. Sound as a powerful force can serve to catalyze and pressure into certain behaviors. Goodman shows how affective ecologies of sonic/vibrational effects are produced by drawing bodies, crowds, and populations into projects of collectivity. See Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*. Pussy Riot's project of affective mobilization was too invested in the effects of sound, logics of force, and ways of turbulence, proposing a platform for collectivity.

noisy action tactically deployed to win out against the politics of regulation. They wanted to reawaken the deadening space in which Russian publics were living passive anesthetized lives, mobilizing on culturally unauthorized sonic presence and investing in the tactics of noise to generate a turbulent process. “We want to be a precedent of punk-feminist performance and have followers,” they said, discussing their project of meddling with Russia’s patriarchal culture and their nomadic approach to performance.<sup>45</sup> Holding onto the idea of invasiveness, which supported their live situationist-style guerilla acts and intrusive operation in cyberspace, they sought to overrun the authority by parasitic action. Sound was weaponized to colonize and capitalize on attention and invite solidarity among the revolutionary publics. The group deployed sonic branding strategies and virosonic tactics, investing in the insurgent potential of the Pussy Riot audio virus. They masterfully joined the politico-semiotic content of their voice to the art of sonic intrusion, alluding to the order of noise as their ultimate stakes.

In other words, Pussy Riot’s values of transgression, extremity, and excess were directly embedded in their sound. The identity of female fighter that the group pursued in making was branded as excessively noisy, risky, and vigorously dissenting. And the campaign to discredit the group was sensibly and morally cued around a novel danger of this identity. Pussy Riot’s punk riot was deemed threatening, amid concerns with what it can do. More than punk and more than riot, it was a battlefield environment to which sound contributed an atmosphere of aggression, an act of violation, and a sense of offence.

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<sup>45</sup> Pussy Riot discuss their migrant, invasive, and nomadic ideology and performativity in an interview with *Gazeta.ru*. See Dar’ia Zagvozdina, “My vyshli zakhvatyvav’ ulitsy,” *Gazeta.ru*, 27 February 2012, <https://www.gazeta.ru/social/2012/02/27/4013957.shtml>

Aiming at outdoing the punk performance, the Pussy Riot project however remained serial to the aesthetic extremism of punk productions. Treating the screaming voice as a sonic event, it honed extreme vocal techniques and extra-musical sonorities of punk performance to create a clamorous space, in which the group derived greater potential. Punk studies scholar Kelley Tatro writes about the role of screaming and shrill cacophony in hardcore punk, focusing on the affective power of hard and noisy sounds. She argues that punk musicians perform affective labor through physical exertions of screaming, which helps valorization of hard work in the capitalist era of devaluated physical labor and inspires an act of “solidarity through collective catharsis.”<sup>46</sup> Screaming inaugurates a sense of social belonging, fashioning the propagation of “valued affects” like anger and rage and mobilizing on collective vulnerability. (447–448) It valorizes noise, pushing singing to the edge of expressible sound and liberating it from the symbolic content of a message. The sheer excess of energy, punk noise maximizes the potential of the sound “to do”.

Redirecting our attention to the liberating and mobilizing affects of extreme vocalizations, Tatro’s article helps to listen into the screaming obscenities of Pussy Riot as that which set up the conditions for a risky political expression that noise becomes. Pushing language to a cacophony of shouts, the group acted from a state of noise, assuming a new spectrum of affective powers. “Noise [. . .] occurs when language breaks down,” as Simon Reynolds writes in his essay on disobedient powers of noise. It simultaneously precedes and exceeds language, enabling communication outside of language all together. Turning threatening to the authority of language, it comes prior to a

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<sup>46</sup> Tatro, “Hard Work of Screaming,” 431.

conscious thought laying claim to negative or positive meanings. Pointing to an all-pervading fear of noise, Reynolds speaks of noise as interference that operates code-free. Noise unlocks sensation and cuts off signification to unmake sense of what it is.<sup>47</sup> The liminality of noise, its instability as a negative agent, makes noise quite paradoxical, in the sense that noise can activate both negative (irritation) and positive (fascination) affects. Defined by this ambiguity, noise compares to horror, Reynolds suggests. He writes: “We are arrested, fascinated, by a convulsion of sound to which we are unable to assign a meaning. We are mesmerized by the materiality of music. This is why noise and horror go hand in hand – because madness and violence are senseless and arbitrary (violence is the refusal to argue), and the only response is wordless – to scream.” (57)

The noise/horror tandem creates a needed reference to the dynamics of repulsion (hostility) and attraction (positivity) forming around Pussy Riot’s eruption into screaming and performing from a state of noise. On the one hand, Pussy Riot’s noise is understood in terms of its “monstrous” potential to disturb crowds and distress surroundings (as if in horror, confronting audiences with an element of monstrosity and evoking displeasure). On the other hand, it is unconstrained by negative manifestations, pertaining to a positive process of new orders. Using ethico-acoustic strategies of noise, Pussy Riot were able to set things astir and create conditions favorable to havoc. Their way of disruption and creation pushed against assumptions that noise is always already negative. It proposed a different affective engagement that foregrounded what sound affect theorist Marie Thompson had called “noise’s positively productive capacity.”<sup>48</sup> Unlike its association

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<sup>47</sup> Reynolds, “Noise,” 56.

<sup>48</sup> Thompson, *Beyond Unwanted Sound*, 120.

with shock or offence, noise can be seen as an engaging resource aesthetically pertinent to the aims of activist art. In this respect, Pussy Riot's noise must be understood as a "generative" milieu, not necessarily of textures, rhythms, and sonorities, but of turbulent atmosphere that enabled the possibility of change.<sup>49</sup>

### **Noisescape/riotscape**

Why did Pussy Riot's noise qualify as a form of violence to the ear of political authority? To explore this question, I start with the concept of noisescape as riotscape, drawing from Michel Serres's work on the political possibility of noise. Serres writes of noise in association with images that we hear, making it synesthetically feel what noise does rather than what noise is. The disruptive *doing* of noise creates the condition for the new. It defines the process of emergence, the birth of forms, the circumstance of the possible. Serres gives emphasis to this greater disorient and complex "multitude" of noise – a state of confusion and overwhelming chaos from which a process of orientation, a setting toward, begins. The order comes out of the disordered mixture. It emerges in the noisy, in what is constantly shifting, transforming, and moving. He calls the creativity of the multitude a "surge", a compositional forcefield of excess that draws out paths to being and ways to becoming. A surge amounts to an intensification of process, event, nomadic activity, of which what comes to life is composed. Serres speaks of it as a great "uproar", "the noise of murmur and clamor", "the noise of the sea", "both battle and racket", "the collective passion". From "the primal state" – "the multitude in a fury", it all (form, life,

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<sup>49</sup> I refer here to Thompson's discussion of noise as generative force, which is tailored to the field of noise music serving the purpose of primary research material. (Ibid) My use of the term "generative" suggests a broader interpretation, which embraces the variety of practices that make use of "noisy" sounds.

time, history) begins. The work of formation is also the work of transformation, a possibility born from the unknown.<sup>50</sup>

A nude figure emerging in a swirl of colors from the waters, *la belle noiseuse* (“the beautiful clamorer or the querulous beauty”) serves as an ideal metaphor to exemplify the formative and transformative process of noise. Inspired by the painting of the same name in Honoré de Balzac’s story “The Unknown Masterpiece”, Serres creates a trope of “Aphrodite born of the waters” to poetically allude to the passage from chaos to form, probing the very process of creativity, the slow coming to life. Meditating on his encounter with the painting, its hazy and atmospheric form and ambiguous content, he uses the image of seascape to complicate the concept of noise. Seascape is a reservoir of possibilities – the capacity of the multiple. Noise is an opening to capaciousness. This is how incipience expresses itself, with the emerging form of Aphrodite arising from the chaotic sea, from “the ocean of *noise*, the surge of differences and determinations”. (37)

In the nascent clamor of the sea, there is a vagueness forbidding to know what is yet to exist, a new field in the making, the intermediary between chaos and form, a volatile transitional state that defines the restlessness within space, the inclination from which something emerges, the onset of the motion. Serres calls it “the great turbulence.” (71) On the processual level, noise is inherently compositional, in-forming and re-forming, innovating and germinating, growing into and out, expanding and complexifying. It is the making process. And it is the unmaking process, one that can generate potentials, differences, and changes. “Noise is the vector, noise is the feathered arrow, noise sows the poisonous stroke as it goes. Parasite logic never stops. The seed-

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<sup>50</sup> Serres, *Genesis*, 19-21; 52-54; 83, 139.

corn dies, and it dies. The seed-corn dies, and it sprouts. It sprouts and it is meager, it fructifies only slightly. It sprouts and it multiplies, exponentially, it overruns the place, it occupies space ...”, as Serres writes, getting to the bottom of the making/unmaking process. (58)

Through the insightful exploration of noise, Serres subverts the authority of ocular thinking, operating in a different, acoustic environment of sea, noise, rumor, crowds, moments of life and history. For him, knowing the world means hearing its murmur. “Hearing is an open receiver which does not go to sleep,” he writes, contesting the model of the observer and the observed. (60) The auditory scene that hearing affords attention is a scene of matter in movement and flux, a scene of life under continuing variation. Serres seeks a grasp of this turbulent milieu, “the expansive fizzle of sea noise”. (68)

The clamorous sea serves as a conduit to his philosophy of restlessness, noise, and transformation: “The noise – intermittence and turbulence – quarrel and racket – this sea noise is the originating rumor and murmuring, the original hate. We hear it on the high seas.” (14) He then further alludes to the disruptive power of noise, saying: “The noisy sea is always there, present, dangerous.” (20) The threat of noise is rendered meaningful and can be sensed and apprehended in hearing: “This restlessness is within hearing,” Serres asserts. (13) To delve deeper into the process of formation and transformation, one of revolutionary desire and action, he elaborates an ontology of collective energy, passion and power. A surge of energy stirs up things and sets into threatening alterities. We never exactly know what may occur under “fury and noise”. Using the example of sporting events, Serres writes: “...listen to what is shouted in the clamor of the stadium. The secret lies in that noise. That chaos-noise is primitive, like the wind of violence,

unleashed, mastered, lost, retaken, delirious, and disciplined. It subsides and swells like action, but it is noise like action: disorder and danger to be controlled.” (55) This noisy state – “the state of furor” – is both destructive and generative, disordering and ordering, risking a greater destabilization. The unleashed energy of collective commotion drives a violent act of transition.

How is this process of transition – “the groundswell of violence and pandemonium”, as Serres describes it, is invested with power? How is it far-reaching? Violence owes its genesis to the turbulent chaos, to that what is analogous to the manner of a whirlwind, vortex, or immense arborescence. The noise made by the crowd – the onset of turbulence – is an index of violence. It propagates acoustically, and in the broadest sense. With the surging swell of a “solitary sound” that can propel “the river of noise”, space undergoes a massive change. “Space is invaded by an immense arborescence, from dovetail to dovetail, roots, rootlets, trunk, branches, and boughs. The noise runs on, flies, goes from knot to knot, branching unpredictably,” Serres writes. (59) The overspreading noise carries with it this frightening potential to infiltrate and disrupt systems, analogous to the parasite that thrives through dominance: “Noise is parasitical, like interference, it follows the logic of the parasite, a very tiny thing, an insufficient reason, a cause without consequence at times, which may vanish to the left of the dovetail, which may increase and magnify to the right of the instauration [...] Noise sows the poisonous stroke as it goes. (57) Taking up the parasite as a foundational metaphor and opening it to a philosophical reading, Serres explores the transformative action of noise. In the capacity of the parasite, noise perturbs systems, destabilizing and renewing them, playing the role of the intermediary that motivates rigorous shifts and

transformations. Parasitic intervention is crucial to evolutionary systems, as Serres explains: “If evolution is an order, the parasite is certainly its element. It interrupts a repetition and makes the series of sameness bifurcate.”<sup>51</sup>

Understanding the operational logics of noise with Serres helps to draw together the social, political, and aesthetic functions of noise as carrying the germ of new orders. If we read Pussy Riot’s political project through the lens of Serres, we can understand more fully how activist art, politics, and noise might be linked. The metaphor of clamorous sea offers a new way of articulating the situation of turbulence that Pussy Riot created, disrupting the conservative politics. Perturbing the old order, the group sought a greater affective disturbance and transformative power. They acted to self-propagate, growing from just a few site-specific gigs into a more expansive presence across political spaces. Surging up, penetrating, and occupying, they followed the logic of the parasite, one that leads to invade, intervene, and modulate. The noisescap of their riot was “full of sound and fury”, the trouble and anguish of transgression. As Serres tells us, the path to change lies through the state of the violent excitement, “the surge in all directions”.<sup>52</sup> Pussy Riot succeeded in making this happen, enabling the rhythm of change, the principle of genesis. Their noise played a role in mobilizing against the Putin regime; the regime, in turn, reacted to the damaging effects, punishing any attempt at subverting the authority of silence through which it could affirm and expand its power.

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<sup>51</sup> Serres, *Parasite*, 186.

<sup>52</sup> Serres, *Genesis*, 63.

## The Kremlin's moral project of silence and noise abatement campaign

During his annual press conference in Moscow on 14 December 2017, Vladimir Putin sent a clear message to the public ahead of the upcoming 2018 presidential election in Russia that he was not fond of his noisy adversaries. He said, "Speaking of the opposition, it is after all necessary to stop making noise in public space or backrooms and talking about anti-popular regimes. It is imperative to invest in concrete deeds to improve what has been done."<sup>53</sup> At the start of his third presidential term, Putin delivered a similar message on his visit to the annual Russian youth forum held at Seliger Lake in the Tver' region in August 2013, where he spoke of his main political threat, recently arrested opposition leader Aleksei Naval'nyi, as if he were an unlawful noisemaker: "Everyone should learn to act lawfully. And nevermore make noise and shout 'Stop the thief! Instead propose a policy and maintain decorous manners, evincing no aggression."<sup>54</sup> This political rhetoric exposes an ideology laden with negative stereotyping of noise as a sign of improper and prohibited behavior, as an abstract threat to the system that associates making noise with some kind of wrongdoing.<sup>55</sup> Putin's remarks point to the imaginary boundary between the disciplined space of his politics and

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<sup>53</sup> Vladimir Putin's official site *Prezident Rossii*, "Bol'shaia press-conferentsiia Vladimira Putina," 14 December 2017, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56378> Here, noise as discursive construct is used in the verbal form "shumet'," which I rendered as "to make noise." The same applies to note 61.

<sup>54</sup> "Vladimir Putin priekhal v molodezhnii lager' 'Seliger'," Channel RT (Russia Today), video published on 2 August 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHvfwR0wzWY>

<sup>55</sup> Putin's speeches as a form of political communication should be seen within the larger political technology practice, which Putin has mastered to influence perceptions of reality and bend the Russian nation to his will. In this regard, Gorham's discussion of Putin as political technologist who programs the political landscape is useful. See Gorham, *After Newspeak*, 139.

the indiscipline born in the abstract noise of his opponents.

Inquiring into the social and political role of noise, French cultural theorist Jacques Attali writes, “any theory of power today must include a theory of the localization of noise and its endowment with form.”<sup>56</sup> For Putin, noise is localized in what he fears most – rivalry motivated by the will to make a political difference, a threat presented by a difference-creating dissonance; in other words, the infiltration of discordant (in the sense of noisy and unwanted) elements into his “harmonious machine.”<sup>57</sup> In the context of his war on noise, the authority of silence is what pertains to law. It secures against violence and disarray attributed to noise.

Pussy Riot’s noisy action inevitably becomes antagonistic to the official politics of silencing, being identified with the dangers of lawlessness. Roaring through the Internet and connecting with audiences of blogosphere, the group joined the oppositional forces in a project of escape from state control.<sup>58</sup> They were seen as part of the larger oppositional platform and related to the ideological argument against noise. Situating a confrontation between noise and silence, they came into a breach with the authoritative

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<sup>56</sup> Attali, *Noise*, 6.

<sup>57</sup> I draw on Attali, who describes totalitarian political organization in terms of operability of noise. Using the example of Zhdanov’s 1947 speech given at a conference of leading musicians organized by the Central Committee of the Communist Party, Attali demonstrates how noise operates in opposition to abstract silence (silence as a noise control strategy and political authority), which is sustained through “tranquil, reassuring, and calm” music that has to be protected by the state. Attali, *Noise*, 7–8. To assure the durability of the regime, “it is necessary to ban subversive noise because it betokens demands for cultural autonomy, support for differences or marginality.” Ibid, 7.

<sup>58</sup> This has been particularly obvious in the realm of oppositional speech culture that moved to cyberspace to circumvent state censorship. Putin faced significant challenges in overseeing online content, especially with the spread of new media technologies. Gorham, *After Newspeak*, 193. The Internet became “an alternative space for oppositional discourse.” Ibid, 197.

ruling and authoritarian rule of the law governing the social order in Russia. Their interfering presence became a site of the existing tensions between the opposition and authority taken in its broadest: the opposition possessed the power to express (enhanced through the forming relation with noise), while the authority sought to bring to bear its power of noise abatement.

To examine Pussy Riot's transgressive breach of Putin's politics, I imagine their agency in an assemblage with noise, as that which made them prone to being policed and prosecuted. Noise was that matter and force that moved Pussy Riot into the world. It harnessed their performativity in the larger field of oppositional forces. It worked to break a set code and fixity signifying the common good of silence. And it became vital not only to what Pussy Riot were set to accomplish, but to the very process of accomplishing. I think from a materialist perspective here, from a perspective that celebrates entanglements between different materialities. Life is composed of the strivings, powers, and journeys by which *all* bodies of force act into the world. Jane Bennet talks about the capacity of human and nonhuman elements and their assemblages "to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own", proposing to understand life as "a restless activeness".<sup>59</sup> And Brandon LaBelle extends the range of agency to sound and sounded subjectivity, coming up with a "vibratory model" of the world in which sounded bodies are harnessed by their vitality, to articulate a whole field of political action that otherwise cannot be grasped.<sup>60</sup> I think with this conception of political participation, seeking insights onto the Pussy Riot project that

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<sup>59</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, viii; 48-54.

<sup>60</sup> LaBelle, *Sonic Agency*, 3; 61-65.

originates in noise and the alien (parasitic) quality of its agency within a specific context of conflict and contestation, and specific arrangement between the Russian state, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the authority of silence.

In the years of Pussy Riot's "explosive" phenomenon, the state has drawn significantly on morality discourse to mobilize obedience, encourage passivity, and posit silence as an ultimate good.<sup>61</sup> Close ties between the state and the Russian Orthodox Church have only facilitated the aesthetic moralism of silence nurtured in the "silencescape" of the act of praying (obeying) as opposed to the aesthetic hooliganism of noise in the "noisescape" of the act of protesting (disobeying). This general stance against noise was expressed by a growing tendency to restore the Soviet imaginary of "peace and quiet" and institute the untroubled and dutiful one people of the new old *Homo Sovieticus* to which Putin's neo-conservative ideology of the moral and political unity was integral. As Brian Rourke and Andrew Wiget suggest, a recent turn to strengthening the national traditions and moral values has its roots in the former cooperation between the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church and the state, which was revealed in the early post-Soviet era. The long established "incestuous Church – State relationship" worked to suppress the rebellious voice. It worked "towards a common goal: a silenced, intimidated, conforming, easily managed society." (249) Evolving into a larger project of

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<sup>61</sup> I use the term "explosive," drawing on Rourke's and Wiget's insightful analysis of Pussy Riot's performative acts that were remarkably turbulent to the political and social field, to such an extent that they were considered "far more dangerous" than, for example, the provocative actions of another feminist group, FEMEN. Rourke and Wiget, "Pussy Riot, Putin and the Politics," 255. As Rourke and Wiget argue, the Pussy Riot phenomenon was highly challenging to the established order, making visible how liberal democracies accommodated authoritarian politics. In other words, it was "particularly explosive" in the sense that Pussy Riot's performances were extremely evocative, resonant, and unprecedented. Even though non-violent, they were met with "maximal coercive force" from the state. Ibid, 234-235.

“disciplining the social body so that it might become more docile, more uniform and more orthodox”, this partnership between the authorities reserved the right to silence as an official strategy. (253) The effort to impose a normality of silence coming from the Church-State collaborative alliance was in evidence at Pussy Riot’s 2012 trial, when a statement by Mikhail Riazantsev, the ecclesiarch (kliuchar’) of Cathedral of Christ the Savior, was read aloud. In it, Riazantsev asserted that, among other inappropriate behaviors ascribed to Pussy Riot’s performance, “it is forbidden [...] to be too loud.” This subversion of the expected sonic norm violated the unwritten norms of “every person’s internal moral code”.<sup>62</sup>

Laden with the ideological effects of silence serving a patriarchal authority, Russia’s official culture is invested in penalizing the confrontations that the rebellious female voice may create with the value system constructed by patriarchy. The Pussy Riot trial made such confrontations particularly pronounced. Pussy Riot were framed as noisy women who did not live up to the expectations of the regime, patriarchal system, and Russianness.

In his song “Jesus Saves Pussy Riot” (Iisus spasaet Pussy Riot, 2012), the Russian poet and activist Roman Osminkin publicly reflected on the ordering of the Pussy Riot speech to the violence of moral authority lent to the Putin regime. Implying a form of judgment made about Pussy Riot’s sonic presence that was deemed unacceptable, he sang to speak out about women being terrorized into silence:

the patriarch punishes  
[. . .]

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<sup>62</sup> See coverage of Pussy Riot’s trial on the Russian Legal Information Agency (RAPSI) site. Trial. Day 5. 3 August 2012, [http://www.rapsinews.com/judicial\\_news/20120803/264081775.html](http://www.rapsinews.com/judicial_news/20120803/264081775.html)

the three innocents must be  
thrown in the fire  
and that will trip up every other  
sharp tongue  
[. . .]  
the three innocents must be  
impaled on the stake  
and that will *shut up* all this  
cuntery<sup>63</sup>

To evoke the experience of the silenced body and condemn the harsh treatment of Pussy Riot, another political artist Petr Pavlenskii stitched up his mouth in his 2012 performance in front of St. Petersburg's Kazan Cathedral.<sup>64</sup>

These protest performances in support of Pussy Riot signal that it is not the semantic content of Pussy Riot's songs that was censored by the regime, but an event of noise to which they amounted, becoming a tool of resistance against the condition of silence under which one had to live. The Kremlin's campaign against rising civil disobedience, which involved the passing of the new anti-protest law in June 2012, was not limited to censoring the meaning or content of political message but pertained to a new kind of policing that sought to locate and suppress any destabilizing, perturbing, and overthrowing force. The acoustic organization of performance became subject to censorship if it undermined the peace and quiet that safeguarded the existing political structure and its stability, if it did not play a positive or beneficial role, or did not fit within a predictable frame of behavior. The notorious detainment of a school-aged boy

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<sup>63</sup> Bozovic, "Performing Poetry and Protest," 209 (my italics). This is Bozovic's translation; the original reads: "patriarkh karaet [. . .] nado trekh nevinnykh brosit' na koster i togda zatknetsia vsiakii na iazyk oster [. . .] nado trekh nevinnykh posadit' na kol i togda zatknetsia vsiakii pizdabol" (Ibid)

<sup>64</sup> "Peterburgskii khudozhnik zashil sebe rot v podderzhku Pussy Riot," *RIA novosti*, 23 July 2012, <https://ria.ru/society/20120723/707321040.html>

for reciting poetry on the streets of Moscow serves as a good example of what can be called a stabilization effect, when authoritative force is deployed to sustain Putin's politics of positive stability.<sup>65</sup> From this perspective, Pussy Riot's arrest appears less shocking because "one can be prosecuted for singing discordantly even in her own neighborhood, not to mention the church of God [in the Pussy Riot case]."<sup>66</sup> It makes clear why Pussy Riot were seen as a discordant noisemaker by the political regime that served as a noise suppressor, and why the relationship between the two resembled a noise abatement campaign in which the peace of silence was to be recovered by eliminating the conflict of noise.

To grasp this relationship, it is helpful to situate the Kremlin's project of silence within the patriarchal narrative of feminine noise. The dualism of noise and silence is heavily embedded in the transcultural misogynistic imagination of women as "'naturally' noisy", as Marie Thompson suggests.<sup>67</sup> Women have been conformed to the screaming body and called disruptive and disobedient. Their sound has been ordinarily suppressed in the name of the normative "masculinized structures of morality" and construed as noise. (301) It appears "dangerous to the ears of patriarchal orders," and is "to be abated", according to the logics enabling masculine authority. (299) Thompson's piece makes

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<sup>65</sup> I refer here to the incident that occurred in late May 2017 and was extensively covered in the Russian media. A boy reciting poetry on Arbat, Moscow's central street, was arrested for being a threat to social order. I see this event as intervention in the urban space by means of unwanted orality, which was apolitical in content but affectively adverse in force. See media coverage: "V Moskve rebenok otvezhen v OVD protiv voli roditel'ei," *Radio Svoboda*, 26 May 2017, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/28511374.html>. My term "positive stability" is consonant with the notion of "stability" at the center of Putin's politics.

<sup>66</sup> Anton Orekh, "Pussy Riot – torzhestvo panki," *Radio Ekho Moskvy*, 1 March 2012, <http://echo.msk.ru/blog/oreh/864213-echo/>

<sup>67</sup> Thompson, "Gossips, Sirens, Hi-Fi Wives," 300.

apparent how placing “women’s noise” in opposition to the virtue of silence helps justify violence against women and invest in traditions of patriarchy and domination. It brings to the fore a familiar pattern of identity formation based on the negative valuation of noise. The Pussy Riot case shows the recent impetus of such identity politics in patriarchal Russia where Putin’s political masculinity serves to legitimate his rule.<sup>68</sup> It can be said that feminine noise to which the group attributed a new meaning undermined not only male authority but also regime legitimacy. For that it risked being abated to ensure the systemic benefit of silence.

The complexity of the politics of silence extends beyond the context of gender and institutionalized power. Silence is lamented as a lost feature in the current state of the soundscape assaulted by the dangers of noise; whereby noise is made a disease that spreads to sicken the acoustic environment.<sup>69</sup> This highly antagonistic relationship between noise and silence rests on a conceptual understanding of silence as “inherently good” versus noise as “always already bad.” (115-117) The work of R. Murray Schafer is a perfect example of such dualistic thinking. In his seminal 1977 book, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, Schafer seeks to recover what he calls a “positive silence”, tuning us toward a negativity of noise.<sup>70</sup> His narrative of silence as a “felicitous state” is already admixed with values and ideas about harmony and beauty, which reflects what Marie Thompson calls “aesthetic moralism”, the

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<sup>68</sup> On Putin’s patriarchy see Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin*.

<sup>69</sup> Thompson, *Beyond Unwanted Sound*, 90-92.

<sup>70</sup> Schafer, *Soundscape*, 258.

framework that puts silence and noise in opposition to each other.<sup>71</sup> Aesthetic moralism is consistent with common definitions of noise as any unwanted, non-musical, disturbing sound that needs to be controlled and abated. Silence, which is “conceived as a rare and precious phenomenon”, falls victim to the “vulgar and polluting” aggressor that noise is made out to be. (88)

The importance of Pussy Riot’s interventions, which are viewed through the lens of Putin’s political conservatism (aligned with the larger patriarchal narrative of noise) and aesthetic moralism as negative affective forces, is that they rupture the association between sound and its moral underpinnings, manifesting in a positive generative condition, one that encapsulates what Serres calls a turbulent, restless, and powerful milieu – the stormy “seascape”. Seeking to create a space of transformation, Pussy Riot invested in bold and fearless proclamations of noise that worked to unsettle and uproot from the value of silence, culture of fear, and condition of obedience. Bringing noise into its position of the catalyst, they hoped to awaken the silenced collective body and invigorate it for political action. Keep the noise up, as Serres inspires, a system needs an intervention that complicates and enlivens it, just like we need the “perceptive bursts, the turbulent environment, the circumstances and accidents, the unexpected intuitions, the news, the dangers, ultimately, the arrows that fly by day, they keep us awake.”<sup>72</sup>

Investing in militant aesthetics and techniques of noise, Pussy Riot sought out a way of intervention that would foster a transition to a different political order. Their noise

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<sup>71</sup> Thompson, *Beyond Unwanted Sound*, 87. The dualistic viewpoint, in which the positivity of silence implies the negativity of noise, is reaffirmed in more recent publications on the subject. See Chapter 3 of Thompson’s book for a more extensive discussion of “Schaferian-inspired” academic narratives that prioritize the “positive affectivity” of silence.

<sup>72</sup> Serres, *Genesis*, 134.

created a needed disturbance in the system that had long worked to sustain the terms of the Russian regime. It violated the logic of mastery and control performed through the arbitrary power that silence held over the Russian people. One may say that the Pussy Riot project failed to yield a major change, that it did not lend to the beginning of the end of the Putin era. Putin rules the country to this day. But I would argue that its explosive effect surprised the Russian people and the global community alike, helping move toward the possibility of Russia without Putin rather than away from it.

**Coming up against the making of “Putin’s Man”: the action #vernisebegolos (#ownyourvoice)**

The value of silence has been fully embraced by the Putin regime in post- Pussy Riot years, which were marked by extensive securitization of the public sphere and the silencing of dissent. Investing in ritualization – the creation of the ritualized body able to perform its collective identity and made to fit in with the normative ideals of Putin’s “moral” leadership, the regime sought to forge the new Russian society totally subservient to authority. With a greater ideological emphasis on the passive, obedient, and silent self, it mobilized on nostalgia for the Soviet past, former achievements and war honors, to inculcate patriotism and collective unity. Calling the control of the population a collective security, Putin managed to construct a semblance of the Soviet system, with its culture of denunciation and secrete policing, and its spectacle of celebration of the “great” Russian state. His larger project of making *neo- Homo Sovieticus*, an ideal citizen deprived of individual agency but collectively minded, carries the imperative to conform,

harness, and keep shut.<sup>73</sup> It renders the subject depleted, drained, and dead quiet, enabling the system to persist with what it has set as a goal.

Pussy Riot used punk sounds to go on the offensive against the system, delivering a highly affecting performance intended to be disruptive to what the system controlled through its established codes of civility and morality. Their act of blasphemy entailed coming up against what the Putin regime held dearest and trying to undermine a ubiquitous norm. Other activist groups have been similarly motivated to oppose the culture of docility and submission, approaching the project of *neo- Homo Sovieticus* as that of the violated body. The 2019 performance #vernisebegolos (#ownyourvoice) and the larger activist movement to which it allied sought to break with the habits of *neo- Homo Sovieticus*: the lack of autonomy, disposition for servitude, inability to resist and speak up. Silence was taken to be the basis of social behaviour that artists wanted to contest, attempting to reclaim value from a sounded, voiced, and self-possessed subject who was the opposite of the socially dead prototype that the regime worked to create. It was thought to deliver a positive affirmation of the deadened individuality from which a sense of collective identity of the immortal Russian people eternally loyal to the state was essentially nurtured.

I begin with #vernisebegolos as a performance that seeks to impinge on the system with the physical presence of the sounded subject that contests and subverts the representational order of the public voice. Engaging with the materiality of the voice and

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<sup>73</sup> I use the term *neo- Homo Sovieticus* throughout this chapter to tally with the new authoritarian impulse detected in Russia and channeled through the workings of neo-Soviet autocracy. Putin has built on the legacy of the Soviet era and habits of *Homo Sovieticus* to reassemble and refashion Russians into obedient citizens of the state. The term *neo- Homo Sovieticus*, or “Putin’s Man” as I refer to it, calls attention to the regime’s holding to *Homo Sovieticus* as a model for living. For more on this see Gessen, *The Future is History*.

its individual distinctiveness, the performance locates in the current model of the obedient society an abstract projection of humanity as commonly voiceless. It condemns the ordering of human to the depersonalized figure of “Putin’s Man”, one born of the system that romanticizes the story of an endearing patriot who would go the extra mile to tender his vote for the beloved leader. The voice of the people lost its presence, its presentational force, to an objectified togetherness that serves the purpose of subordinating and incapacitating everyone to the control of Putin’s will. I explore #vernisebegolos in the context of activist movement that denounces subjection of the Russian people to dehumanized, deadened, and dead citizens ensuring that the status quo of “peace and quiet” is never breached. I bring to attention Maxim Evstropov’s project Party of the Dead as one undermining the making of *neo-Homo Sovieticus* with mocking humor.

I speak of these creative attempts to disengage with Putin’s project of conformity as always connective in a situation that gives one powers of becoming and fosters a different order, that of chaotic noise. First in noisy sound (#vernisebegolos) and then in noisy silence (Party of the Dead), I seek to locate the expressive value of the rebellious gesture channeled through transgressive performance. I ask what a noisy living may sound like in Putin’s Russia, where the violation of expectation is taken not only at its word, look, or act, but at its sound. Thinking with Serres, I write to grasp in its moment of occurrence what is born amid the noise one tries to make, and how it begins to enable a politics of unsilencing.

## The cacophonous voice

On 8 September 2019, the day of St-Petersburg municipal election, a group of fifteen artists stood in front of Chkalovsky-22 polling station and performed random acts of sound.<sup>74</sup> The action was scripted as an amateur choir going berserk during a warm-up performance that never meant to carry beyond the level of rehearsal. Some were forcing their voice, attempting at most powerful sounds, others remained reserved, slowly calibrating to a pitch. Deep breathing exercises were paired with a range of vocalizations as if in an effort to push the weak and unyielding voice over the edge of its limits. Everyone seemed to have their own path at reaching a common goal, lending the process both a sense of dissonance and total liberation from all expectations. I listen into this dissonance and its dramatic effect as something extraneous to the values informing the “peace and quiet” politics, but integral to the scene of performance. Powerful phonic expenditures, exposed breaths, raw sounds, wild cries, intense laughter – these primitive emotion-laden vocalizations work in the service of passion, rage, and fury. They do not conform to what is to be seen as a normative social behavior, bringing expression to noise and, by extension, becoming disruptive and dangerous. Rupturing the sense of the silenced self, they foreground a restlessness, an urging toward the wild, unruly, and fierce. The action assumes a posture of threat anchored in the field of perturbing force that sound becomes in this moment of discordant relation. It evokes a sense of unease,

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<sup>74</sup> For documentation of performance see a series of *Facebook* posts [https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/вернисебеголос?source=feed\\_text&era=HASHTAG](https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/вернисебеголос?source=feed_text&era=HASHTAG); as well as “#VERNISEBEGOLOS khorovye praktiki na izbiratelnykh uchastkakh S-Pb,” video published by Roman Osminkin on 10 September 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbDEXcDivvE>; and “Krik izbiratelia,” video published by Max Stropov on 9 September 2019, [https://vk.com/wall-65922260\\_1809](https://vk.com/wall-65922260_1809)

one replacing a positive affectivity of the established calm, certainty, and presumed stability.

The performance was staged by the Russian political artists Roman Osminkin and Maxim Evstropov, and participants of Perepostsovet, a workshop organized by St. Petersburg activist collective Chto Delat? (What is to be done?).<sup>75</sup> Evstropov's vocal delivery invested in harsh and excessive sound, turning into a nearly unbearable act of screaming that both shocked and hypnotized. It opened the voice to its violent potential and weaponized it for a cause. Osminkin's performance was intense too. A study of respiratory movements of inhaling and exhaling, it treated the voice as force by which to deliver a radical sonority that breaks with the requirements of the docile and obedient body. The voice was no longer a prisoner trapped in the container of the body, but a performative event that called forth a right to sound as that which lied outside the rules of silence one had to follow. The effort to free the voice was further carried through mouth movements tied to greater presence of prelinguistic sounds, glossolalia, and nonsensical outpourings.

The action was designed to yield a cacophonous space to which every participant contributed with a bit of sound. Despite sporadic vocal behaviors, it appeared ordered by a particular interaction. All participants sounded to a unifying standpoint, securing a consensus in differential cacophony. The purpose was to intervene the process of undemocratic election and expose the struggle to be heard. Artists interpreted voting as an act of stealing the collective voice and rendering the people voiceless. Working

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<sup>75</sup> For more information on the collective see their website: <https://chtodelat.org/>; or one of their interviews: "An Issue of Organisation: Chto Delat?" *Afterall*, 12 May 2009, <https://www.afterall.org/article/issue.organisation.chto.delat>

against the prospect of becoming voiceless, their action carried with it an alternative of owning your voice (*verni sebe golos*, #*vernisebegolos*) to obligation of owing it (*otdai svoi golos*) to the state. The idea was expressed in a collective voicing and noisy commotion, pushing off the normative in favor of a new freedom. The sounded presence allowed for a counter-thesis to the “give your voice” rhetoric of Russian propaganda during the election campaign through which a claim of possession over the public voice was made.

Artists placed value on the individual body, and its corporeal force in the energy of breath and sound, to deepen attention to a certain deadening of the human subject that the culture of silencing enabled. They wanted to show that the formation of the voiceless body was coextensive with social space and strategies by which people were directed to stay compliant. Voting was taken as exemplary of such strategies for it allowed the regime to police people into docility and maintain a semblance of democracy. According to artists, #*vernisebegolos* stood against measures of control and forced consent, which voting under Putin strongly resembled, instead reassembling on non-compliance. It called into existence those who refused to give their vote, their voice, and their service to the system. “The goal of the action is to reclaim the voice that we owe, the voice that we are called to give away, the voice that is taken from us or stolen in the election so that we end up becoming voiceless as if we never existed in the first place,” as Evstropov wrote.<sup>76</sup>

Taking the voice as an event of sound that in the ears of authority is saturated with power and threat, #*vernisebegolos* highlighted the sheer forcefulness of the noisy body

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<sup>76</sup> Max Stropov *Facebook* post, 9 September 2019, [https://www.facebook.com/max.stropov/posts/2471986869527410?\\_\\_tn\\_\\_=-R](https://www.facebook.com/max.stropov/posts/2471986869527410?__tn__=-R)

that strove toward appearance. It sought a space of politics that would not limit appearance to the condition of visibility but probe the invisibility of sound as mode of making presence and acting on. Juxtaposing the sonic force of the voice with the representational form by which one comes to be counted as a vote, the action has lent to emancipatory effort. It found in the voice the means to resist the system that reduced the sounded body to identity of a muted subject to which the state declared its right. Looking to break free from this identity, performers acted to locate a violent freedom of noise in the voice and overthrow the mechanisms of control publicly in place.

The action created a site of encounter that would cut off from the rest of things. It worked to expose to the noise of sound, inviting to step outside one's familiar way of entering into a situation. In sounding to dominate the acoustic environment, it intervened the operation of spiritual guidance that street music, so-called *pesni-pliaski*, served to accommodate. As Evstropov described it: "There was a concert in front of Chkalovsky-22 polling station, *pesni-pliaski*, lottery and free patties for all. Next to it, there were groups of *gopnik*-like men; it was not clear whether they were workers or hired thugs [*titushki*], or someone's electorate. We acted as an amateur choir warming up our voices so to speak, trying to *shout down* [*perekricat'*] what was going on stage. Some of us were bellowing, some were uttering "A" and "Zazaza", some were laughing. I was shouting out "loneliness sorrow", the words of the song I could hear coming from stage. After that, we turned to wailing [*golosili*], first by the polling station and then by front stairs. Two young female police officers came up to us asking what was happening – we told them that we were an amateur collective, rehearsing a show of stolen voices."<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid (my italics).

*Pesni-piaski* here are markers of cultural disposition toward Soviet style public entertainment that plays a major mobilizing role. *Gopnik* refers to a member of gopnik subculture, a young man coming from disadvantaged family, poorly educated and formally unemployed. Not quite a “street kid” but more of a socialized individual with anti-Western views, *gopnik* is one who gets involved in black market economy, gangster games, and informal security forces. In Evstropov’s commentary, the term most likely stands for a group of pro-regime publics ensuring that the concert runs smooth. *Titushki*, in turn, refer to policing agents that monitor public space and enforce a dictatorship. They are the face of the Putin regime, both in Russia and the post-Soviet space.

The act of shouting down to which Evstropov draws attention is a gesture ordered by way of noise. It implies bending the rules, subverting the norms, and interfering with the sensory reading of space as harmonious and pleasant. It is a gesture of shutting down, hacking and preventing from happening. Its incentive is to counteract mechanisms through which voting publics get mobilized, the pervasive ritualization of patriotic responsibility performed through *pesni-piaski* political procedure, which testifies to a desire to trick people into believing, belonging, and behaving on the orders of the regime. Delivering an error in the register of the sensory (discomfort) and the affective (unease), the performance appeared at odds with behaviors expected and values long established. It functioned as an auditory pollutant that accompanied the unpatriotic agenda of advancing objection to the will of authority.

Authority, in my reading of it, is both real and abstract force, which generates itself through practices that sustain securitization and regulate who is “ours” and who is “others”. Seeking a paralysis of patriotic spirit, #vernisebegolos attempted at creating a

situation through which new information could course across space, violating the order of stability upon which authority had depended. It brought to attention the purpose of the election-entertainment complex working to service surveillance and censorship and grow a need to belong to and function under the state. And it exposed the stakes of the larger project of manipulation and deception that the regime sought to hold to soundwise, through *pesni-piaski*: to produce a ritualized body that would be led to becoming a silenced self. Commenting on the disruptive operation of #vernisebegolos, Evstropov pointed to the objective of the action to revert back to the sounded self as a way of pushing against this process of becoming. For him, the act of shouting down as shutting down with a force of voice that breaks onto the scene and enacts an unsettling of the existing arrangements between citizens and the state is the act that relegates the body to the sphere of political practice. It performs a violent undoing of the silenced body that is self-induced through participation in the making of submissive and orderly citizen as part of the larger political equation established to keep the regime in power. Harnessing pride and patriotism, and backing on what the election-entertainment complex has to offer as propaganda tool, directly enter into this equation.

The experience of finding the voice in the body and the body in the voice, which the action masterfully choreographed, differed strikingly from the lost sense of self retained with the existing stakes of voting in Russia. The word “*golosili*” (wailing, screaming, howling), upon which Evstropov relied to describe the act of prolonged powerful sound that #vernisebegolos tried to achieve, shares same root with the word “*golosovali*” (voting). In this context, “*golos*”, or “voice” in Russian, stands to account for the lost personal matter that failed to show as sound but had a sociopolitical

dimension found in forms of identity and relation it supported. #Vernisebegolos – #ownyourvoice – engaged with the tension that came with the layers of meaning that the word “golos” opened up, building to a vocabulary of the political subject.

Speaking to this, Osminkin wrote: “On 8 September [2019, the day of election], you are summoned to give your voice – without an alternative or choice not to do so! But we are here to help you get your voice back! Have you ever thought why your voice – unusually deep, strong, resonant and sonorous (when being heard inside) – leaves the body to become weak and powerless? This is likely because the greater power of sound is lost up to 80 percent when the voice is expelled from the mouth. These 80 percent are wasted on the quivering movements, or vibration, of the vocal cords, resulting in the exhausted voice. We created techniques for restoring your voice, using straightforward exercises to help you draw energies from chest and mouth. Konstantin Stanislavsky once wrote: ‘Sound, placed against the teeth or steered into a bone, i.e. skull, becomes strong like steel. In turn, sounds maneuvered to soft palate and glottal space become resonant as if cushioned in layers of cotton’. Learning the techniques of bio-resonance, such as “gentle mooing”, “soft moaning”, “subtle sobbing”, “pitiful bleating”, etc., can help you open your voice to its full potential, giving it energy and strength! Your entire body will start vibrating and sounding, turning into a vocal instrument. And you’ll be able to restore the voice you so desire in your most daring dreams!”<sup>78</sup>

This manifesto reads as radical pedagogy committed to the sound-in-the-self.

Alluding to the voiceless body as an ever-present reminder of the inert and docile subject

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<sup>78</sup> See Roman Osminkin’s statement below the video “#VERNISEBEGOLOS khorovye praktiki na izbiratelnykh uchastkakh S-Pb,” published by him on 10 September 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MbDEXcDivvE>

one is turned into under the current conditions of collective identity, Osminkin invites fellow citizens to live life voicefully, awakened and energized, and made anew in the process of commoning to which a vibrating (striving, noising) body may emerge. A site of rupture and revolt, #vernisebegolos brought this body into existence, in force and volume, seeking a trespassing strategy to confront social silencing in Putin's Russia.

### **Against the safeguarding powers of the deadened, the dead, and the immortal**

To better understand how the production of a subject deprived of acoustic agency and vocal identity serves the authoritarian order of Vladimir Putin, I want to explore in more detail how Russian culture enters into a national imaginary of immortality that constructs an ideal of the body which does not register corporeally but is deeply fixed to the representational presence. This suspended body, completely devoid of motion, vibration, and resonance, is inscribed into the social as a condition to be aspired. It is from this condition that life bound by duty, obligation, and gratitude to the state is imagined. I inquire into the social position of the immortal body, seeking to articulate the utopian impulse that marks the birth of "Putin's Man" – an exemplary citizen untroubled by the ills of mortals, who is offered a form of permanence in the society that invests in the future of Russia's neo-Soviet becoming. I then locate a process of rebellion supported by corporeal dynamics of presence as a project that condemns one's buying into an immortal existence greatly commodified for the sake of selling the idea of Putinism. I distinguish this process by exploring how Russia's counterpublics face up to the regime's recruiting of the living to the status of the dead in order to keep the living deadened and long-dormant.

With the Soviet system as a major point of reference, the regime invested in political culture that stressed Soviet values and beliefs and mobilized support for what proved to be a resilient and durable dictatorship. In this context, immortality was an imperative that signified a desire to stay in power. At the level of cultural imagination, it expressed a particular yearning for a new identity based on the immortal essence of “Putin’s Man”. Imagined solely on merits, the immortal servant of the regime was forged on the lack of autonomy (devoid of will, voice, and humanity) and complicit with aspirations to override the corporeal body so as to create an objectified body-image to which collective self-fashioning had to conform. He emerged reduced to a photograph, visible yet unsounded – a dead hero who put his life on the line to meet the obligation to the state. Photograph played an important role in summoning the mortals to the idea of immortal servitude and commanding a lasting allegiance to the system. It allowed for a scene of appearance that was marked by corporeal absence from which a new sense of quasi-religious collective transcendence could be instilled. The Immortal Regiment procession (*Bessmertnyi polk*) became such a scene, quickly growing into a state-controlled movement.<sup>79</sup>

The Immortal Regiment started in 2012 as an act of honoring the dead relatives who fought and perished in the World War II. It then expanded into a larger commemorative ritual that attracted millions of Russians who found themselves greatly resourced by the power of Soviet tradition. And it soon reached a transnational scale, building on diasporic celebration of the Soviet victory and patriotic courage. Both a tactic

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<sup>79</sup> Svetlana Prokopyeva. “Russia’s Immortal Regiment: From Grassroots To ‘Quasi-Religious Cult’,” RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, 12 May 2017, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-immortal-regiment-grassroots-to-quasi-religious-cult/28482905.html>

to attest one's loyalty to the Russian state and a strategy of neo-imperial persuasion adopted to inspire a rhetoric of historical brotherhood of former Soviet nations likely wielded by an immortal leader to which Putin wanted to qualify, it was meant to bring a strong sense of collective immortality. Millions of the deceased were immortalized in commemorative processions that spread across the Russian cities. People were seen marching and carrying photographs of the war dead along with Soviet flags and images of Joseph Stalin.<sup>80</sup> It was festivity that became quickly harnessed into a grand biopolitical project uniting the living with the dead in a collective body through which a link to the Soviet tradition of mandatory patriotism had been established. The living dead – the immortals – were fashioned into ideal citizens whose silent presence fit well with the idea of a dead quiet, permanently mute nation.

Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk have called this particular sociality a Russian thanatopolitics.<sup>81</sup> Instead of marking the pained condition of dying, the Immortal Regiment enacted a certain measure of contractual obligation to be celebrated with pride and honor, indirectly summoning the living to die for the state in exchange for immortality. Russia's most notorious political strategist Alexandr Dugin, who promoted the imperial destiny of Russia and helped Putin cement his authoritarian rule at home and neo-imperial policy abroad, saw in the Immortal Regiment a "force of the living death". Advancing the idea of resurrection of the Soviet dead to outnumber the living so as to perfect and fix the collective body to the ideal, he preached an eternal purity that new

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<sup>80</sup> See some of the accounts: "Stalin stal liderom v oprose rossiian o samykh vydaiushchikhsia lichnostiakh v istorii," *Interfax*, 26 June 2017, <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/568025>; "V Iekaterinburge na aktsiiu 'Bessmertnyi polk' vyshlo okolo 200 tysiach chelovek. Shli s portretami Stalina," *Nakanune*, 9 May 2019, <https://www.nakanune.ru/news/2019/05/09/22540360>

<sup>81</sup> Makarychev and Yatsyk. *Critical Biopolitics*, 14; 56-59.

identity of “Putin’s Man” aspired to create. Making the Immortal Regiment an articulation of Russianness that called into being a superior people, he wrote: “These generations of the dead joined the ranks of the millions who are alive. Indeed, the people are not only the dead and the living, it includes also those who are not yet born, regardless of whether they are conceived or not – they will also be Russians, our people, part of this immortal regiment. In due time they will also be giving their lives for our motherland and for our people.” (56)

The Immortal Regiment movement connected the bravery and tragedy of those who fought in the war to Russia’s neo-imperial mission. Absorbed by the authorities, it took up the World War II victory as the basis for a grand narrative of Russia’s resurrected past and mighty future built around the expanse of the Russian world (*ruskii mir*). National and transnational marches that it mobilized instilled a sense of moral obligation among the Russians and “compatriots abroad”.<sup>82</sup> Putin joined the movement himself, leading the march in Moscow on 9 May 2019 where he walked the Red Square, carrying a portrait of his father.<sup>83</sup> As the project started to evolve from what was initially an act of personal war memory to a performance of state memory, it laid out the larger stakes of Putin’s vision: to create a copycat version of the Soviet nation. The trope of the nation as family, through which Putin could easily speak, was of particular importance, winding up patriotic passions around any and all the dead. No longer relatives to the living, but family to the state, the dead emerged to personify the Russian society and give the

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<sup>82</sup> Fedor, “Memory, Kinship, and the Mobilization of the Dead,” 321-324.

<sup>83</sup> “The President took part in the Immortal Regiment march,” *President of Russia*, 9 May 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/60495>;

“Russian world” a new standing in the world. Their photographs did not even have to come from one’s private archive to join a show of the authorities but be distributed from the holdings of the state archive.<sup>84</sup> Photograph in this context did not serve a personal memory of war anymore; it became a means of forging a social bond across a transnational network of Russian cultures, as the basis for national unity through which a geopolitical remake of the post-Soviet space could be launched. The pro-Kremlin processions, in fact, took place in many countries, displaying a collective allegiance to Moscow across the former Soviet states and beyond.<sup>85</sup>

The Immortal Regiment project as a cultural undertaking must be seen within a greater field of uniquely Russian realizations of immortality, which found their way into Putin’s autocratic utopia. The more the cult of the dead earns the love of the living the better it turns out for the regime that is totally engaged in and powered up by national obsession with the immortal self. As Maria Engström rightly notes, the Immortal regiment cuts into a much broader quest for immortality in Russia, bringing forward new connections. “While the elites are trying to find a technology of immortality, the Russian people started a movement which is the most striking example of post-Soviet neo-cosmism,” she writes, locating the Immortal Regiment within Russia’s philosophical and cultural space.<sup>86</sup> A “victory over time and death”, as she refers to it, the Immortal Regiment is repurposed around the idea of building a future in which one is never to die.

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<sup>84</sup> “Kazanskim studentam razdavali portrety dlia shestviia ‘Bessmertnyi polk’,” *Idel.Realii*, 9 May 2017, <https://www.idelreal.org/a/28476764.html>

<sup>85</sup> For an overview see Davydova-Minguet, “Media, Memory, and Diaspora politics,” 107; Weiss-Wendt, *Putin’s Russia and the Falsification of History*, 108; or “Immortal Regiment: Thousands March to Remember WW2 Relatives,” *BBC*, 9 May 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/in-pictures-36249817>

<sup>86</sup> Engström, “Telluro-Cosmic Imperial Utopia,” 67.

(68) An act of mass solidarity that feeds utopian goals, it helps Putin’s programmatic politics that takes advantage of popular fascination with eternal life. Taking loyalty to the regime as a prerequisite for immortality, Russia’s political elite, for instance, has already suggested adding the right to immortality to the Russian constitution. (67)

Anthropologist Anya Bernstein writes about immortality as a ubiquitous ideal in Russia. Through a set of historical, cultural, and political accounts, immortality reads as a visionary project that is undertaken on a national scale by different communities of practitioners, thinkers and artists, as well as by ordinary Russian citizens living the everyday struggles.<sup>87</sup> Bernstein lists various contributing forces to what can be seen as a Russian pursuit of an upgraded human condition. One can be a transhumanist seeking to grant the dead an eternal life; a futurist imagining a becoming post-human; an Orthodox believer living by faith a spiritual immortality journey; a revolutionary advocating a denial of death as such; or an ordinary citizen popularizing the cult of immortal Soviet leaders, resurrected saints, and deathless heroes – to share a desire to overcome the limitations of corporeality. Questioning humanism or breaking with it completely, these different social agents invest in myths, methods and technologies of immortality as a way of “remaking life and death”. The Russian leadership in turn benefits from their collective compulsion so as to realize its own vision of immortality on authoritarian terms, by building an identity of Russia’s immortal leader whose sacred authority and mythic

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<sup>87</sup> On Russian immortalism characterized by collective obsession with life extension, technological resurrection, and eternal salvation, as explored through technofuturist practices, communist necropolitics, and the Russian Orthodox ritual culture, see Bernstein, *The Future of Immortality*; on mastery of the state and servitude of the dead and the dying, see Bernstein, “Love and Resurrection”; and on Russian transhumanist practices joined to or divorced from immortalist views and traditions of Russian Orthodoxy, see Bernstein, “Freeze, die, come to life”.

power are to be taken as an essential part of his greatness.<sup>88</sup> Putin's ambition to never die exemplifies this politics of the authoritarian mobilization.<sup>89</sup> It also shows that such a politics remains connected to a popular imaginary of Russia's predetermined destiny, as predicated on the idea of the eternal present.<sup>90</sup>

Relating the project of immortality to Putin's plan of staying in power, Evstropov launched a counter-project that offered a compelling tool for activism in a uniquely Russian cultural setting. He called it Party of the Dead, seeking to confront the Russian publics with new reflections of the ideal of immortality that served Putin's reign. Party of the Dead (*Partiia Mertvykh*) evolved from Evstropov's earlier project Group "Motherland" (*Gruppa Rodina*), which came to an end in 2018, and became a sister project to another initiative called Institute of Political Magic (*Institut Politicheskoi Magii*). Institute of Political Magic draws from the occult, engaging the magics of DIY conjuring technologies so-called *bioramki*. *Bioramki* are used to detect sites of past revolutionary events by recording a surplus of energy in space and pointing to areas

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<sup>88</sup> This is consistent with Soviet rituals of resurrection (see Yurchak, "Netlennost' formy"; "Bodies of Lenin") and post-Soviet ways of keeping Putin forever (Engström, "Telluro-Cosmic Imperial Utopia").

<sup>89</sup> Putin's leadership defies description, being called all sorts of things: the "tsar" ("A Tsar Is Born," *The Economist*, 26 October 2017, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2017/10/26/a-tsar-is-born>); the "immortal" ("Putin the Immortal," *The New York Times*, 18 January 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/18/opinion/putin-russia.html>); the "saviour" (Adam Robinson, "Putin Cast as National Saviour Ahead of Russia Election," *BBC*, 21 January 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-42707957>); the "emperor" (Anton Troianovski, "A New 'Emperor': Russia Girds for 16 More Years of Putin," *The New York Times*, 11 March 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/11/world/europe/russia-putin.html>); and the "eternal" (Joshua Yaffa, "Vladimir Putin Positions Himself to Become Russia's Eternal Leader," *The New Yorker*, 12 March 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/vladimir-putin-positions-himself-to-become-russias-eternal-leader>).

<sup>90</sup> See Timothy Snyder, "Vladimir Putin's Politics of Eternity," *The Guardian*, 16 March 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/16/vladimir-putin-russia-politics-of-eternity-timothy-snyder>

where new attempts at revolt could be made.<sup>91</sup> Party of the Dead, in this context of Evstropov's projects that seek action against Russia's authorities, can be seen as an affair that intends to mock, shame, and parody a serviceable, sacrificial, and immortal citizenry that the performative act of the Immortal Regiment works to create.<sup>92</sup> Subverting the defining elements of the Soviet aesthetics with which the Immortal Regiment processions engaged, Party of the Dead incorporated black and white colors into their theatrical space. Dressed up as the walking dead – enlivened skeletons, zombies, and vampires, performers took to the streets with black banners, white-on-black message boards, and black-and-white images. Instead of photographs of the dead they carried portraits of human skulls, rendering the idea of mortality and ridiculing social determination to make the dead a new political force. Their satirical and Kremlin-unfriendly actions pushed back against the idealized image of the immortal self, presenting with a depleted, drained, and potentially perishable necro subject.

To counteract the Immortal Regiment movement that became a global Russian phenomenon, Party of the Dead aspired to create a larger protest community of a “necrointernational”.<sup>93</sup> Starting locally, they launched a series of actions, often going places where they risked being arrested. They would show up at pro-Kremlin marches,

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<sup>91</sup> “Politicheskaia biolokatsiia #1,” video published by Institut Politicheskoi Magii on 16 June 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpgUFFsSpEc>

<sup>92</sup> For documentation see Partiiia Mertvykh *Facebook* profile: <https://www.facebook.com/the.party.of.the.dead/>; and for a good overview of the project, see Svetlana Pavlova, “Zhivye ne vpolne zhivy’. Partiiia mertvykh na puti k nekrointernatsionalu,” *Radio Svoboda*, 6 January 2019, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/29679508.html>

<sup>93</sup> See “Partiiia mertvykh – predvybornyi rolik,” published by {Rodina} on 29 April 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4dVu-bOD\\_w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4dVu-bOD_w); also see promotional photography: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2807111609308527&set=a.1642624735757226>

for instance, and blend in a crowd.<sup>94</sup> At the 2018 May Day rally, they took bold risks and displayed Evstropov's artwork "The Portrait of the Leader in 9 Stages of Decomposition", which evoked the inevitability of Putin's death.<sup>95</sup> The artwork was made in 2015 when Evstropov was involved in the Group "Motherland" project. Inspired by the 19th century Japanese study "The Body of a Courtesan in Nine Stages of Decomposition", which depicted a decomposing female corpse, it documented a disfiguring of Putin's portrait, reducing the immortal leader to a mortal thing.<sup>96</sup> Evstropov used the usual grass as part of materials to grow into the portrait and slowly destroy it. The process resembled the action of worms working their way to turn the thing into compost and make it part of soil life. Carefully documenting the stages of decomposition, Evstropov presented nine images in a form of collage. As if putting Putin to the test of earthly survival, he sought to remind the Russians that "... everything is finite, and we should not forget about it".<sup>97</sup> The work essentially was a statement against Russia's politics of eternity, and Putin's personality cult. It added to achieving the Party of the Dead activist aspirations to awaken Russian people to their political role.

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<sup>94</sup> See Partiiia Mertvykh *Facebook* posts, 3 May 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=2462905667062458&set=a.1642624735757226>; and <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=2462905933729098&set=a.1642624735757226>

<sup>95</sup> The Party of the Dead member who carried the artwork was detained and charged. See Alisa Kustikova and Serafim Romanov, "Khot' trava ne rasti," *Novaia Gazeta*, 08 June 2018, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2018/06/08/76760-hot-trava-ne-rasti>

<sup>96</sup> See Evstropov's *LiveJournal* entry, [9 stadii razlozheniia vozhdia], 14 June 2018, <https://stropov.livejournal.com/90807.html>

<sup>97</sup> "Desiataia stadiia razlozheniia vozhdia," *Radio Svoboda*, video published on 25 June 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwqSkhWWiDI>

Deconstructing the mise-en-scène of “peace and quiet” with ingress of rebellious behaviors, Party of the Dead sought resistance to a posture of submission and docility that the Immortal Regiment processions embodying the dead citizens and immortal heroes assumed. In refusal of immortality, the groups showed intent to sound in a newly performative way, coming undead and unsilenced, in excess of relation one is expected to maintain with the system.

### **Noisy counterpublics as Russia’s illegals**

#Vernisebegolos performs a body that appears from a position of excess, as a moral outsider that takes on a task to perturb the “pretty” order of working system with a grotesque arrival to which “ugly” dissonant sounds give form. I hear it as potentially congruent with Pussy Riot’s noise, as intervention of the foreign that threatens to seep over and break apart what has been working at the service of those in power. Party of the Dead, to which #vernisebegolos allied, also carves out a space for noisy behavior, taking on a comically affronting performance and signaling a force of corporeal presence.

The process that these projects govern shares the characteristics of collective participation that is deemed unwanted, typically excluded or ordinarily suppressed. It is not surprising that each of the projects was policed at its physical site. Someone was arrested or approached by patrolling officers who were there to serve public interest. Public in this context maintained the dominance, ruling the moral code and defining a norm of political participation. Constituting the basis for community around which steps to protect had been taken, it operated on privilege, promoting the ideal of participatory culture that would match up to the rhetoric of harmony, peacefulness, and stability employed by the regime. The projects that grounded in the noise were poised for action

through which the public's bias was criticized for reflecting the growing dominance of the Russian state. Reduced to criminality, they exposed the punitive character and exclusionary tendency of the public sphere that forbids one from going against what is officially permitted and imposed by a system of Putin's rule that orchestrates a return to a conservative and patriarchal Russia. Asserting upon a public stage that valorizes a creation of a collective consensus under Putin, the uninvited "intruder" that these projects turned out to be created a space of agitation within which a counterpublic started to organize itself as a political formation.

A noisy counterpublic, as I suggest calling it, emerges in response to exclusiveness of the publics that order the logic of credit for one's service to the state and stay within the bounds of legality and morality defined by the politics of silence. It breaks the quiet of the orderly obedience and become Russia's illegal, so to speak. It operates to reclaim state-controlled public space to projects that produce an interruption or corruption of information upon which fixity and predictability is sustained, and bring in a new factor, a twist, or a variation. These projects are experienced as stranger things, working their disruptive way slowly into society and the system, sometimes mistaken for an asset or not immediately recognized as a trespasser.

I borrow the term "counterpublic" from Nancy Fraser, Michael Warner, and Brandon LaBelle, each of whom notably formulates an account of the relationship between public and counterpublic. In Fraser's account, counterpublic is formed in response to the politics of exclusion around which the entry to the official public sphere is organized. Its "counter" status places emphasis on positionality as a quality of relation. For dominant publics to be, counterpublics must exist. Standing in for marginalized,

“subordinated social groups”, counterpublics bring forward counterdiscourses through which they resist the organization of dominance. They define themselves in opposition to the official public sphere, always seeking to abridge the participatory privilege given to dominant publics. “Subaltern counterpublics,” as Fraser refers to them, become the constitutive site of minoritarian politics.<sup>98</sup> For Warner, the interaction between publics and counterpublics is both conflictual and symbiotic. Counterpublics are defined by ways they enact their strangerhood onto the public sphere, attempting to be reached and attended to. Publics, in turn, are understood by their primary affixation to counterpublics, attempting at “reaching strangers” in order to self-sustain as a social entity.<sup>99</sup> As Warner writes: “A public is always in excess of its known social basis. It must be more than a list of one’s friends. It must include strangers.” (55) In his account, both publics and counterpublics are extended to “scenes” of activity through which one can appear into the dominant/subordinate binary. (86) In LaBelle’s terms, counterpublics are “unlikely publics” that lend themselves onto the public sphere through a force of sonic presence, probing invisibility to gain entry. They come to others on sonic terms, into a space of appearance that defies the logics of a visual world. Seeking in sound a new construction of space, unlikely publics create an alternative public sphere oriented by what is heard, underheard, overheard, and enabled through a “listening from below”. Integrating sonic sensibility into a larger insurrectionary project, they appear to unsettle the ideologies of visual access through an “art of presence” that disengages with stasis and stability,

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<sup>98</sup> Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 67-68.

<sup>99</sup> Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” 56.

instead foregrounding transience and ambiguity. In LaBelle's study, counterpublics are defined by the emancipatory promise of sonic logics of forming and instituting.<sup>100</sup>

My use of the term is guided by an understanding of counterpublic through its divergence with what defines a normative and regulatory operation of a general/dominant/likely public in any particular context. Subaltern (Fraser), subordinate (Warner), or unlikely (LaBelle), counterpublics remain reduced to minor publics and viewed as otherness. Their struggle to enter the public sphere that favors a certain ideal of official culture is marked by assertions of strangeness. In the Russian scene of struggle where anyone who does not conform to the nominal identity of neo- *Homo Sovieticus* assumes a status of the stranger, exclusion is based on the structural opposition of noise and silence. A noisy counterpublic, in this regard, is the opposite of the inert, passive, and predictable public promoted by the state, which mythologizes silence as a positive and beneficial condition. It is a site of collective effort to appear and create the conditions through which the body of noise becomes operational. The body of noise starts where silence ends, moving into the world to unsettle, unground, and uproot from the existing moral codes, social orders, state-sponsored traditions that serve Putin's course. In Russia, it is the illegal body.

The projects that I've discussed have both the fieldwork and network components, operating on the ground and on the Internet. Through site-specific interventions and online communities, they build an oppositional space of Russia's illegals, those who refuse to be pulled into collaboration with the state, its written laws and unwritten

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<sup>100</sup> LaBelle, *Sonic Agency*, 14-15.

directives. The making of a noisy illegal, the antipode of “Putin’s Man”, can be seen a project that qualifies as a hack formalized on the basis of one’s noisiness.

Establishing a code of silence, the state trapped and isolated the public sphere, making it accessible solely to those who meet the normative criteria of membership, leaving the disadvantaged communities behind. LGBT people, dissidents, ethnic minorities, migrant workers, and refugees, among many others, form such communities, struggling to appear to a society that polices the presence of the stranger it encounters. The stranger in this account settles in politics by a force of projects that work to disrupt a semblance of harmony that the public sphere enshrines. It transmits information that seems relevant but not entirely comprehensible to the system. This was the case with “non-music” of Pussy Riot, “non-choir” of #vernisebegolos, and “non-regiment” of Party of the Dead. These projects used camouflage tactics to mask their true agenda, passing as punk, amateur choir, and immortality ritual, respectively. They appeared funny and entertaining to the Russian publics, communicating through the familiar elements of music and theatre, while also establishing the terms of estrangement through the process of noise. As such they moved through public space, interfering with the system, until identified as strangers who showed up illegally on the scene.

Summarizing an understanding of the stranger as a cacophonous element that disrupts the established calm, LaBelle calls attention to its act of trespassing that may trigger an activation of a change, bringing chaos to order. He writes: “... the stranger generates a relational dimension by intervening with the distance of the outsider, and by bringing peripheries or backgrounds into the inner life of the local... A figure that looms in the background and that may step forward, or overstep unknowingly, to activate social

encounters, as well as conversation and community”.<sup>101</sup> Explored through a sonic agency of the overheard, the stranger, in LaBelle’s account, breaks boundaries, excites processes, catalyzes action, and resets relations. It is “a vibrancy that may disturb” and, by extension, annoy and violate in order to rejoin and transform. “May we understand the noisy interferences of the stranger as a discordant opportunity, one that gives way to new social relations? Following Sennett, is not the irritating force of interruption at times delivering explicitly what we might not fully understand? A noise that may challenge the tonalities of social community, but in doing so may equally enrich the vitality of its shape and form?” LaBelle asks. (72) Alluding to Serres’s noise, he maps a greater operation of the stranger, cycling back to the idea of transformation through a violation of norms and expectations.

The stranger is constitutive of the complexity of a system. Or, as Warner suggests in his study of the social space, strangerhood is a necessary condition for a system to function as such. Strangers are not exactly foreign. “They are a normal feature of the social... The modern social imaginary does not make sense without strangers,” Warner writes.<sup>102</sup> They brace instability and become systemic. In other words, they are what sustains the system’s renewal, its condition of being and becoming. The projects that I discussed must be seen as a creation of such condition. Producing or acting as noise, they contended with the political system that imposed a silenced collective body as the ideological basis for Putin’s moralism. Using a sounded body as an imperative, they worked to upset the order of “peace and quiet”, disturbing its equilibrium by feeding

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<sup>101</sup> LaBelle, *Sonic Agency*, 72.

<sup>102</sup> Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics,” 56-57.

“foreign” elements into the existing cultural codes and social habits, and pushing the system to its slow breakdown. Capitalizing on liberatory and transgressive potential of noise, they stood against the policing forces of silence, and the making of “Putin’s Man” to which these forces gave stark expression.

### **The offensive work of sound**

Locating the politics of noise and silence within a system of relations between the opposition and authority in Russia, I have brought attention to the space of conflict where one figures in sound that is politically, ideologically, and socially “unwanted”. The projects that I study in their contextual specificity and conceptual operation serve as the ground from which I claim a political arena to noise. Both a sound and concept, noise is constituted by its relational event, one that violates established orders. The violation brings with itself a quality of an ethos that is mobilized to be offensive in making an impact on the immediate environment and the extended network of relations that sustain it.

The offensive work of sound exposes a regulatory politics at the level of the auditory to which I attend by examining Pussy Riot’s “upsetting” performance within the field of its engagements with Russia’s political audiences. Pussy Riot appeared clamorous and hostile to the ear of authority, being perceived in the violence of assault on the acoustical and moral nexus. Their sound was socially disapproved, not only for its redundant and inappropriate presence that disturbed a sacred and serene atmosphere in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior but also for its more general violation of public norm that had been cultivated and nurtured under oppressive political realities. The group was denounced for their site-nonspecific sonic presence, which was associated with

aggression toward the system, and essentially conformed to the image of loud and unruly woman who was not acceptable in the society of “Putin’s Men”. Inasmuch as Pussy Riot were imagined to be antagonistic, they indeed engaged a combative tone, posing for a battle with the Putin regime and weaponizing sound against the political purpose of harmony by which the regime sought to institute the societal silence. Going on the offensive, they grounded their oppositional stance in sonic posture that amplified a militant emotion and affective potential of their dissent.

Along with Pussy Riot, I have brought into listen the project #vernisebegolos, which sought to advance the political goals that Pussy Riot pursued. Carried out by artists who publicly expressed their support for the imprisoned members of the Pussy Riot collective, the project entailed a forceful intrusion onto the structure of citizen participation put in place for the operation of authoritarian power. In examining the performance, I paid close attention to the working of silence and silencing that did not necessarily take effect from the sound of silence but seemed to arise from the silence of sound. I suggested that the state-ordered project of patriotic sonority to which #vernisebegolos opposed was, in fact, one way of silencing. Rendering itself subversive, the action delivered a break onto the overall coherence of Russia’s voting ceremony from which silence was distinctively animated by the production of a voiceless subject subordinated to the will of authority. It worked to violate the established code of conduct forbidding one from appearing in the open scene with a project of unpatriotic sound. I have explored how it was designed to function as noise, delivering an extraneous sonority and impinging with the force and impact of discordant proximity to the extent of becoming an alleged political and ideological misdeed. Similarly to the work of Pussy

Riot, #vernisebegolos was perceived as an erroneous element within a collective sensorium of silence to which the conditions of public life in Russia gave formation. Deviating from the acoustic norm of patriotic entertainment offered on the streets, the action was rendered intolerable and removed from the scene. It qualified as an auditory nuisance in public space that was controlled for sensory input, being acoustically and aesthetically harmonized with institutionalization of state power.

I come to imagine the action as an auditory nuisance, thinking with the work of David Howes and Constance Classen. In their discussion of regulatory politics that concerns the senses, they give the example of cultural and political summoning of sound to an attitude of harmony. Urban noise, for instance, is not only disruptive of auditory comfort but also of a positive state of peace. Sounds of Christian church bells in Islamic territories or the Islamic call to prayer in Christian territories are not only conflicting with the religious life but also with a possession of good will. Legitimized on basis of cultural tolerance, sounds like bodies become included or excluded. They are deemed trustworthy or not, being assessed against the standard of cultural typicality. Excluded sounds are perceived in their transgressive act and disquieting presence, translating into the experience of “auditory disturbances”, “auditory conflict”, and “auditory invasion.”<sup>103</sup>

Attending to the politics of exclusion that orchestrates the auditory conflict in Putin’s Russia, I presented activist projects that directly entered the space of this conflict. Thinking from the standpoint of oppression and resistance to it, I went on to map a more encompassing view of cacophonous collective expression, opening the discussion to the Party of the Dead project to which #vernisebegolos allied. I showed how the Putin regime

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<sup>103</sup> Howes and Classen, *Ways of Sensing*, 110 -112.

invested in aestheticizing the loss of human agency through social practice of immortality and the politics of “good” silence. I then presented #vernisebegolos and Party of the Dead as projects that sought to develop sensibility to this loss by confronting the voiceless and immortal subject with live humanity. While #vernisebegolos granted the voiceless a sound of the voice, Party of the Dead stood up to the immortal with the fact of mortality. Both projects claimed the right to live body, gathering toward a greater emancipatory action. Together with Pussy Riot, they brought external interference to the system set to produce what I refer to as anaesthetized neo- *Homo Sovieticus* and discuss as a direct product of Putin’s politics. Sounding forth the body that behaves fugitively and insurgently, these projects came against expectations of authoritarian mastery.

Drawing out a consideration for sound’s political work through the question of the offender, I have sought to give attention to what may go invisible in the space of encounter from which the Putin regime draws its legitimacy. Noisy counterpublics, “strangers” or “illegals”, as I imagine it, are projects of participatory critique and sites from which forces of political change are shaped into an offensive action which makes real a threat of the insurgent body.

## The Carer

I am thinking care itself as a critically disruptive doing that can open to “as well as possible” reconfigurations engaged with troubled presents.

Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*

### Introduction: Life-sustaining sounds

In February 2018, a team of journalists from the Ukrainian media-center Nakypilo followed Ukrainian poet Serhii Zhadan and his ska-punk band Sobaky v kosmosi [Dogs in the Cosmos] aka “Zhadan and the Dogs” to the town of Shchastia in the Luhansk region of Ukraine. The frontline of the Russian-Ukrainian war, the town at the time was controlled by the Ukrainian army, which secured it from pro-Russian rebels and Russian militants. It was part of the ATO (Anti-Terrorist Operation) zone where active combat took place. The ATO was a frequent destination for Zhadan who lived in the city of Kharkiv near the Russian border and traveled to the zone regularly since the start of the 2014 war. His 2018 trip was part of this routine journeying through war-torn towns and villages to play music for those who could not escape the flames of the war. “Music there, where war is” was the title of the project that he worked to document with Nakypilo team.<sup>104</sup>

I write this chapter in an attempt to listen out for what the project contributed to realize and de-realize through sound’s implication in a doing that affected life conditions in a wartime world, catering to the needs of a place hit by military invasion, destruction and tragedy. Zhadan took on a mission “to bring music” into the region confined to the

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<sup>104</sup> For the documented material see Alina Shul’ha, “Muzyka tam, gde voyna,” *Nakipelo.ua*, 22 February 2018, <https://nakipelo.ua/muzyka-tam-gde-vojna/>

danger of violence. Checkpoints, convoys, and military bases were the immediate signs that no one could be safe in this heavily militarized zone where life-and-death stakes were eminently high. For many, the ATO was a place they hoped to escape. For Zhadan, it became a place he wanted to tour with the project that would take on a greater force, impacting the local conditions and carrying consequences for the region and its people. Music was much more than a form of entertainment. It was a matter of involvement, a material force that could pull one out of a horrific reality to a new surround which the real unseen of sound could generate. It was “a resource from which life could draw itself”, as some listeners noted, attending to what appeared to them as a “fragment of peaceful life”. It helps us be, they said in one way or another, reflecting on the overwhelming intensity of a sonic situation which gave them a sense of a dismantled wartime world. I listen to their voices cut to the sounds of trumpets, drums, and guitars, and the loud tempest of Zhadan’s own voice projected through the microphone to gather around me too, as I write to imagine the possibilities and consequences emerging in the project’s particular involvement in the re/making of the war experience through sound’s logic of bringing about a complete alterity of the situation.

Moving from a deserted concert hall to bomb shelter, in listening, I follow “Zhadan and the Dogs” in their effort to offer the sensibility of a peacetime situation through an acoustic index of safety that their performances sought to become, mobilizing on the sense of normalcy, peace, and civility, to carry away from the arbitrary and the oppressive. I listen beyond the lyrics, progressions of pitch, and intensities of vocal shouts, seeking to hear what I perceive as a reclamation of sound to its situated action by which an ethical obligation emerges within a material vital doing that sound performs.

“Music there, where war is”, in my exploration to it, is a project that involves in a disruption of destruction, suffering, and surrendering to what the process of war brings to realize. It resets, de-realizes, and initiates a life-urging service to the city, neighborhood, and community directly affected by the war. “When I come here, I see traces of heavy shelling”, Zhadan shared, bringing up “the invisible enemy” by which one was confronted with the need to exercise caution. He talked about civilians walking the streets, unarmed and unprotected as if their life was not accounted for. He talked about the military lodged in the ATO for a combat operation that risked erupting into a full-fledged violence. He searched for words to describe what a footprint of this war might be, setting his project against the backdrop of troubling realities faced by those who stayed to witness.

I hear him struggling to express the immensity of the tragedy that Ukrainians are left with. I hear him trying to give name to the destructive force that broke one’s home, one’s world, one’s life down completely. What starts in sound may precipitate elsewhere, he alluded, contemplating on the effects of his sonic mission absorbed into the surrounds, the flow of war that pulls a world of destructive forces into expression. Violated bodies and destroyed lands provide a vessel through which this flow creates its field of operation, yielding into processes of physical and psychological exhaustion, deprivation, and death. Zhadan took these processes very seriously, seeking in sound an immersed ethical involvement in recuperating and restoring to a life-sustaining condition, obliged to the wellbeing of the region.

The war brought grave detriment to eastern Ukraine, he emphasized, working to create a lasting impact on the lives and communities touched by its violent acts. His

efforts of intervention performed a resistance to the regulating effects of wartime reality. “Music there, where war is” became a conduit for activating the conditions of peacetime experience, deregulating and resetting social, mental, and acoustic ecologies through which war manifested in its hostile action. I locate in this involved mode of engagement a commitment to care, a situated response to the needs and demands of the lived situation. I start the chapter, seeking a deeper understanding of the situation, both restricted and unrestricted to a particular historical moment and location. Drawing on Zhadan’s political motivations to come to the warzone with the project that grounds his oppositional stance toward Russia’s empire-building in Ukraine and his rejection of formal peace as a condition dictated by the invader, I explore how the project stems from an effort of peacemaking that is not about stopping a war but about facing up to war in ways that challenge a normative “counteractive” gesture. In studying it specifically for affirmations of peace that perform against the proliferation of war processes, I ask how the project claims a position of contestation modulated by the participatory work of sound. Sound is brought to attention by its sensory materialist participation in the making of experience, place, and one’s world, emerging as a carer whose doings have ethical, practical and material consequences. Acknowledging these consequences, I examine a particular operability of the situated sounded action that drives my inquiry into sound’s implications, collaborations and complicities, from which to suggest its ethico-political purpose. Standing for the world or weaponizing against it, sound is involved in labors of life and death, in both the realistic and most extended sense. I try to expose these labors, contemplating on sound’s capacity to be in the service of a common necessity, and collective survival.

I pair “Music there, where war is” with another account of political involvement to which I construct a form of responsibility and situated response concomitant with a task of sustaining life where it has been threatened. Many kilometres away from the ATO, in the village of Shiyes in Russia’s far-northern Arkhangelsk province, poet, musician and activist Kirill Medvedev delivered a uniquely impactful performance that engaged sound into an obligation to participate in making a difference for (the life of) the region facing a greater environmental destruction. In the summer of 2019, he travelled to Shiyes with his political rock band Arkady Kots, to lend support to local struggles over government plans to build a massive landfill in the region’s pristine forests. Major clearcutting of the taiga forest had begun. Authorities erected a four-meter-high steel wall around the work site to prevent access. Locals, in response, set up a protest camp by the site, demanding a stop to construction. Medvedev’s arrival tensed the ongoing fight over Shiyes with the project of sound through which he could directly act upon the situation, the environment and its ecological future.<sup>105</sup>

I listen to the project for how it operates as a sonic mission invested in the Shiyes community, seeking to understand the localized interactions from which a contractual obligation toward the life of the region emerges. Revolving around the song “The Walls” (Steny), which plays into the Shiyes experience of dealing with the actual wall while also offering metaphorical connotations, the project is endowed with meaning, power, and agency, serving the agenda to galvanize solidarity actions and advance anti-capitalist

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<sup>105</sup> Medvedev published recorded videos of select performances. See Gruppa Arkady Kots, “‘Arkady Kots’ na Shiyese. Steny rukhnut,” video posted on 10 July 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thiK2QO9dUo>; or Gruppa Arkady Kots, “Arkady Kots. ‘Steny rukhnut’ na Shiyese,” video posted on 17 August 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMXuzr1gT88>

vision of the young New Left to which Medvedev associated himself. “The Walls” was adopted as an anthem of the Shiyes protest camp and became a driving force of Russia’s larger anti-landfill movement built around public outrage over Moscow’s historically colonial politics in northern (indigenous) regions. While attending to the initial proposition of the project to activate a community, I also try to account for what else it worked to accomplish, for what it was capable of involving, lending itself to a life-giving mission.

Joining the project of Zhadan to that of Medvedev in this chapter, I explore activist responses from the frontline of current conflicts. Moving from the scene of war in eastern Ukraine to the site of environmental offence in northern Russia, I examine this sonically shaped action as a partaking in winning a struggle for life against a destructive force of territorial expansionism and environmental crime that the current moment of Russia’s neo-imperial, autocratic, and criminal system of relations makes operative. It is from this way of supportive participation in making the world a liveable place that I imagine sound’s ethical implication that nurtures the conditions in which an enactment of care occurs.

### **Embracing the im/possibility of peace: Zhadan’s opposing stance**

When asked in an interview when he thinks the war in Ukraine will end, Zhadan responds: “I don’t know when it will end...but I know what has to be done for it to end. We must stay together and continue to do what we have been doing.”<sup>106</sup> He leaves it at that, as a broad and uncompromising statement carrying the force of collective obligation

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<sup>106</sup> “Sergei Zhadan, pisatel’, v programme ‘Batsman’. Vypusk ot 23.08.2018,” *112 Ukraina*, video published on 24 August 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qwr5mGwxNsw>

to resist. I replay this moment of the interview over and over, trying to decipher what is coded in Zhadan's call for collective endurance from which his entire activist project gains its argumentative traction. There can be no compromise where there is no promise of peace in sight, he seems to suggest, taking war as a final decision that now determines the fate of Ukrainians as a nation. He once boldly testified to this claim, saying: "No one can protect their country by accepting conditions dictated by the invader. You do not get closer to victory by withdrawing your troops".<sup>107</sup> Commenting on a new round of peace talks that failed, he criticized the Ukrainian authorities for meeting the demands of the "aggressor" when the war was far from being close to an end. "The war is still going. The shelling does not stop. No one means to agree to anything," he proclaimed, speaking of an ongoing violation of the terms and conditions of the peace agreement that Ukrainians were pushed to accept. For him, the truth to peace process is found in every moment of living face-to-face with the failure of it, coming to terms with the impossibility of eliminating violence through a scenario of absence to which the ambitions to end the war pertain. "One cannot end the war just by 'stopping the shelling,'" he professed, referring to the intention of the Ukrainian authorities to submit to the imperial will of the Kremlin by accepting the consequences of Russia's new landgrabs in Ukraine. This would not help end the war on Ukraine but add to perpetuating it, he advised. Russia has used peace process as a way of gaining affirmation of its illegal actions (such as the de facto annexation of Donbas and Luhansk regions and formal integration of Crimea) and its

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<sup>107</sup> See Serhiy Zhadan, "Nikhto ne zdaten zakhystyty svoiu terytoriiu, pryimaiuchy umovy zaharbnyka," *Novynarnia*, 18 December 2019, [https://novynarnia.com/2019/12/18/zhadan/?fbclid=IwAR2P5-D\\_gUsiPSIwDc1ouvy5RsdGwoKXiBnjQclura-2X9NSl3ZZcqswzAg](https://novynarnia.com/2019/12/18/zhadan/?fbclid=IwAR2P5-D_gUsiPSIwDc1ouvy5RsdGwoKXiBnjQclura-2X9NSl3ZZcqswzAg)

cultural hegemony in eastern Ukraine. In Zhadan's hold of it, peace remains a false prophecy under such circumstances, one that imposes and sustains a reactionary politics of passive responses to a situation of great uncertainty. "War is not won by victory. Those who win the war never stop attacking," Zhadan restated Hemingway, taking the threat of peace just as seriously as the threat of war. (Ibid) To come to peace, one is expected to give in to what the foretold ending of the war announces. In the Ukrainian case, the prospect of peace is dictated by a compulsory contract with the imperialist imagination and geopolitical goals of Russia and, hence, is profoundly unsettling, if not alarming.<sup>108</sup> There is more to an end of the war in Ukraine, Zhadan continued to insist, essentially turning away from peace as a countermeasure to war to peace as a relation to war, a position (and proposition) of an encounter. His activist project in the ATO actualizes this original vision, re-imagining peace as a response to the demands of the present moment of which war is now part.

Sounding from the standpoint of this radical orientation, Zhadan's project works in the efforts of Ukrainian endurance and self-defence. It renders powerful the Ukrainian choice not to accept the normative conditions of war and peace that delimit what remains possible for Ukrainians under Russia's war. It convenes a scene of participation in which the collective pursuit of endurance is not limited to investing in war and peace but extended to making peacetime for war times, inventing how one can get through moments of despair, hopelessness, and pessimism without succumbing to a quest for peace in all of its false pretense. War is endured at great cost, and so is peace as we know

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<sup>108</sup> For a deeper understanding of Russia's latest imperial procedure in Ukraine and beyond, see Bertelsen, *Revolution and War*; Grigas, *Beyond Crimea*; Kushnir, *Ukraine and Russian Neo-Imperialism*; McNabb, *Vladimir Putin and Russia's Imperial Revival*; Sayapin and Tsybulenko, *The Use of Force against Ukraine and International Law*.

it, Zhadan preaches with evidence of the Ukrainian experience which proves the necessity to put a hold on peace process that entitles Russia to privilege and immunity. In this view, his project assumes a posture of resistance in the face of a threat that any enabling of war and peace enacts. It proposes to think with an alternative to the established protocols of the current situation, recognizing the ongoing challenge to Ukrainian survival both in the event of a full-fledged attack and in the situation of a prolonged territorial and cultural absorption into imperial ownership. One way to foster an alternative is to give peace a chance through a novel sense of care for what needs to be overcome as war. The project seeks to hold to this possibility of overcoming, grappling with the impossibility of peace through situated scenarios of peacetime to which the work of sound gives standing.

“This war exposed us in a lack of capacity. We don’t have what it takes to be – our own army, law, national security. We have to create it all from scratch,” Zhadan said upon arrival to the ATO.<sup>109</sup> Drawing attention to the stakes of Ukrainian vulnerability, he admitted to the risk of going to war when Ukraine was largely unprepared to fight against Russia, while also attesting to the impossibility of escaping the coming of this war. He talked about what the war meant for Ukrainians who had to learn navigate their way through the use of force and also for him as an artist who was left with a sense of urgency to pursue other logics of resistance. I seek insights in this scene of conversation, listening to understand what “starting from scratch” entailed for him as an undertaking that he carried over from the political into the sensory, situational, and real to which sound was expressive.

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<sup>109</sup> “Muzyka tam, gde voyna,” *Mediagruppera Nakipelo*, video published on 22 February 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KRwaNDPdd3M>

## Conspiring against empire-keeping forces

In preparation to his upcoming trip to the ATO, Zhadan wrote: “War becomes history, growing its debris into the surroundings, scarring the air and leaving one with an aftertaste of metal and black soil. In the abandoned trenches, dry grass blends with the colour of barbed wire. War changes us, yet it does not break us all. It calls on our readiness and strength to stand for what remains important. It calls on our willingness to make a choice.”<sup>110</sup> For him, endurance comprises evolution with every encounter of violence, a continual alteration brought about by the course of war that touches life most deeply. He witnessed that amidst the violence of the conflict, many of the Ukrainians who lived in the warzone fled their home to places that had not been directly hit by the war. Those who had to stay were disadvantaged, marginalized, and disposed to withstand gruesome evidence of the war’s onslaught, its acting on the body and environment, its way of disfiguring, depleting, and scarring. Sympathizing with their struggle in wartime, Zhadan sought a project that could be an available resource employed to render living possible in a perilous situation failing one to persist into life, a project that would nurture toward a choice to endure impact and lead through a refusal to be contained and governed by the internalized experience of a minor people left to no choice. With its practical involvement with the local conditions and its ideological directives, he urged a turn away from sentiments deepened by the imperial history and a recent totalitarian past, meaning to dispute the established imaginary of a common people sharing a destiny of living the

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<sup>110</sup> See Serhii Zhadan *Facebook* post as of 31 January 2018, in which he reflects on the war-torn Luhansk region of Ukraine:  
<https://www.facebook.com/serhiy.zhadan/photos/a.240891332625809/1541038175944445/?type=3&theater>

layout of Russia's new imperial design.

His project joined to the Ukrainian efforts to dispel the myth that citizens of Donbas agreed to Russia's expansionist aims in Ukraine. Along with fellow artists from eastern Ukraine, Zhadan has worked to challenge assumptions about eastern Ukrainians who are often reduced by the Russian nationalist discourse to the uncivilized people willing to be absorbed into the dominant society of the "Russian world".<sup>111</sup> As Yuliya Ilchuk explored it, Zhadan shared a sense of obligation to give Ukrainians living in the Donbas and Luhansk regions a voice, working off the imperative "to achieve civic consolidation" so as to create a space for dissent of those who had been forced to live under the separatist authorities working to legitimize Russia's de facto control over parts of Ukraine. His conscious effort to employ artistic strategy to appeal to audiences living on occupied territories is directed, in its expectation of protest, at empire-keeping forces that continue to shutter Ukrainian options away into a life under the command of Russian hegemony.<sup>112</sup>

Bob Holman's foreword to Zhadan's collection of poems translated into English best encapsulates this detailed and effortful labor of an artist striving for a Ukrainian dream, a sovereign united country that is fully recovered from the old imperial order and set on a path to an alternate future: one in which it will never be subjected to the violence of foreign authority. Riddled with collective insights, beliefs and dreams, Zhadan's texts and activist performances stay true to the goals of the Ukrainian freedom and justice

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<sup>111</sup> I further explore implications of this discourse in the last chapter of the dissertation, discussing how Russia's civilizational identity politics has become a commonplace strategy to ground its geopolitical orientation toward a partition and/or absorption of foreign territories and populations.

<sup>112</sup> Ilchuk, "Hearing the Voice of Donbas," 256.

movements to which Zhadan has been “deeply committed”. They bring attention to the Ukrainian experience of struggle, enabling a storytelling that reaches all the way into the political. In Holman’s account, Zhadan emerges as a visionary of Ukrainian unrest, “the contemporary heir to Taras Shevchenko”, a beloved national prophet, while also as a “lone wolf iconoclast” whose revolutionary attitude never stopped taking him to the streets. He would participate in demonstrations and protests in the name of Ukrainian ideals, willing to jeopardize his safety for a political cause. In 2014, he was severely beaten by a gang of pro-Russian thugs for not submitting to their request to kneel and kiss the Russian flag.<sup>113</sup>

His gesture of refusal must be read as a promise of resilience against the violence of anti-Ukrainian sentiment expressed by Moscow fans, Russian state media, and the Kremlin. Ukrainian activists have been frequently portrayed as terrorists and fascists by those who subscribed to the sponsored discourse of Ukraine as a hotbed of danger to Russia and who engaged in perpetuating a Russian propaganda myth of a fascist threat evoked by the 2014 Maidan uprising and Ukrainian revolution.<sup>114</sup> It is in this context that Zhadan was seen as a rebel supporting the agenda of the “fascist coup” in Kyiv, as the Russian government referred to the events in Ukraine.<sup>115</sup> He was called a “nationalist

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<sup>113</sup> Zhadan, *What We Live For, What We Die For*, ix-xiv.

<sup>114</sup> On the role of Russian propaganda in defining Ukraine’s efforts for statehood as fascism, see Bertelsen, “Epilogue,” 377-412. Also see Andrea Chalupa, “Putin’s Fabricated Claim of a Fascist Threat in Ukraine,” *Forbes*, 4 April 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2014/04/04/putins-fabricated-claim-of-a-fascist-threat-in-ukraine/#cc97c6a1782e>

<sup>115</sup> On a dismissal of the Ukrainian revolution as a “fascist coup”, see Luke Harding, “Kiev’s Protesters: Ukraine Uprising was no Neo-Nazi Power-Grab,” *The Guardian*, 13 March 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/13/ukraine-uprising-fascist-coup-grassroots-movement>; also see a geopolitical analysis of Russia’s resurgent imperialism to which a

terrorist” by the Russian and Belarusian authorities who barred his access to a poetry festival in Belarus.<sup>116</sup> Zhadan, however, had long opposed such claims, facing up to the deceit of Russian propaganda, the role of which, he argued, was to orchestrate hate and premeditated conflicts. Following the 2014 incident, he spoke about Moscow’s manipulative campaign to use the rhetoric of “fascists and extremists” to spark a Ukrainian conflict from which a geopolitical mission of the empire could be resumed. Edging one towards hate became an incentive, he contended, saying: “All you need to do is create an enemy and convince yourself that this enemy is threatening you”.<sup>117</sup>

His activism has centered around the project of a unified Ukraine to which he contributed as a writer, working to refute myths about cultural antagonism between eastern and western Ukrainians upon which the explanation of a Ukrainian conflict was grounded, and as a thinker, sympathizing with the idea of democracy at the heart of the Maidan movement. In his 2020 interview to Ukrainian journalist Kateryna Iakovlenko, Zhadan specifically discussed his involvement in what he saw as a destigmatization of eastern Ukraine as a borderline region that is different but not inseparable from the rest of the country. For him, Ukraineness does not imply an erasure of cultural and linguistic difference, on the contrary, it proposes an assertion of difference, the process to which

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politically convenient scenography of the “fascist coup” in Ukraine was part in Toal, *Near Abroad*, 17-54.

<sup>116</sup> Amelia Glaser, “Poems for an Uncertain World: On Serhiy Zhadan’s ‘What We Live For, What We Die For,’” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 11 May 2019, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/poems-for-an-uncertain-world-on-serhiy-zhadans-what-we-live-for-what-we-die-for/>

<sup>117</sup> Jan Maksymiuk and Claire Bigg, “Ukraine’s Rock Star Poet Who Chose to Fight Back,” *RFERL*, 11 March 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/a/the-ukrainian-rock-star-poet-who-fought-back/25293165.html>

the latest civic engagements and cultural initiatives in the Ukrainian East were distinct examples.<sup>118</sup>

Zhadan's trips to the area were part of this political agitation and cultural revival in the course of which his sung poetry performances lent greatly to the ongoing transition of the region from attitudes maintaining the culture of pro-Soviet sentiment to a stance of Ukrainian dissent. As a spokesman of the Ukrainian people, he came across as an outsider who attempted to alter and contradict the sung poetry community tradition that had long existed in the east of the country where former Soviet musical culture informed the practice of performing poets, also known as bards. Bards occupy a unique place in the emotional and intellectual life of the part of the Russian-speaking community that laments the collapse of the USSR. They appeal to the nostalgic feelings for the Soviet past, valorizing the imaginary of a collectively lived "extraterritorial" "quasi-citizenship" that fosters "a form of joint identity" with Russia and expresses a strong bent towards Russian nationalism.<sup>119</sup> Their network in Ukraine is primarily formed in the eastern cities of Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, and Mykolaiv, where it serves the ideological needs of pro-Russian groups invested in the various forms of commemoration of the Soviet experience. On the larger scale, it shares a nostalgic and nationalist subjectivity shaped by Soviet and neo-Soviet military-patriotic pedagogies and Russian neoconservatism and used as a portal into the experience of a collective Soviet body

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<sup>118</sup> Kateryna Iakovlenko, "Serhiy Zhadan: 'Donbas is more about revival than ruins'," *OpenDemocracy*, 27 October 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/serhiy-zhadan-donbas-interview/>

<sup>119</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the ideological and geopolitical kinship into which Russia invests to dictate its imperialist demands, see Cheskin and Kachuyevski, "The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Post-Soviet Space," 8-9, where they discuss extraterritorial compatriotship in the post-Soviet space as an element of empire building.

buried in memory but still alive. Bards see themselves as guardians of the Russian spiritual-moral values, seeking to build on the social and political legacy of Soviet communism, fictional brotherhood, and common language. They are encouraged by the Russian authorities who invest in the canon of bard song across the post-Soviet countries, especially Ukraine and Belarus, by offering funding, venues, and opportunities for a memorial culture.<sup>120</sup>

Dislocating the listener from the bard tradition that now serves to mobilize social participation in the construction of neo-imperial space, Zhadan brought charge against the empire-keeping forces of musical sound.<sup>121</sup> His sung poetry performances garnered their effects through the expression of Ukrainian subjectivity aimed at countering the old political subject of a pan-Russian nation. He defined his activist action in terms of the operativity of its standing against what he once called an “attempt to revive the Soviet zombie”, seeking a strategic alliance with the collective process of the Ukrainian Revolution.<sup>122</sup> Ukrainian-American poet Ilya Kaminsky has called Zhadan “a national

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<sup>120</sup> One can gain access to the post-Soviet bard scene using the website <http://www.bards.ru/>, which lists the past and upcoming events. Once browsed, the website presents an evocative perspective on what it means to be a post-Soviet bard. It features activities that cater for Russia’s efforts to foster military-patriotic upbringing ([http://www.bards.ru/news\\_show.php?id=788](http://www.bards.ru/news_show.php?id=788)) or pay due respect to those who proved fidelity through service to the Soviet regime ([http://www.bards.ru/news\\_show.php?id=793](http://www.bards.ru/news_show.php?id=793)). This form of participation explicitly positions the practice of bards within the Russian identity lines, ideology of the Soviet good, and nostalgia for the imperial past. Many of the events are supported by the state-sponsored cultural channels.

<sup>121</sup> I make claim to an operative alliance between the post-Soviet bard movement and Russia’s imperial course. Steeped in the myth of the “Russian soul” and symbolism of the “Russian national idea”, songs of the post-Soviet bards deliver the nationalist agenda of the Kremlin to the post-Soviet populations. Building on the sense of *camaraderie* formed around the “Russian values”, they preach a shared allegiance to Moscow. For an in-depth analysis of the bard tradition, see Daughtry, *The Intonation of Intimacy*, where he explores its emergence, evolution, and political purpose.

<sup>122</sup> Marci Shore documents Zhadan’s position on neo-Soviet mentality forged through current imperial ambitions in the occupied Donetsk region. See Shore, *The Ukrainian Night*, 210.

bard, a chronicler”, attending to his effort to capture a sensibility of collective struggle through the use of poetic voice.<sup>123</sup> A bard, in this context, is an impassioned witness to Ukraine’s journey from a dispossessed nation within empire to an independent state, whose vocal testimonies and rhythms of narration strike a chord with millions of Ukrainians living the everyday of Russia’s aggression. “Music there, where war is”, as a project of the bard’s duty in its embracement of insurgent sound, then can be seen as a form of participation in chronicling the expressions of Ukrainian resistance as enabled by the situated praxis of sounding and listening.

### **Launching a sonic mission on the frontlines**

Although inseparable from the political and cultural sphere, Zhadan’s project in the ATO must be also distinguished at the level of practical engagement: in its purpose of making a difference through the involved intervention and in its doing that opens to consequences. It must be understood in the operability of its peacetime sound procedure within the ethical conditions of the omnidirectionality between sound and violence that are created in wartime. Sound matters in the mattering of war. It is concomitant to the continuation of violence and processes of warfare, being on the continuum with the war world. What can happen when the continuum is disabled and the terms of wartime are broken, with a directed sonic mission to which Zhadan’s project gave a standout expression? In presenting this question, I take seriously the significance of the project in its ethical implications, inquiring into a participatory act of sound that is oriented by commitments embedded in the vital material force that confronts and disrupts the path of

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<sup>123</sup> Zhadan, *Mesopotamia*, praise page.

war.

“Sound is not weightless. It is not bodiless, not ethereal, it is not immaterial. The opposite is true. Sound goes through my body, through your body – right here, right now, wherever we are,” as sound theorist Holger Schulze puts it in his essay on the presence of sound to which he ascribes “corporeality”. The “body of sound”, as he refers to it, is presumed in its experiential effects and localized impact, vibrating, resonating, and coming into tension with other bodies, things, environments. It is imagined in its material totality and temporal unfolding, as well as in its pervasiveness and palpability. “Sound is thoroughly material, it is a vibration, a disturbance in a material continuum: a disturbance that moves through elastic materials,” he writes, rethinking the invisible and ephemeral condition of sound toward physical evidence.<sup>124</sup> The experience of sound’s presence calls to a corporeality of sound through a situated awareness of it as afforded by subjective, sensory, and bodily perception of sound’s material event, the effects and affects it results in. “Single sounds do span and shiver through the very physical structures that you and I are: are ‘areal’, our area,” Schulze says, drawing from the work of Jean-Luc Nancy to convey sound as a source of disturbance. (203) Disturbance, in his conceptualization, is a continuous vibratory reordering of a physical environment to which our bodies relate, react and act in. Casey O’Callaghan, philosopher of sound and perception, talks about disturbance as a particular composition of movement in which a material object sets a “surrounding medium” into motion – or, into sound. This sort of “disturbance event”, as he coins it, has to do with the way sound travels and persists to reach the perceiver. In his account, sounds are “medium-disturbing events”: disturbance of the air by a vibrating

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<sup>124</sup> Schulze, “The Body of Sound,” 198.

object, for instance. Their acting must not be understood in visuocentric terms as analogous to objects and their attributes, instead imagined more as a relational event that has duration. “Sounds, intuitively, are happenings that take place in one’s environment. This is evident in the language we use to speak of sounds. Sounds, like explosions and concerts, *occur, take place, and last*. Colors, shapes, and fiddles do not,” O’Callaghan explains, defining a “disturbing event” of sound as an “occurrence” that has lifetime.<sup>125</sup>

What I gather from these two different perspectives is that disturbance to which sound’s material/relational event reveals is a process of a vibrating source. What can we discern if a vibrating source is the material world of war – guns, combat vehicles, explosive devices, all things audible, and audible inaudible, replete with violence and warfare? Anthropologist of war sound Martin Daughtry calls an ecology of the war’s sonic process a belliphonic ecology, for it is ordered by a vibrational force of sound that is amplified for a strategic military engagement. Intended as a neologism that considers warscape as an acoustic territory, the term “belliphonic” derives from the Latin word “bellum” (war) and the Greek “phone” (voice) and signifies the “agglomeration of sounds” produced by things that fit a specific military purpose.<sup>126</sup> His use of the term is guided by a distinction between wartime and peacetime sonic situations, and meant to serve the argument that war involves a sonic dimension which is characterized by the violence of its “deleterious effects”. Daughtry studies the violent act of war as that of its sound. Sound’s potential to cause damage is deployed into the making of war, he argues, showing how sound acts as a “brute force” that renders the experience of war more

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<sup>125</sup> O’Callaghan, *Sounds*, 67 (original italics).

<sup>126</sup> Daughtry, *Listening to War*, 3.

traumatic. Theorizing the assault of belliphonic violence as an extent of a battlefield, he writes: “Belliphonic sounds are the substance of wartime acoustic ecology, and often the *sonic matériel* with which war is fought. And since sound and violence enter the world omnidirectionally, the consequences of these acts – consequences that include but are not limited to hearing loss, traumatic stress, exhaustion, aggression, and depression – are distributed broadly. A full accounting of the war thus must include the acoustic violence and aggression produced by the sonic campaigns that emerged within it.” (182)

Daughtry gives a detailed account of the belliphonic and dangers of exposure to it, drawing on his ethnographic study of sound-induced trauma in the 2003-2011 Iraq war. He defines a violent act of sound as an assault on one’s sensory corpus. We listen not only with our ears, but with our skin, hair, body’s cavities, viscera, he contends, developing the concept of “the belliphonic auditor” to account for a corporeal space within which belliphonic sounds carry out their violent action. Belliphonic auditors are submitted to a situation in which an acoustic and haptic event of sound is implicated, becoming victims of crime of which sound is part. They are subject to attack, incurring sensory and psychological damage, and attesting to the war’s “excess of evil” to which sound serves, as a weapon. (23-25; 92-93) Using testimonies of the Iraq war survivors, Daughtry rethinks the experience of war toward a primary function of the belliphonic. Sound’s involvement in doing harm is far more extensive than we possibly think, he concludes, showing that a collective trauma of war is greatly deepened by acoustic exposure. (271)

In formulating an attestation of violence that takes place outside the field of vision, Daughtry delves into an acoustemological situation that involves the corporeal

sensorium. Sonic violence whose performative force of inflicting, threatening, and causing is carried into what he refers to as “the totality of the war’s pansensorial onslaught and long half-life” leaves legacy that needs to be addressed. (25) Acoustic weight of war is real and its long-lasting impact on those who are to bear it comes in forms of injury. Daughtry explores how injuring occurs, rethinking sound in terms of its way of “bodily invasion”, its “dynamism” of spreading through space, and its “overwhelming materiality” to which we become physically and psychologically vulnerable. (161-163) He writes: “... we are all aware when we are in the *presence* of a sound,” developing an understanding of sound’s “presence” as that which has size, mass, and force. Sounds can envelop us, being “bigger than we are”. (161) They can intrude into our space of sensory contact: “rub up against the body, punch the chest cavity, pierce the eardrum”. (163) They can impact so severely that their violent disturbance may put us at increased risk of deafness. (164)

Daughtry’s work essentially builds to the idea that the order of war is backed by the violence of sound, episodes of which uproot and force into escape. Warfare is a striking combination of discriminatory and nondiscriminatory attacks to which bodies and environments are made vulnerable. These attacks occur at different levels of engagement (sensorial, ecological, material, etc), which gives one the sense of exposure on all fronts at once. Sound, as constitutive of the materiality of war, is rendered operative in this excess of experience. The effects of its sensory input lend to the processual event of war that is perceptible as an aggressive act toward the human sensorium. In his foreword to the recently published volume on the experiential dimensions of modern war, David Howes commands our attention to “the all-out assault

on the senses that typifies the phenomenon of modern conflict”.<sup>127</sup> Recounting the studies concerned with the sensory implications of war, he writes: “...war is first and foremost an assault on the senses. It repositions and reconditions the senses.” (xx) Life in a wartime environment is marked by constraints imposed on the body that is prompted to mobilize sensibilities to read cues of impending danger, be willing to forego peacetime standards through wartime requirements, and learn to endure some horrifying experiences in the face of survival. One’s sense of being at the limit is complete with a range of “sensory adaptations” to the persistent disruption of peacetime conditions. The increased sensory defensiveness occasioned by war, as Howes explains, is a technique of endurance with which the assault on the senses is fought. In the introduction to the same volume, editors Paul Cornish, Nicholas Saunders, and Mark Smith draw on the magnitude of disturbance that the body has to withstand during times of conflict, expanding our understanding of conflict beyond its representational geography back into its nonrepresentational conditions, the conditions of an assault force that makes the violence of sensation its action. Sensory overload is registered as something antithetical to peacetime ethics. As they write, attending to both the general and context-specific experiences: “conflict assaults and overwhelms the senses, numbs them, and rearranges them in contradistinction to what we might think of peacetime sensory experiences...”<sup>128</sup> In other words, warfare is realized and perpetuated through sensory stimuli that destroy one’s sense of peacetime normalcy.

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<sup>127</sup> Howes, “Foreword,” xxii.

<sup>128</sup> Cornish et al, “Introduction,” 7.

Traumatic loss of normalcy haunts one's lament of peacetime sound, as Daughtry points out. In his exploration of the private music experience of belliphonic auditors, he stresses one's desire to push back against wartime conditions and seek a sonorous space shaped by sounds consonant with peaceful life. Mobile music technology offers such immersive experience of living through a "semblance of normalcy", compelling one to isolate from the ambient world of war. As a "technology of self-regulation", it helps create situations of listening and sounding in which peacetime conditions are purposefully nurtured. Bringing the pleasurable sounds into combat environment is both a therapeutic measure and resistant strategy enabling one to endure a deeply disturbing encounter with the belliphonic.<sup>129</sup> But music in wartime is more than a category of sonorous phenomena or a way of ethical engagement, Daughtry shows. It is a particular doing that is deemed capable, adequate, and disruptive to the scene of belliphonic violence. In conceptualizing a pushback against the belliphonic through the act of music, he charts sound's space of action, the site of an ethical integrity from which the making/unmaking of war can be imagined. A healing touch of sound that mobile music in combat zones performs is juxtaposed to acute violence of sonic campaigns to further characterize a space of dissonance between "good" and "evil" into which actions of sound are closely intertwined. Here, sound is assumed not only in its direct consequences for belliphonic auditors, but also in its force of composition and decomposition of war as such. The omnidirectionality of sound and violence around which Daughtry structures his philosophical argument attests to this compositional work of sound that involves a process of coupling between sound and war, as well as sound and peace.

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<sup>129</sup> Daughtry, *Listening to War*, 228-229.

I read Daughtry's thesis on wartime sound as a statement on the ethical potential of sound to act *against* or *for* the world. The "kernel of potential violence" can be found in all sounds, Daughtry asserts, asking how it is commonly exploited, serving the harmful cause or situations opposite of what he calls "healthy". (165) It is through activation or deactivation of sound's potential for violence that he rethinks human practices in their material obligation with ethical dimension. In calling on the material effects of our engagement with sound, he creates a binary opposition of harmful/beneficial sounds, while also unpacking a proposition that takes hold of what it means to be sonically involved with care. Daughtry treats the sonorous conditions of peacetime as a sensory value by which one is bound to civility, while deploring the weaponization of sound and the loss of collective obligation that starts from the normative ideal of peace. His taxonomy of participatory sounds of the Iraq war serves the argument that sound is not exactly abstract from a moral stance. "Sound wounds", he writes, imagining sound's assault as a crime and giving it a moral reading. Wartime sound is construed as an unwanted encounter associated with ill-willing and ill-being – "it is an important part of the sensory field through which violence, survival, and traumatic memory are enacted." (271-273)

Daughtry's account relates a call for resistance to the threat of sound's potential violence. It presents one end of a given polarity, that of "evil", assuming that there is also the other. It is deeply suggestive for how violence and civility, as conditions where war and peace are intended, are embedded in the situational experiences of sound. I seek to listen and write about Zhadan's sonic mission in the ATO against the backdrop of these experiences, gathering from the taxonomy that posits belliphonic sounds counter to

sounds associated with peacetime. If we think back to the project in light of the studies that I discussed, it is its particular nonparticipation in the belliphonic scene of the war, as perceivable in the ethos of peacetime sound it fostered, that gave direction to a process through which sound acted for the world, and not against it.

Zhadan's sonic mission set sound in direct confrontation with the material conditions of violence it was primed to create as a force potentialized for its destructive and incapacitating effects. It engaged with the *promise* of sound rather than its threat, staging a kind of remediation by probing consequences in the shaping of a new lived world. I see it as a form of intervention in what sound could be, in its differing purpose, unconstrained by the primacy of the belliphonic. A psychologist working with the residents of the ATO for whom Zhadan performed mentioned that local communities saw this new purpose of sound as life sustaining, for it turned out to be the opposite of what operated in the imperative of deprivation, violation, and harm from which sound in wartime was never relieved. She spoke of Zhadan's mission as an enabling condition for a contingent but transforming situation in which one experienced the actuality of a possible world as process which engaged a new kind of truth confirmed and affirmed in sound. In its trial of sounding as doing, the mission proved conducive to the task of care. It aimed at detecting and responding to the needs that persisted in a place transformed by the scene of violence to which belliphonic sound directly participated. Both civilians and service members were regularly exposed to deeply traumatizing acoustic events, becoming inured to them as consequence. "When explosions occur even children pay no heed," the psychologist pointed out, describing life in wartime as a journey of violent encounters. Within the sonic and sensorial situation of these encounters, Zhadan's project

appeared offsetting, if not emancipating. It presumed a retreat from the realities of “grey zone” one would find themselves imprisoned, orchestrating a withdrawal to a peacetime world one could perform and cohabit by virtue of sound. Its task of conjuring away the war by displacing it with a “fragment of peaceful life” and producing the experience of great positivity was vital in times of crisis. “There is so much war – and almost no joy”, the psychologist discerned, raising a sense of urgency and acknowledging the need for care that emerged from many constraints imposed by the armed conflict. In her view, Zhadan’s project worked to meet this need through the evocation of sound’s beneficial effects. It came to be valued for the impact of its humanitarian mission, as well as for the ethical ambition of its acoustemological situation, one of the order of life and joy rather than that of threat and fear into which the experience of sound in wartime typically receded. Zhadan’s bandmate, drummer Garik Ostapov, called this opening onto acoustemological difference a transition from living the life of a zombie to getting exposed to life’s positive charge”.<sup>130</sup>

If we rethink a wartime place in terms of the invisible presence of sound shaping one’s sensibility and exposing a shared vulnerability, as Daughtry suggests in his formulation of war’s acoustemology, we can imagine that any involved intervention that instantiates inflection of the sound’s tendency for violence can be perceived as a concrete difference made when reclaiming civility to sound. “The constant presence of armed violence forces civilians and service members into a common, caustic wartime acoustemology, evoked here by the concentric zones of audition,” as Daughtry writes,

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<sup>130</sup> Alina Shul’ha, “Muzyka tam, gde voyna,” *Nakipelo.ua*, 22 February 2018, <https://nakipelo.ua/muzyka-tam-gde-vojna/>

reassembling the belliphonic according to its oppressive logics.<sup>131</sup> Zhadan's sonic mission sought to put oppression out of action, disabling the force of coercion as a given term of war on which sound operated and setting the auditor free of acoustemological assumptions, habits, and constraints. It admitted a possibility of peace, lending this possibility an intentional agency. Peace here became a new state of consonance, one's agreement with (the fact of) being in discord. For Zhadan, it was a response that measured to his political aspirations to show up to the current war in ways that would not fashion peace as the opposite of war, but would take it as a format of confrontation, a setup for coming to terms with the impossibility of the very elimination of violence.

French philosopher Étienne Balibar gives the condition of impossibility a theoretical reading. He starts from a presumption that “war is the worst form of violence, yet it must be accepted under certain conditions (because peace is not the supreme value, or at least not an unconditional value)”, setting out a perspective that calls into question a political commitment to negate violence with the imperative of peace.<sup>132</sup> He speaks of the “conflict” between war and peace – violence and civility – as a tension embedded in obligation toward negation. There are two “forms of practical negation”: dissociation and counteraction. Rendering any of them means falling into a politics that is either an “abstraction from violence” (“nonviolence”) or an “inversion of it” (“counterviolence”). (22) Dissociation from violence serves the legitimation of it, whereas regulation of violence by way of paying back is an act of violence in itself. Both forms of response entail that “we do not know how to leave”: how to stop being in complicity. (4) There

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<sup>131</sup> Daughtry, *Listening to War*, 98.

<sup>132</sup> Balibar, *Violence and Civility*, 3.

must be a third option, Balibar then suggests, one that takes seriously the condition of impossibility and engages with it. He posits “antiviolence” as a third course of action, one that ensures that we do not pursue a “simple sublation of violence” but face the “uncertain stakes of a confrontation with the element of irreducible alterity”, grappling with the ongoing and eventuating. (17) He further elaborates on this stance legitimated by the alternative aim of contestation: “I say *antiviolence* because the prefix “anti-,” as in antithesis, antipathy, or antinomy, designates the most general modality of the act of ‘facing up to’ – from within the polity or community as well – or of measuring oneself against that which is, doubtless, enormous or incommensurable.” (24) The act of facing up around which an argument for antiviolence is structured pertains to the conditions under which the politics of civility may go in a direction that is different from the one(s) predicted by the logic of negation. Anti-violence does not invest in the sense of helplessness and a sculture of negative power, he suggests, but gives way to a politics of resistance that builds on a positive proposal, “as a ‘place’ in which active subjectivities and collective solidarities are forged”. (138)

I understand Zhadan’s sonic mission exactly as an attempt to break with negation by probing to restrict civility to antiviolence – to an act of encounter that brings out an alternative to inaction (resignation, passivity) and counteraction (annulation, overthrow) in the possibility of impossibility to which a more radical quest for peace may resemble. The mission in its way of taking peace as a probation of confrontation avoids patterns of conformity to a politics of civility predicated on the abolition of violence as a practice of collective instituting. It affirms, against the ethics of violence, a “peace” of sound, an involvement from a cumulative effect that operates positive power. A sonic quest for

peace, as I want to call this involvement that takes on a principle of antiviolence, stages a response that embraces a participation of sound to which a situated ethical obligation can be attributed. It is from the perspective of this obligation that intention not to put an end to war but to confront the cause of its endlessness can be assumed.

### **Sounding out of bomb shelter**

The moment I put on my headphones, I am met with a punctured sound of Zhadan's bold voice uttering into my ear: "Your heart is sponge, your brain is paste; go work – give us revenue! your throat is carved clay, and lungs are cotton wool balls; your only duty is to be working". I've read Zhadan's poetry over the years, becoming compelled by its compassionate stance, activist passion, and honest intent. This time I am struck not only by the intensity of lyrics riddled with semantic density amidst their explicit doctrine but also by the act of Zhadan's deliberate recitation every passage of which is charged with wordless effects and inarticulate stirrings. I rewind to hear more, looking for a start, a minute Zhadan shouted out for attention: "Is all good? Yes?... Then let's go, my next song is dedicated to the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, and it's called 'Budzhet' (Budget/Revenue)". With drummer carrying the beat, the concert continues to my rejoicing in the prospect of Zhadan's vocal delivery and the impassioned performance of "the Dogs". Some familiar Ukrainian words instantly pop up, breaking through a harmonic drone that emerged after the initial strike note orchestrated what felt like power surge. They sound rushed, carried in one breath, stormed to a couplet. I cannot gather them all, only fragments of the whole: "authorities", "deputies", "ministers", the words I know have been part of everyday conversation in which Ukrainian struggles and aspirations are intensely lived. I am carried into the midst of it, away from what I can

hear to what I can imagine, in listening, travelling back to Ukraine, its political perturbations and upheavals, crises and revolutions, hustle and bustle. I am no longer where I am. I am elsewhere, in the place of knowing and unknowing, in the place of confronting my gaze. In sound, I am back. The joy of being where I want to be hits home. I've lived and lived out of this before. I've been in the effort of my coming. In this new return, I can relate again, to the struggles of my people, to their ceaseless efforts to be, to their performing a promise of the truth they know.

What lent to my act of seeking a realization of alterity is never exactly inseparable from what served the process of performing and unperforming place, and one's sense of reality, to which "Zhadan and the Dogs" engaged in a bomb shelter, where they played the show. Their playing in the name of a possibility (not a nostalgia) held to the background of war, offering a collective survival strategy within a shared goal of struggle brought into experience through a project of sound.

The concert took place in the basement of the facilities of Luhansk thermal power plant (TPP) located north of the town of Shchastia. The town is positioned near the line of separation, which divides the occupied territories of Ukraine from the rest of the country. In the spring of 2014, it was seized by pro-Russian insurgents and Russian special forces and came under control of the self-proclaimed "Lugansk People's Republic" ("LPR"). After intense warfare over the course of the summer months, it was retaken by Ukrainian volunteer combatants and subsequently by the Ukrainian military in late 2014. During this period, many residential buildings were damaged, public facilities became inaccessible, and electricity supplies were frequently interrupted.<sup>133</sup> The thermal

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<sup>133</sup> Libereco: Partnership for Human Rights and Vostok SOS. *Civil Society in the Conflict Zone of Luhansk Region: A Report on Local Characteristics and Needs*, May 2020,

power plant was constantly targeted with projectiles and rockets, which posed a real threat of ecological disaster in the event of its explosion.<sup>134</sup> The next few years were marked by repeated attacks, regional migration, and humanitarian crisis.<sup>135</sup> Shchastia was transformed into a military base where the Ukrainian armed forces were permanently stationed and prepared to stand ready for a full-blown offensive.<sup>136</sup>

Zhadan's choice to perform for the Ukrainian military in the underground bunker of the local power plant that withstood intense fighting was grounded in a greater project of solidarity which his entire mission turned out to be. "It is our will to be there where Ukrainian military service members are: if they have to face fear, we must too," Zhadan said. Luhansk TPP was first to be visited: "This power plant – a strategically important object and the only source of energy in the region – sits at the line of separation. It now hosts the 80th Airborne Division of the Ukrainian Armed Forces. We decided to play the concert underground. Concrete walls provided acoustics and safety to us."<sup>137</sup> In comparison to other venues where "Zhadan and the Dogs" later played, such as degraded buildings of former community centres in which a concert stage could be found, the

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<https://www.lphr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Civil-Society-in-the-Conflict-Zone-of-Luhansk-Region.pdf>

<sup>134</sup> "Pri popadanii v TES v Shchast'e mozhet byt' tekhnogennaia katastrofa," *Hromadske Radio*, 4 December 2014, <https://hromadske.radio/ru/news/2014/12/04/pri-popadanii-v-tes-v-schaste-mozhet-byt-tehnogennaya-katastrofa-ekspert>

<sup>135</sup> "Ukraine Crisis: Delivering Aid to Schastye on the Front Line", *The ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross)*, 11 February 2015, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/ukraine-crisis-delivering-aid-schastye-front-line>

<sup>136</sup> Nolan Peterson, "'War Is My Life': A Journey Along the Front Lines in Ukraine," *The Daily Signal*, 9 March 2016, <https://www.dailysignal.com/2016/03/09/war-is-my-life-a-journey-along-the-front-lines-in-ukraine/>

<sup>137</sup> Alina Shul'ha, "Muzyka tam, gde voyna," *Nakipelo.ua*, 22 February 2018, <https://nakipelo.ua/muzyka-tam-gde-vojna/>

underground facilities of TPP did not afford a familiar setup, inviting an encounter which was destined to remain closely tied to space that would not exist in peacetime conditions. The bunker was a place created by war and the experience of it. It brought the artists in touch with the needs and wishes of those who regularly sought shelter in it.

In the situation of war, many subterranean constructions which are used for different purposes in peacetime are turned into much needed shelters. They become revitalized with hiding bodies, their routines and practices, and their sounds. In his book on acoustic territories, Brandon LaBelle draws attention to specific significance of these sounds in the acoustic architecture of war that folds back onto the omnidirectionality of sound and violence. He gives the example of the London Underground during the First and Second World Wars when it was repurposed to accommodate crowds fleeing air-raid signals and bombings. The entire space was utilized to carry on with the everyday, being transformed into the semblance of peacetime world. With entertainment facilities installed and educational activities made available, the occupants were led to a betrayal of war reality. Their long hours were spent on sharing a joy of living: chatting, entertaining, laughing, as if refusing to join into the threat of death. This transformation of the Underground from a dark and haunted space into an environment of “the surprising laughter and music resounding against the looming threat of bombers,” was realized, among other things, by an acoustical flux of what was at great variance with the aboveground norm of “war-noise”. “With the terror on land and in the sky comes the refuge sought below ground, minimizing the fear and challenge of the experience of war-noise,” LaBelle writes, assuming a certain acoustic comfort that the Underground afforded. With the account of the London Underground, he gives a more encompassing

reading of underground space as a “potential haven, sanctuary, or site for resistance”, while also seeking to elaborate a more conceptual consideration.<sup>138</sup> Charting out an understanding of the underground as a site of power and refusal to accept what is above, he allocates an explicitly political register for the act of going underground and performing from below. “Going underground” is a call for an intercession of power. It is a position of countering what is assumed by the hegemonic politics above, a way of entering into tension that could stir new political formations and open onto a space of transformation, bringing forward the voices, needs, and demands of those who find themselves on the margins. “The underground then is a secret, a fold, a crack, and an echo beating out from unknown cavities, which might suddenly fill up with bodies, forces, or cultures, to refigure terrestrial relations,” as LaBelle puts it, affirming the positive effects of rising from below to which such a politics of participation pertains. (26-27)

Zhadan’s performance out of bomb shelter carries over into this politics, sounding of the order of life in the circumstances ordered by a promise of death held out by war as an institution that serves to cause harm. It raises the confrontational dimension of sounding from below, not only in the sense of being underground and overcoming the war in the comfort of joy, but also in the sense of facing up to the above, to the situation of the established, the powerful, and the ordered within which the legal space of war (and peace) is created. As I’ve emphasized, sound in its belliphonic manifestations is inscribed in distributional (and institutional) warfare as the substance and tool (or the “*sonic matériel*”, as Daughtry referred to it) with which an involvement in making war is

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<sup>138</sup> LaBelle, *Acoustic Territories*, 19.

imagined and practiced. Zhadan sought to create a space of experience in which sound exerted a de-realizing influence on the scene that showed and proved the rule of war, violence, and the belliphonic. Underground became more than architecture and a place where performance took place, it turned into a way of relating to what was above, one's open response to the ruling hegemony of war that rendered life unliveable. Both a hideout and a showing, it signified itself in a paradox. The performance was part of this conflicting engagement, sounding inward to comfort and sounding outward to upset, in the act to constrain war and urge its fallout.

It arrogated to itself a mission in which sound was the *matériel* with which the agenda of introducing alterity into the familiar environment was pursued. The concert as insurgent operation worked toward suspending the capture of a contained world that all things "war" came to construct, opening up onto the uncontained, the unregulated, and the newly possible, which a space of contestation it created could foster. Zhadan's sung poetry was conducive to making its content a context of experience, pushing the boundaries of the real and provoking one into a sense of complication, which I found myself probing in listening as mentioned earlier in this text. It cued attention to the intent of the mission, delivering proof of an inventive withdrawal from one's habituality into a performed actuality to which those who listened claimed a "fragment" of peacetime. Staying true to the task of care that sound was taken up to perform, the concert pertained to a relief effort delivered to the struggling community, while also extending the scope of Zhadan's project in the ATO to a situated disruption with consequences to the aboveground politics.

## The “war” on capital: Medvedev’s repertoire of confrontations

I first came across the work of Kirill Medvedev as a reader not a listener. It was in the early 2000s when his poetry started to circulate online and be archived in web-based anthologies like Vavilon.ru.<sup>139</sup> I found his texts to be reflective of a deepening crisis of Russian life. They read as a chronicle of the poet’s encounters with social and political regression that led to the dark times of “no good”.<sup>140</sup> Exposing Medvedev’s distrust, frustration, and disappointment at the world, they were marked by personal anguish and revolutionary fervour. I saw this early work as a show of concern for the lack of political will that Medvedev sought to confront with a manifesto for self-determination that his first book of poetry strongly resembled. Unsatisfied and nostalgic for revolutionary times, he longed for action. Finding himself estranged from literary community and intelligentsia who he thought were overly disengaged, Medvedev wanted to branch out with a project of social and political participation which would have important consequences for processes of change. He needed a more effective medium than language to intervene. In 2010, he co-founded the folk punk rock band Arkady Kots, which extended intervention to the work of sound.

Named for the proletarian poet and Russian revolutionary Arkady Kots who translated the French workers’ anthem “L’Internationale” into Russian, the band was created to advance the socialist ideal through music and verse. Their repertoire was tailored to the political agenda of the New Left, which Medvedev had been popularizing. It included protest songs written to the lyrics of revolutionary poets and Medvedev’s own

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<sup>139</sup> <http://www.vavilon.ru/texts/medvedev0.html>

<sup>140</sup> I refer here to his first book of poetry entitled “It’s No Good” (*Vse Plokho*) (2000)

adaptations of proletarian music classics. “We want to show that music, poetry and song, can be political”, the group said in an interview, seeing themselves potentially challenging the “conservative-apolitical taste of the masses”. Identifying with a new political force that defined itself against the obligations of a passive and inert citizenry nurtured by the Putin regime, they declared to stir away from the old. Protest music served this purpose. It was comprehensible to casual listeners to which the group wanted to speak: “We want to be known, but popularity for us is not an element of career that leads to commercial success and the life of celebrity, but an instrument of our creative and political instituting as a leftist collective, as well as a mechanism of yielding a real effect on the public, and the society.”<sup>141</sup> Taking the process of creating the protest mood as their goal, the group traveled across Russia to support oppositional initiatives and form a space of political visibility into which the New Left idea could enter. They joined rallies, demonstrations, and mass strikes for causes ranging from censorship and political repression to workers’ rights and freedom, to deforestation and illegal construction, becoming Russia’s important political actors who brought music into their well orchestrated play.

Arkady Kots was produced by a team of amateur musicians who relied more on the political message than their musical skill. Medvedev called it “the worst band in Moscow”, claiming an avant-garde inheritance to the aesthetic inferiority of the project and seeing this inferiority as valuable to his ethics of provocation.<sup>142</sup> “We are bad

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<sup>141</sup> Andrei Rudoi, “‘Pochemu sotsializm?’ Interv’iu s gruppoy ‘Arkady Kots’,” *Vestnik Buri*, 13 April 2016, <http://vestnikburi.com/pochemu-sotsializm-intervyu-s-gruppoy-arkadiy-kots/>

<sup>142</sup> Robert P. Baird, “Kirill Medvedev’s Personable Provocations,” *The New Yorker*, 30 September 2013, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/kirill-medvedevs-personable-provocations>

musicians – we do not make it a secret,” his bandmate Anna Petrovic publicly disclosed, treating the project as an inquiry into the avant-garde possibilities of sound.

Distinguished by a rejection of academism, Arkady Kots was a quest for a “fierce freshness of sound”. Its “ambiguous style, odd harmonies, and peculiar arrangements” created a certain quality of openness to continuous changes, a quality of resistance to stable formalization. She saw in this susceptibility to influences and lures a degree of novelty: “We never know what we’ll get, what we’ll need. It feels as if online”. For her, the project carried an actual anticipation of risk, an influx of the forthcoming upon which one could build a unique affordance. Nikolai Oleinikov who also played in Arkady Kots saw the project as work that was heavily invested in the idea, not the aesthetics. In his view, it was a project of those who had much to say and did not fear to speak it out, even in a rough, underdeveloped way. Sound was more of a necessity to dress up the idea and make it operational, he pointed out. Medvedev too anticipated to overstep the limits of “pure art” with this project, envisioning the work of the group as a response to the existing conditions of life and current ethico-political demands. Arkady Kots practically embraced the battle cry of revolutionary tactics, weaponizing sound for a greater cause. It was reassembled to reclaim and newly radicalize the protest song tradition within which the “anti-bourgeois, proletarian, anti-authoritarian, feminist, etc.” interests were met.<sup>143</sup>

The group juxtaposed themselves to mainstream culture in its pursuit of professionalism, reinvesting both art and activism with nonprofessional ethos. They wrote in a statement: “We do not take on the role of professional artists who claim to be apolitical and pretend

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<sup>143</sup> Elena Fanailova, “Istoriia gruppy ‘Arkady Kots’ na fone istorii protestnogo dvizheniia,” *Radio Svoboda*, 22 July 2012, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/24655402.html>

to make ‘pure art’, whereas they are fully dependent – financially and ideologically – on those in power, on their direct or indirect requests and preferences. Nor are we interested in becoming professional activists and politicians, who are so defined by their activities and fights with the people alike that they become shortsighted, and even alienated from their own humanity.”<sup>144</sup>

The anti-aesthetic and nonprofessional approach that the band advocated worked in favor of their mission, something that their fellow political artists – the actionists of Pussy Riot failed to achieve despite their strikingly similar perspective. It helped the group to establish connection with a wider political audience who sought direct communication rather than aesthetic sophistication or polite professionalism. Due to a particular accessibility and unpretentiousness of their work, Arkady Kots succeeded in taking centre stage without compromising a provocative stance of the avant-garde project, which distinguished their work in the first place.<sup>145</sup> Their performances garnered support with the ordinary populace and cultural elite, holding to the group’s primary agenda to mobilize all segments of society under a unified vision. “Our goal as a collective whose music appeals to the workers of Kaluga as much as to the intellectuals of Moscow is to unite the Russian people in a protest movement and give this movement a social quality and leftwing ideological vector”, they said, imagining an alliance between the working class and intelligentsia, periphery and center. A unifying music of the Russian New Left, as they branded it, was “neither reduced to the leftist subculture nor to

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<sup>144</sup> See their website <http://arkadiykots.ru/poziciya.html>

<sup>145</sup> For Medvedev’s practice that associates with the aesthetic transgressions of the avant-garde, see Bozovic, “Poetry on the Front Line,” where Medvedev’s artistic input is discussed as a total “poetic and political project” of which Arkady Kots is part.

the tradition of Soviet-era revolutionary songs,” but brought anew in the current post-communist conditions marked by Russia’s transition to capitalism.<sup>146</sup>

Arkady Kots played an instrumental role in mobilizing a communal sentiment that united Russians around the political position of progressivism and the New Left. It served the dissemination of Medvedev’s ideological argument that Russia needed a new left-wing force that would carry itself against the neoliberal and pro-Soviet politics characterizing the country’s recent descent into a totalitarian democracy. Painting the failed project of Russian socialism as a defeat of the Russian (Old) Left, Medvedev called for a new manifestation of the left-wing idea in a project that would advance the ideal of state socialism, reimagining and reinventing it in a participatory democracy. In his 2020 opinion piece, he reassessed Russia’s political field, stressing the importance of such an oppositional formation, which, as he pointed out, began to emerge from a shared commitment to egalitarianism, communitarianism, and social liberalism. The need for a new Left project has been felt since the 1990s when left-wing dissidents started to rethink state socialism toward a democratic socialism, he argued. By the mid-2000s, it was even more imperative because the promise of perspective change that an independent left democratic project could deliver was replaced by a project of “managed democracy” to which Russia’s official left-wing parties (corrupt by a conservative right-populist idea) allied. In the early 2010s when the anti-government protest movement gained momentum but was quickly suppressed by the authorities, it was the least favorable moment for the opposition to address socio-economic demands and come out with a socialist program

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<sup>146</sup> Andrei Rudoï, “‘Pochemu sotsializm?’ Interv’iu s gruppoy ‘Arkady Kots’,” *Vestnik Buri*, 13 April 2016, <http://vestnikburi.com/pochemu-sotsializm-intervyu-s-gruppoy-arkadiy-kots/>

because anyone doing so would be seen in solidarity with protestors. “The situation has changed in the last few years,” Medvedev concluded, crediting the translocal politics of social activist initiatives that created the way for social agenda to enter the political. It is in these new circumstances that the force of the Russian New Left started to grow and pressure toward a radical break with capitalism.<sup>147</sup>

Joining the emergent anti-capitalist movement in Russia, Medvedev developed a strong argument for the Russian social democratic state – the welfare state refashioned to the priorities of the Russian society which he thought was ready for a revolutionary and reformist approach. In his view, Russia has enough of accumulated capital, private and state, to draw funds for education, health system, and other public services, which had been absorbed into market economy but could be fully subsidized. And it is in the hands of the Russian people to push the country down this socialist path. If grassroots groups continue to press for social action, there is a real chance that the fight driven by egalitarian ideals may lend itself to a social democratic future, one that is different from Russia’s communist past and undemocratic present. Any movement at the heart of local communities counts.<sup>148</sup> Medvedev envisioned this process of forging an alternative to the Soviet authoritarian socialism and post-Soviet authoritarian neoliberalism as a project of “progressive patriotism” – a collective thinking and acting in a leftward direction toward an egalitarian world. Together with Oleg Zhuravlyov, his bandmate from Arkady Kots, he wrote an essay outlining the urgency of this new patriotic engagement. Locating the

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<sup>147</sup> Kirill Medvedev, “What’s Behind Russia’s Left-wing Turn?” *openDemocracy*, 12 March 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/social-democracy-russia-kirill-medvedev/>

<sup>148</sup> Kirill Medvedev, “O sotsial’nom gosudarstve, reformizme i revolutsii,” *Anticapitalist.ru*, 24 December 2019, <http://anticapitalist.ru/2019/12/24/кирилл-медведев-о-социальном-государ/>

presence of “patriotic ethics” in the progressive forms of collective action to which the New Left idea became organic, the authors pointed to the rise of anti-capitalist sentiment among Russians. The 2011-2012 protests played a crucial role in aiding a leftward swing, shifting the critique of the Putin regime from the case of dictatorship to the case of oligarchy that seized power and national capital. This gave a new orientation to collective action, pushing it toward an explicitly anti-capitalist stand. In the recent years, Russia saw the inspiring waves of local and municipal activism, which marked the beginnings of what Medvedev and Zhuravlyov called the “formation of a new patriotic project of local community with a greater degree of autonomy and inclusion”. It is in this project of local alliances that they discovered a new possibility for reclaiming the Left from the defeat it had suffered and taking the direct offensive against capitalism.<sup>149</sup>

Medvedev’s ideological standing inspired a larger practical project – a community support campaign within which Arkady Kots became operational. His 2019 trip to Shiyes was part of this endeavor fueled with social, political, and environmental concerns. The campaign was infused with militant meaning, launching as a battle with the ruling regime and progressing into what resembled the New Left’s “war” on capital. In the beginning of it, Medvedev was focused on the goals of anti-Putin activism, seeking to confront the regime. Arkady Kots joined the 2011-2013 Bolotnaia rallies and became involved in the Pussy Riot solidarity demonstration outside a Moscow court in the course of which Medvedev and other band members were detained.<sup>150</sup> The intention was to show that

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<sup>149</sup> Kirill Medvedev, Oleg Zhuravlev, “Novyi patriotizm – novaiia oppozitsiia? Nabludeniiia sleva,” *Colta.ru*, 10 February 2020, <https://www.colta.ru/articles/society/23550-kirill-medvedev-i-oleg-zhuravlev-o-progressivnom-patriotizme>

<sup>150</sup> Sergei Chernov, “Arkady Kots: Riot Folk From Moscow,” *The Moscow Times*, 31 July 2013, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/07/31/arkady-kots-riot-folk-from-moscow-a26351>

people could fight back: remove Putin from power and elect the opposition along which they stood.<sup>151</sup> Following the crackdown of the protests, the campaign took an anti-capitalist stance. Medvedev became more equipped with the New Left idea, aspiring to make it work in the Russian context. Arkady Kots went on to support the workers' movement, playing in the Khimki truckers' camp and joining the warehouse workers' strike, among other similar gatherings shaped by the ethos of proletarian struggle.<sup>152</sup> Medvedev stayed inspired by the surge of proletarian dissent that was gaining traction, seeking to give more to the growth of the movement.

His trip to Shiyes was certainly overshadowed by desire for a newly patriotic community-wide leftward-veering action that he envisioned as a Russian revolt in the name of a just post-capitalist future. It adopted a militant posture against Russia's capitalist imperium, where domination by state power and capital led to societal paralysis, the crisis of center and periphery, and extensive environmental breakdown. Medvedev hoped to raise a promise of widespread solidarity, which could bring Russians closer to an exit from Putinism and robber capitalism in which they found themselves living. Summoning a fight over Shiyes, he wrote with the prospect of collective insurrection: "The atmosphere in Shiyes is gloomy, landfill lobby lends its position to a violent conflict. Rosgvardiia (the Russian National Guard) took control of the resisting

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<sup>151</sup> See, for instance, Medvedev's sharing a stage with the opposition leader Boris Nemtsov during the 2013 rally on Moscow's Bolotnaia Square: "Steny rukhnut," *Radio Svoboda*, video published on 7 May 2013, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xe\\_6H2da400](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xe_6H2da400)

<sup>152</sup> Sean Guillory, "Kirill Medvedev: Let's Not View Each Other as Wretched Sovoks and Obnoxious Kreakls," *The SRB Podcast*, 18 January 2016, <https://srbpodcast.org/2016/01/18/kirill-medvedev-lets-not-view-each-other-as-wretched-sovoks-and-obnoxious-kreakls/>; For chronicle of the warehouse strike see "Na avtoskladakh 'PDK' pod Moskvoy v polnoch nachalas zabastovka," 10 December 2015, *Unionstoday.ru*, <http://www.unionstoday.ru/news/ktr/2015/12/10/21275>

village of Urdoma, one that is closest to Shiyes. They detained protestors’ wagon at Pereprava checkpoint, where we were twice this summer, where defenders fed us and sang with us... Activists are calling for mass mobilization. Spread the news, everyone must know about Shiyes, it is our war and our frontline.”<sup>153</sup>

I read these words like I did his prosaic poetry – as a chronicle of life ruptured by crisis, despair, and continued survival under the unfolding “war”. It isn’t war as one knows it, but war as one battles it, hostile and uncompromising. There seemed to be no “peaceful break with capitalism”, Medvedev once proclaimed, assuming the position of the warrior.<sup>154</sup> Shiyes for him was so much more than a cause worth fighting for – it was a step towards an end of the endgame into which his country entered, descending into the dark times of its political turmoil, criminal lawlessness, economic disparity, and environmental destruction.

### **Understanding the Shiyes crisis**

In the summer of 2018, local hunters discovered a covert construction site near a small village of Urdoma in the Arkhangelsk region of Russia.<sup>155</sup> Inquiring further, they learnt that authorities were building a massive landfill where more than ten million tons of

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<sup>153</sup> Kirill Medvedev *Facebook* post, 30 October 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/kirill.medvedev.7/posts/2517976184956089>

<sup>154</sup> On his disillusionment with a peaceful approach, see here: Kirill Medvedev, “What’s Behind Russia’s Left-wing Turn?” *openDemocracy*, 12 March 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/social-democracy-russia-kirill-medvedev/>

<sup>155</sup> Yelena Solovyova, “Protests in Shiyes: How a Garbage Dump Galvanized Russia’s Civil Society,” *The Moscow Times*, 6 July 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/07/06/protests-shiyes-how-garbage-dump-galvanized-russias-civil-society-a66289>

garbage from central Russia would be disposed in the next twenty years.<sup>156</sup> The investors who came from Moscow and were backed by the Kremlin told the locals that the construction project was a waste management facility “EcoTekhnoPark” where garbage would be sorted, processed, and recycled. However, it was later confirmed that the project was nothing else but an open landfill where often hazardous waste would be dumped and left to decompose.<sup>157</sup>

The construction spurred large protests and was strongly opposed by a team of Russian scientists who saw major risks in undertaking the project. There were numerous deviations from national and international standards – scientists argued, condemning the authorities for noncompliance with requirements to move into deeper depths the residues that could not be utilized. Leaving the unsorted waste to decay would lead to the formation of toxic gases which would be released into the atmosphere in the next fifty years. The team deplored the lack of assessment on the part of the government, seeing the project as a catastrophic threat to local ecologies and populations. A large-scale deforestation associated with the project would be ruinous, resulting in increased levels of precipitation and leading to major ecosystem imbalances, more so the landfill itself would be a major source of pollution circulating through the air, groundwater, soil, and food chain. The site was a flood-prone area that served the locals as a reservoir of water

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<sup>156</sup> “Russia’s Waste Management Crisis in Spotlight Again after Protest,” *Russia Business Today*, 4 June 2019, <https://russiabusinesstoday.com/environment/russias-waste-management-crisis-in-spotlight-again-after-protest/>

<sup>157</sup> “Na poligone v Shiiese ne budet pererabotki otkhodov,” *Sever.Realii*, 28 September 2019, <https://www.severreal.org/a/30188479.html>

supply, the team also stated, urging the government to reassess considerable dangers of building a landfill directly there where drinking water was collected.<sup>158</sup>

While scientists sought to provide a comprehensive analysis of ecological situation, protestors battled with regional police and contractors over the construction site. They set up the Shiyeys Watch camp where they lodged to protest until their demands to stop construction work were met. The authorities however continued the work, clearing more forest and pushing the protestors away with a four-meter-high wall that contractors built to protect the site. The protestors in turn took to the old logging roads to impede transportation of equipment, which then led to a more violent confrontation.<sup>159</sup> In the course of clashes with police, many were detained and prosecuted, which prompted some activists to come to Moscow to lay out their plea and defense statement.<sup>160</sup>

The Shiyeys crisis galvanized public outrage against the authorities, giving rise to Russia's large anti-landfill movement. From the Shiyeys camp, protests spread regionally into the Komi republic and neighbouring Arkhangelsk province, soon reaching major cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg.<sup>161</sup> The movement was laid over with the anti-

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<sup>158</sup> See recording (in Russian) of a round table organized by the regional heritage foundation [fond sokhraneniia kul'turnogo nasledii], where a national team of scientists discuss the risks of construction: "Shiyeys: 'Posledstviia ekspluatatsii poligona dlia zakhroneniia othodov'," *Sotavision*, video published on 21 November 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryar8swtD0Q&feature=youtu.be>

<sup>159</sup> Charles Maynes, "Locals Protest Construction of Russia's Massive Landfill," *VoA*, 18 September 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/locals-protest-construction-russias-massive-landfill>

<sup>160</sup> "Zashchita Shiyesa. Aresty, shtrafy, ugovnyye dela," *Radio Svoboda*, video published on 24 June 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hxrQ5m46fk>

<sup>161</sup> Russia's Anti-Landfill Movement Marks 1 Year with Mass Protests," *The Moscow Times*, 9 December 2019, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/12/09/russias-anti-landfill-movement-marks-1-year-with-mass-protests-a68524>

Putin, anti-colonial, and anti-capitalist sentiments, which marked a growing alienation from the ruling regime and lent to expressions of social, environmental, and indigenous solidarity. The landfill project was seen by local populations as a manifestation of Moscow's colonial control over Russia's northeastern periphery where both settler and indigenous communities had long experienced economic and political domination by the federal center.

Shiyes lies on the border with the Komi republic, a territory populated predominantly by the indigenous Komi people who claim their collective right to the land of ancestors. The Komi perceived Moscow's landfill construction in their pristine forest landscape as an insult, joining together with other oppositional groups in an openly anti-Moscow stance.<sup>162</sup> Their protest was led by the anti-colonial effort, as much as by environmental concern, exposing the long-standing tensions between the indigenous community and Moscow's historical authority.<sup>163</sup> It built from the Komi experience of Russia's imperial politics dating back to the tsarist era when the colonial regime was imposed by military force and punitive raids; and then to the Soviet period when practices of violent assimilation, russification, and cultural dispossession continued; and, finally, to the Putin era when highly centralized authoritarian policies were imposed to enforce russification and strengthen control over the Indigenous territories, their resources, revenues, and cultural capital.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> "Eto zemlia nashikh predkov – oni stoiat i smotriat na nas," *Meduza*, 12 December 2019, <https://meduza.io/feature/2019/12/12/eto-zemlya-nashih-predkov-oni-stoyat-i-smotryat-na-nas>

<sup>163</sup> RFE/RL's Russian Service, "Thousands Rally In Russia's Komi Republic Against New Landfill," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 3 June 2019, <https://www.rferl.org/a/thousands-rally-in-russia-s-komi-republic-against-new-landfill/29978612.html>

<sup>164</sup> For a historical overview, see Diatchkova, "Indigenous Peoples of Russia"; and for more

The Shiyes crisis unmasked Russia's colonial, ecocidal, and capitalocentric logics and exposed deeper resentments about Moscow's centralized power and predatory politics. The construction project was seen by the protestors as a site of stark abuse, yet another violating gesture by which the central authorities had demonstrated their way of conquest, subjecting peripheral territories to resource exploitation and environmental violence. Producing mass feelings of injustice, it summoned insurrectionary fervor containing unsympathetic tone toward capitalism, which then amplified the ideological position of the Left among the protestors and invited the rhetoric of proletarian struggle.<sup>165</sup> Local communists and Marxists stood in solidarity with Indigenous and environmental activists, holding in common a history of the Russian periphery that was full of traumas and injustices.<sup>166</sup> Carried by a promise of egalitarian principles and socialist collectivism, the protests became a movement for environmental sustainability and social justice, responding directly to the crisis of capitalist system in Russia.

### **Getting involved: the songwork**

I sometimes read *The Russian Reader*, a blog by fellow academic who is well versed in contemporary issues and Russian politics. In the 2019 post on the protestors' "siege" of

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recent tensions and actions of resistance, see Tatiana Britskaia, "Iz nas delayut edinyi sovetskii narod," *Novaia Gazeta*, 21 December 2017, <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/12/21/74992-iz-nas-delayut-edinyy-sovetskiy-narod>;

<sup>165</sup> Artyom Sandakov, "Russia: Shiyes Environmental Protests – A Shining Example of Workers' Solidarity," *In Defence of Marxism*, 21 August 2019, <https://www.marxist.com/russia-shiyes-ecological-protests-a-shining-example-of-workers-solidarity.htm>

<sup>166</sup> "This is the Land of Our Ancestors': How Plans to Put Moscow's Trash in the Komi Republic's Taiga United Environmental, Indigenous, and Communist Activists into a New Opposition Movement," *Meduza*, 8 January 2020, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2020/01/09/this-is-the-land-of-our-ancestors>

Shiyeys, they wrote: “On the eve of the siege, the vocalists from the group Arkady Kots, composers of the song “The Walls,” which has been adopted as the protest camp’s anthem, travelled to Shiyeys to boost their [protesters’] morale.” The post, which is a translation of Russian-language opinion pieces, delivers a statement that Russians did not sway away from protesting despite a high “cost of solidarity” that many had to pay, losing their job, or else their freedom. Arkady Kots lent support and sympathy to the Shiyeys resistance movement, countering the sustained efforts of the authorities to erode morale among the protestors by threatening them with penalizing measures.<sup>167</sup> While I agree with what I am reading, I cannot stop imagining beyond the effect of enthusiasm that Medvedev’s music project dramatically expressed with the protestors.

“The Walls” by which Arkady Kots figured themselves in discord with Russia’s political regime, first during the 2011-2013 protest rallies and then during the 2018-2019 Shiyeys riots, was indeed an anthem of solidarity that transcended boundaries of locality and was performed by protestors across Russia. It was Medvedev’s original arrangement of the famous 1968 Catalan protest song “L’Estaca,” which was remade into “Mury” by Polish songwriter Jacek Kaczmarski in 1978 and became popular with the Polish Solidarity movement in the 1980s. Historically, the song embraced the mood and spirit of revolt, both in the context of the Catalan struggles for autonomy and the Polish movement toward a democratic governance. It became a perfect practical complement of Medvedev’s ideological elaborations of a new social-democratic revolution in Russia, delivering powerful energies to agitate, mobilize, and drive regional insurgencies against the authoritarian center. During the Shiyeys crisis, the song was quickly appropriated by

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<sup>167</sup> The Russian Reader, “Shiyeys: The Cost of Solidarity,” 2 November 2019, <https://therussianreader.com/2019/11/02/shiyeys/>

the larger Shiyes community, becoming choreographed to different protest situations either in its original or renewed form.<sup>168</sup> As Arkady Kots turned politically and musically invested in the 2020-2021 Belarusian protest movement against Lukashenko's dictatorship, Medvedev's arrangement of "The Walls" found resonance with the Belarusian people too who started to creatively appropriate it.<sup>169</sup> Shaped and reshaped through protests and communities, the song, from its initial Catalan version to Polish and Russian adaptations, brought people together under the spell of confrontation with the ruling regimes. Its performances formed a particular constellation of sonic contributions through which one could learn of shared struggles and desires, concerns and ambitions, cries and joys of becoming-revolutionary.

In the case of Shiyes, the song definitely did its part in maintaining high morale and keeping the protest going, adding to the intensity and geographical expanse of it. Its disruptive role, in this sense, was to produce and keep enthusiasm of the collective body that was beginning to emerge in its sonorous space. In other words, it acted as a catalyst of what had been already induced with the crowds and goals in play. There was a different plane of disruption to which I also want to attend, seeking to think not so much of techniques by which the song was made to serve the political purpose of the leftist

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<sup>168</sup> See, for instance, a choral dance performance: "'Steny rukhnut, rukhnut, rukhnut...' – Shiyes tantsuet i poyot!" *Activatica*, 17 November 2019, <https://activatica.org/blogs/view/id/8549/title/steny-ruhnut-ruhnut-shies-segodnya-tancuet-i-pojot>

<sup>169</sup> On Arkady Kots' recent engagement with the Belarusian protest movement, see *The Russian Reader*, "Arkady Kots: We Will Have to Fight for the Future," 30 December 2020, <https://therussianreader.com/2020/12/30/arkady-kots-belarusian-collection/>; also see, for instance, a video of Medvedev's arrangement of the song being performed by a group of Belarusian musicians in a Minsk underpass. "Militsia podoshla k muzykantam, katorie ispolnili v perekhode 'Steny rukhnut'," *Zerkalo*, video published on 26 September 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ts8kV6jnUWo>

idea, nationwide revolution, or social struggles, but more of ethical doings by which it was implicated in the ecological crisis and obligated to a future outcome for the life of the region. Its involved participation poses a question of what sort of encounter there could be proposed through the actual work of singing and sounding that maintained not only the production of protest space but also the very possibility of forming an ecological relation through which one could respond to the immediate needs of a situation that put humanity to the test.

I listen to the murmur of the song, not the song. The song is over loaded with strong words that steer me to think what they tell me instead of what I hear through them, the movement of their performing. What I wrote so far was a tuning effort, me tuning in to what was in the process of happening, an organized participation, social, political, and sonic. Now I am in, grasping it in listening, across the voices, in the plurality of soundings and their possibilities, from a plane view into a blind spot, adventuring through evidences of sound that are much more than folk riot music to which they are ordered to hold. A poet with a guitar, standing before the protesting crowds that join him in singing, looking up to him leading the way. I know where he is leading, it feels like I've been to his poetry enough to navigate its course through meanings and breaks, contours and accents by which it takes its form. A rebellion. A fight. What else, a war: of words, of sounds, of beliefs. Whose life is on the line, I ask myself. The poet fights for "them", the people, their land, their forest, their drinking water too. If he leaves it unspoken, we won't make our way to hear it, to dive deeper into it, in effort that may be joined by others, in effort connecting us all to the breath behind every utterance and every moving whisper. "Whisper" is my secret word. Paradoxically, the song I hear is the opposite of

the whisper. It is as loud as it can possibly be. It cascades outward. It cries out. In Shiyes, on Bolotnaya Square, at the heart of the Khimki forest, in the pedestrian underpass somewhere in Belarus heavily hit by Lukashenko's purges. It pops here and there, it springs everywhere, growing its gesture, its pressure, bending to its will it thrives, it overthrows. Its whisper is not what I imagined a whisper to be, a glimmer that could hardly qualify to be a sound, an undertone that faints and drops, out. Its whisper is what feels like a passionate intrusion, one that cannot be suppressed for it keeps itself moving, enlivening what is thrown at it, into the stirring power of growing sonority.

"The Walls" in Russian, "Mury" in Polish. The title fits into expectations of what the song is meant to accomplish, in breaking with the continuity of things, in starting from a new point. "These walls should never have been here!" Medvedev sings, conjuring them to "crumble, crumble, crumble" in a greater effort of collective rupture and transformation. He comes in sound and force, setting the Shiyes Watch camp to a stage, opening the ear to the surroundings, to more than there is a song. Beyond content, beyond concert, beyond the verifiable reality. I hear the cry, but I do not (actually) hear it as an acoustical identity. The cry that appears to me is not a vocalization that I anticipate the cry, the crying to be. It is made up of more than what has taken form or precipitated a tone, of more than what I recognize as the song of which I write. This cry comes from elsewhere, I conclude, from other than a mouth that performs the voice, the identity, the poet. It is bigger than what is given to me in this moment of listening. I've learnt of the Shiyes crisis from this cry, the cry that keeps whispering itself across the lips, the lives, at the in-between of depths from where the other's being emerges. The forest they fight to save, the land they care to preserve, the waters they mean to keep clean. The whisper of

their effort lends itself to the situation. They've won, it reads across the headlines.<sup>170</sup> I hear it, the closure of the project was announced. I hear it as a fact, and as consequence that brings with it a celebration of life in the community. From the intensity of sound to an extensity that makes explicit the going of life, I hear it as a rescue mission.

The mission, I come to imagine, the "giving" of it, is part of the entangled knots of relations involving things, beings, forces, and entities, all of which are engaged in the collective enactment of togetherness within which the need of care is deeply felt. The song, the whisper, the share of it, assumes an ecological perception of being implicated, of detecting oneself among others assembled in the making, of difference that the poet inspired to orchestrate. The acting of the song, the working of the whisper, lays claim to a form of reciprocity from which a contractual obligation towards the life of the region is drawn.

I want to give attention to this relational arrangement within which the doing of sound takes meaning and value in a situation that runs its course in the direction of environmental destruction. The song, the workings of it, presupposed a certain reciprocal agreement that defined the terms of obligation and alliance, creating the space of alterity from which a passage to a symbiotic partnership with the living world could be imagined.

In his seminal book, *The Natural Contract*, Michel Serres urges a rethinking of Nature toward a legal subject that must be recognized for its rights. In arguing for a new

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<sup>170</sup> The Russian Reader, "Total Victory for Protesters in Shiyes," 14 June 2020, <https://therussianreader.com/2020/06/14/shiyes-2/>; "Russian Court Rules to Demolish Controversial Landfill," *The Moscow Times*, 9 January 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/01/09/russiancourt-rules-to-demolish-controversial-landfill-construction-a68847>; "Sud vstal na storonu aktivistov Shiyesa v dele protiv 'Tekhnoparka'," *Activatica*, 9 January 2020, <http://activatica.org/blogs/view/id/9032/title/sud-vstal-na-storonu-aktivistov-shiyesa-v-deleprotiv-tehnoparka>

type of contract that is needed in the current circumstances of environmental rights abuses driven by the exploitation of natures and corruption of the global systems, he calls for an ecological relationship to the “worldly world”, one that is defined by deepened entanglements and interdependencies.<sup>171</sup> The “worldly habitat” in which we live needs more than a scientific sense, it needs a legal alliance within which a relationship of symbiosis and reciprocity is nurtured in lieu of mastery and possession. Acting as “tectonic plates” that set the world to a cataclysmic transformation, human beings put themselves on a path of war, failing to foresee the scope of destruction and consequences of their own defeat. “Achilles, king of war, struggles against a swelling river. Strange, mad battle!” Serres deplors it, exposing humanity’s vulnerability. (2) He urges us to “institute a lasting truce” by entering into a natural contract that recognizes the rights of our “host” and the need for an ethic of care and responsibility. Behaving like parasites who sustain themselves at the expense of the host, we come into a conflictual relation with our surroundings, a situation of dangerous imbalance (“abusive disequilibrium”) that holds the risk of collective “extinction”. Once the host is dead, the parasite falls prey to it, Serres warns, seeing a new contractual quest for symbiosis as a way out of dire plight. (33-36) Stop all hostilities toward the living other, “the things of the world” to which we are bound, he proclaims, anticipating a peaceful ending of the lasting war. He writes: “We must decide on peace among ourselves to protect the world, and peace with the world to protect ourselves.” (25)

But there might not be a peaceful walkout, Serres goes on to suggest, writing with activist purpose to draw out into a long struggle ahead of us. The path to peace is

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<sup>171</sup> Serres, *The Natural Contract*, 16.

collectively forged down the thorns of revolutionary actions to which he as philosopher has joined. There must be the “guardians of the Earth, of humanity, and of things themselves” whose actions may speak for those who cannot deliver their say. There must be a practice of patience, a long-term promise to keep the fight over the rights of “all the others” going despite the price at which a guarantee of safeguarding the global natures is obtained. There must be an obligation of care through which a symbiotic art of living performs its political role in holding us to the law of “equilibrium” upon which our future is predicted. (30-46) In other words, there must be a radical movement through which to orchestrate a downfall of humanist thinking and give rise to a posthumanist ethic of living under the terms of natural contract. “Each of the partners in symbiosis thus owes, by rights, life to the other, on pain of death,” as Serres puts it, presuming a contract through which “the Earth speaks to us” as the nonhuman other. (39)

I read Serres’s assertion about reciprocal agreement as an acknowledgement of participation by which we abide the rules of the natural contract with our individual engagements and collective actions. How one acts marks out an open field of practices and involvements within which a response to the current crisis operates. In the Shiyes case, the working of the song afforded a particular orchestration of reciprocity that was collectively shared and mobilized by engaging with the commitment of symbiosis of which Serres speaks in his philosophical text. The natural contract, in my reading of Serres, is a needed measure to gain passage into a space of conversation, one where “the things of the world speak” in the voice of forces, processes, and interactions from which we can decipher and attend to their needs without descending into “the violent explosions of conflicts”. The Shiyes crisis rendered this measure thinkable through the project of

sound that provided the human community with the tools of effective intervention addressed to local experiences specifically and global risks more generally. The project of the songwork, as I want to refer to the operative distinction of it, exceeded its activist purpose of exposing the ideological justification of one's being on war terms with capitalism, something that Medvedev's ethico-political and ethico-aesthetic engagement with the song entailed. It worked to yield access to the lived situation of care relations to which every move of collective coming into the "worldly world" of the natural contract was assembled. The songwork, both as ecological procedure and political affair, was permeated by worries about the fate of the region facing the environmental emergency and collective decisions to respond. It was contractually partnered and materially conditioned to lend the effects of its action beyond the bounds of enthusiasm, to a real lifesaving mission of which the doing of sound was vital part.

In his study of eco-activist art projects that engage with today's environmental crisis, T. J. Demos elaborates the idea that a justice-seeking action to which art joins is essentially an engagement in a contractual manner (in the Serresian sense of it) which extends our attempt to "decolonize nature" to the disruptive power of artwork. Nature, "colonized in concept as well as in practice", is reduced to an "objectified, passive, and separate" nonhuman world within which we humans learn to operate through the scope of our scientific, technological, military, and legal projects.<sup>172</sup> Art, in this regard, emerges as an alternative project through which we can affirm our ties and alliances with other things and beings in forming ethical obligations that do not start from the politics of the host and the parasite. Following Serres, Demos envisions a political future of the natural

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<sup>172</sup> Demos, *Decolonizing Nature*, 12-14.

contract as that bound to the emancipatory and egalitarian imperative of ending the “war on nature” and engaging in a new imaginary of post-anthropocentric legality. The making of it involves collaborative efforts, the total artwork of which is what we may witness in real time as a process of growing an indigenous-like awareness of a place and the planet we live. (7-29; 259-272) The realization of Serresian proposition may in fact begin with a mode of artistic action capable of directly addressing environmental justice concerns. For Demos, these concerns do not necessarily owe to “human activities” but to capitalist political forces behind the corporate-state complex. Locating the cause of destructive environmental transformation in the violence of capitalism, Demos presents a critique of the Anthropocene thesis holding capitalism, rather than humanity, responsible for catastrophic environmental breakdown.<sup>173</sup> Making an argument against the discourse of the Anthropocene, he also takes a strong stance against the discourse of disaster that serves the exploitative interests. The troubling anesthetization of violence, which we see with disaster art projects that visualize scenes of environmental harm, does not import decolonial concerns (of the natural contract) but dramatizes “in spectacular fashion” the act of mastery. (60-70) In turn, the dissenting attempts at disruption of violence, which have been underway with justice-centered art projects, enable a new transformative politics aligned with the contractual undertaking to mend the broken bond between the planet and humanity. (103-109) In his careful survey of such attempts, Demos goes on to argue for an artistic share of the remedial process, which carries those seeds of change we desperately need to grow.

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<sup>173</sup> Demos, *Against the Anthropocene*, 7-22.

My thinking about sonic intervention into the Shiyes crisis owes a great deal to the idea of artwork as mobilization which Demos' work essentially develops, examining how art projects create and solicit a greater response to contemporary environmental crises. The working of the collective artwork to which these projects assemble can be seen as a site of interaction that allows the flow of conversation, the "speaking" through which the other is heard, in Serresian terms. Demos actually uses the term "the artwork-as-mass-mobilization" when he discusses the Climate Games project, a transnational eco-activist intervention which mobilizes around the motto "We are nature defending itself." (106-107) The "artwork" in this case is more than a performance of disruption to which Demos attributes a neo-Brechtian and neo-Boalian quality. It is also a mode of being in relation by entering into a contract of reciprocal immanence (if "we are nature defending itself", then nature is us), which comes in effect in real time. The artwork is working its way into global activist struggles, while also lending its action directly to the field. Its life-saving benefits might not be immediately apparent but eventually proven in the conditions of alterity the work worked to create, revoking a social license of disaster projects, both potential and currently underway.

The songwork, of which I think as process of the song's working and song becoming (art)work, can be grasped through its far-reaching effects for the Shiyes area. It held a promise of alliance with the world as a place to live and with the place as a world of its own, mobilizing on a sense of kinship and indebtedness, and concluding to an act of effective intervening to which care was compelled by the need to defend and be defended. In its situated specificity and worldwide space, it became a life-urging mission reclaimed to the worldly presence of the sounding voice. Gathering on the rebellious

energies, the songwork delivered front-line service in a battle situation one hoped to have favorable political and ecological outcomes.

### **The making of liveable worlds**

It is a matter of activism to foster concerns – and it is a matter of care to be involved in concerns. In this chapter, I have attended to these matters of political participation through a study of two “sonic missions” to the frontline conflict zones, the warzone in eastern Ukraine and the combat-like Shiyes Watch camp zone in northern Russia. Joining an ideological affair to an ecological engagement, both missions took the form of a rescue operation catering to the needs of a place shaken by the violence of war or environmental crimes. I have explored this operation as a life support project the aim of which is to seek alterity to the unliveable conditions through a performative and practical making of a liveable world.

Referring to the process of making, as well as unmaking and remaking, of the world through sonic participation, I think with a posthumanist critique of care which delivers a speculative deliberation on the all-pervasive circulation of care in interdependent material more than human worlds. Rethinking the world as a terrain of encounters that is multi-layered and infinitely complex, this new critical approach to care offers a more encompassing understanding of relational ecologies within which webs of “thick” and “impure” connections are formed. I was led to explore the work of sound through the question of the carer to speculate upon a possibility of this ethics of entanglements that makes room for a sonic body to enter the world ecologically, materially and relationally, impacting and holding consequences for collectively shared spaces where it operates. In her book on care to which this chapter is indebted, Maria

Puig de la Bellacasa speaks of care as a force that operates worldly transformations acting upon the proximal and distant “others”. Care, in her elaboration of it, is a kind of invisible cement that holds the world(s) together in a complex relational assemblage of assemblages. It enters into the field of action with a force of material expression, contributing to the mattering of the world that is always becoming.<sup>174</sup>

I extend Puig de la Bellacasa’s definition of care to the situated sonic missions which I discuss in view of their life-giving consequences. I position Zhadan’s performance in the ATO against the belliphonic scope of sound, attending to its disruption of war process and its making a difference in experience. I examine its break with the problematic assumption of the war/peace binary and reductive conception of peace as the condition in which violence is eliminated. Following from Zhadan’s activist concern with the impossibility of peace and Balibar’s philosophical account of this impossibility, I argue for a sonic format of confrontation which Zhadan’s project developed. Defining the mission in acoustemological and ethical terms as a constructive working relation with the living world, I juxtapose it to a destructive charge of weaponized sounds through which violence is operated. I then refer to the process of unmaking the war world, which the sonic making of peacetime essentially resembles, as a constructive experiment in creating the liveable conditions through inhabitable sonic fragments of peaceful life. Seeking the awareness of this productively disruptive promise of sound that Zhadan’s sonic mission held, I conceive of the mission’s ethical doing as a caring endeavour. In a shared situation of frontline operated by an imminent threat of

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<sup>174</sup> Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 1-24.

violence, the mission pertained to a relief effort, taking on a vital dimension in the circumstances ordered by an oppressive urge.

In attempting to expand the inquiry into the caring work of sound, I've moved to the scene of Medvedev's mission in the Shiyes Watch camp and, more broadly, in the Shiyes crisis. I discuss the political project of this mission within and beyond its ideological frame, exploring how it enters a space of anticapitalist struggles while also putting itself into a relational arrangement with the ecological world. I delve further into how it is implicated in the collective response to the situation of environmental violence and how it is obligated to the continuation of life that is threatened by a disastrous outcome. I come to imagine the mission in its operative procedure of the songwork from which it can forge a contractual relationship to the living world, essentially making (possible) its living by determining its fate. I put the fate of the Shiyes region at the centre of my thinking of what else the song can do in its ecological undertaking which lends itself to environmental ecology. The rescuing of life, the giving to the fate, the making of the giving become politically operational possibilities of the songwork's working its way into the world, for the world, reciprocally in response to what the world speaks itself to urge. I grasp the evidence of this reciprocity in listening to what feels like a moving whisper, the whisper of the effort to save what has been left to a violent force of the colonial capitalist project which the Shiyes landfill construction turned out to be.

In grouping the two missions together, I think from an actual threat event around which they are orchestrated, a threat to life and the collective living of it. A threat event, in my understanding of it, is an event of manifestation of the imperial, colonial, and capitalist violence to which both the 2014 war in the Donbas and Luhansk regions of

Ukraine and the Shiyes crisis in Russia were born. It is an event of appearing that yields to a damage, destruction, and harm; an event of a careless tone toward the world. The missions that I study are positioned against this destructive showing, being examined for a constructive purpose and productive effort of the vital doing from which life can derive its chance.

## The Magician

And of course the DJ is often regarded as a shaman or dark magus.

Reynolds, *Generation Ecstasy*

Sound is the basic means for the transformation of the magical will.

Dane Rudhyar, *The Magic of Tone and the Art of Music Shambhala*

### Introduction: Shamanic sounds

On 14 September 2018, hundreds of electronic music devotees travelled to Moynaq, an abandoned fishing port in Uzbekistan, to have rave experience of their lifetime on the desiccated seafloor of the Aral Sea. A group of DJs set up a stage right in the desert, welcoming guests to Moynaq's first techno fest called Stihia (Force of Nature).<sup>175</sup> Locals and travelers joined the event, scattering across the dancefloor that bore witness to a major environmental disaster of the late twentieth century. A ten-hour long show was a unique fusion of activist performance and shamanic ritual shaped by an attempt to "revive" the dying Sea, both in functional and fictional ways. The organizers wanted the festival to be part of a larger rehabilitation project invested in environmental and historical justice, and economic revival of the region, while also extending the scope of political participation to a therapeutic possibility of sound.

Taking the role of local shamans who could summon the clouds and bring the rain, DJs streamed sound into the seabed, both invoking and evoking the Aral's return.

The performance pertained to shamanic invocation, seeking a sonic imagination of the

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<sup>175</sup> See the 2018 promo video "STIHIA Promo Video", *KEBATO*, video published on 15 August 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-Ekr3ePt\\_g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-Ekr3ePt_g); and the 2018 promotional video "STIHIA 2018 Aftermovie", *Faculty Acoustics*, video published on 15 May 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SaMVMwf\\_-6A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SaMVMwf_-6A)

lost Sea. DJs “pumped out” sound like water, investing in the experience of a healing “sound storm”, something that appeared at odds with the traumatic scenes of toxic dust storms to which local life was bound. Locals were bemused by the whole performance which held out a promise of the Aral’s return to the community that lost hope in seeing the Sea ever again. Young and elderly joined the jamboree, for the first time experiencing a sheer force of electronic sound that they had never encountered before.

Electronic music was banned in Uzbekistan by the Karimov regime whose oppressive cultural policies brought the country’s art scene to a long period of isolation. Uzbek DJs were pushed underground, performing mainly in their own apartments for a group of dedicated friends. The Tashkent lawyer and producer Otabek Suleimanov, the mastermind behind Stihia, worked tediously to bring Uzbek electronic music to public attention, using all available platforms to promote it after the fall of the regime. Stihia was integral to his intent to claim Uzbek electronic music a form of cultural production and forge a new activist community through a coalitional collaboration with musicians. The project was planned as an annual event which would bring tourists to Moynaq, facilitating its alternative economy and fostering its community wellbeing. In greater political terms, it was a project through which Suleimanov could speak the tragedy of the Uzbek and Karakalpak people for whom the loss of the Aral Sea was truly a catastrophic experience that informed their struggle for historical and ecological justice.

I write about Stihia with this struggle in mind, listening across histories of violence and processes of healing, seeking to locate Suleimanov’s project in the shared space of post-catastrophic survival, rehabilitation, and reconstruction. I discuss Stihia not only as a festival of electronic music unique to Uzbekistan, but also as a therapeutic scene

which conveys a sense of loss and the possibility of recovery through the sonic world one creates and imagines. The “sea of sound” to which Stihia alludes performs and unperforms place, and, in its restorative efforts, celebrates the dream-come-true experience, investing into collective wellbeing.

I take Stihia’s pursuit of shamanic stagecraft and space of therapy as a point of departure to explore a particular magicality of sound that is mobilized for activist purpose. I start with an overview of the project, reading across media reports that make a political case for Stihia, at once acknowledging its provocative shamanic stance. From these initial public responses, I move to discussing the historical context of the Aral tragedy, outlining the Russian pre-Soviet and Soviet colonial and imperial politics in Central Asia which directly contributed to the ecological degradation of the region over the years. I focus on the event of loss, the loss of the Aral Sea and its consequences for surviving ecologies and populations, examining Stihia as a project of coping with the trauma of loss. Speaking of the project as a nonstandard political act, I turn my attention to expressions of shamanism, tribalism, and magical spell to propose an understanding of Stihia that takes into consideration the ineffable qualities of sound.

Making a ritual form of response to environmental crises a prime focus of this chapter, I bring into listen another project which enters my discussion with a different but complimentary perspective. On 19 June 2016, a group of Russian poets gathered on the outskirts of St-Petersburg for the Sowers of Space [Seiateli prostranstva] action with Tibetan singing bowls.<sup>176</sup> Reciting their texts in a ceremonial style to the sound of the bowls, the poets performed a ritual in the name of ecological wellbeing, seeking to bring

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<sup>176</sup> “Pushkinskie laboratorii 2016. Seiateli prostranstva. Stih i poiushchie chashi,” *Alisa Beliaeva*, video published on 8 January 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUdi6HIUX8g>

together the energies of the living word and the living world. Tibetan singing bowls served as clinical readymades to probe the affective remaking of the environment through healing vibration, lending themselves to etho-ecological intervention by which performers could make their political point.

The action was part of the landscape poetry festival “Pushkin Laboratories” [landshaftnyi poeticheskii festival’ “Pushkinskie laboratorii”], which was organized by local artist Vladimir Beliaev who sought a new way of protesting against the capital-driven usurpation of the common lands in St-Petersburg suburbs. The poets toured the contested areas leaving traces of poetry across different sites, employing psychogeographical principles of the *dérive* to call for a return of the Situationist critique of capitalism. Fashioning solidarity with local environmental groups who opposed the operation of the capitalist system that sustained practices of environmental neglect, they sought an ecological connection, a space of “dialogue” with the living habitat through which they could construct a creative “eco-instituting”.

I explore the “Pushkin Laboratories” project and the Sowers of Space action in the context of local resistances, listening across activist concerns and ongoing efforts to consolidate solidarities around anti-capitalist critique. Developing an understanding of Beliaev’s political and poetical activism as a share of collective investment in protecting the green spaces of contested sites, I analyze the festival as an attempt to relate and cohabit with the surroundings, or “landscapes”, of which humans and their material traces are part. The sound of Tibetan singing bowls is understood as a contributing element to processes of relation, participation, and transformation, a source of spiritual promise and healing possibility. Seeking an expanded account of the Sowers of Space action, I go on

to position Beliaev's project within the larger imperative of neo-shamanic culture riddled with an occulture of care.

In bringing together the two case studies that invest in ritual and shamanic care ethics to craft a response to local crises, I explore an activist engagement with the ineffable, or beneficial, doings of sound, which the projects that I discuss make apparent. I choose to call these doings magical so as to give agency to the magicity of sound that makes itself expressive in the therapeutic act of these projects. Co-positioning Stihia's radical experiment of the Aral Sea's revival with the Sowers of Space action's neo-shamanic endeavor, I try to listen and write across resonances that sound the same intent: to embrace a bond with habitats that carry a cause for collective struggle. The projects come together in their ambition to invent how else one can act when formal politics fail to deliver. Mobilizing ritual techniques and healing perspectives, they invite the magics of sound into practice, bringing their activist force into play.

### **Stihia: performing the Aral, reviving the region, sounding the nation**

Armed with DJ sets, Stihia's seven techno "wizards" took up a shamanic mission to revive the dead Aral Sea. Streaming sound into the deserted seabed and commanding the surroundings to the force of tribal beats, the force of nature – or, *stihia*, they staged the promise of magician's trick to invoke the presence of the disappeared sea. The Aral were to "appear" at a rapid speed of techno pulsing with the insistence of a new sonic truth.

Stihia was a unique way of granting the long-standing wishes of Moynaq residents who could no longer hope for anything but a miracle to bring the Aral back. Moynaq, a small town situated in Uzbekistan's poorest republic of Karakalpakstan, was once a thriving fishing port. It turned into a ghost harbor when the Sea desiccated,

fisheries collapsed, and impoverished local workers had to leave. The environmental situation only worsened over the years, developing into a climate emergency. The dried and polluted seabed of the Aral became frequently “whipped up” by severe winds, which formed toxic dust storms that left people “choking on air.”<sup>177</sup> A truly dystopian space one would imagine in a sci-fi novel, the town remained home for those who could not escape their destiny. “When you see all the problems there, the unemployment, the water shortages, the toxic soil, you start to have second thoughts about throwing a big dance party in the middle of it all,” Suleimanov recalled.<sup>178</sup> His initial plan was to set up a stage for Stihia right by the Moynaq’s striking landmark, a ship graveyard where the rusting hulks of scrapped ships scattered across what once was the sea. Sandy terrain, however, made it hard to install the stage, pushing Stihia toward the Moynaq’s lighthouse. Here, erected with the view of the desert, Suleimanov’s mega sound installation were to last for ten hours, inviting locals and guests to “dive” into the depths of the imagined sea.

A call for the Aral’s sonic resurrection discerned a cry of despair. It revealed the pain of knowing that there seemed to be no other way to instill hope but to create a sea out of sound. How many more political failures one had to live to give up on formal politics and gain trust in sound as in the real maker of local wellbeing. A native of Uzbekistan, Suleimanov grew up with these failures, seeing how the Aral Sea’s desiccation led to catastrophic changes, impacting the lives of the Uzbeks and

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<sup>177</sup> See the 2018 ethnographic account of Moynaq in Dene-Hern Chen, “A Country that Brought a Sea to Life.” *BBC*, 24 July 2018, <https://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/country-brought-sea-back-life>, where the state of Moynaq is described as a situation of desperation and misfortune.

<sup>178</sup> “Dancing To Revive A Dead Sea: A Review Of Uzbekistan's First Electronic Music Festival,” *Electronic Beats*, 21 September 2018, <https://www.electronicbeats.net/dancing-to-revive-a-dead-sea-a-review-of-uzbekistans-first-electronic-music-festival/>.

Karakalpaks. His project Stihia was born of this experience, being driven by activist passion and great fondness for electronic music. It was a straight-from-the-heart techno-shamanic mission that put faith in sound more so than in god.

Seeking to grant sound the creationist powers, Stihia, indeed, resorted to electronic music as to mother goddess who could command the Aral (and the region) to salvation. By creating a sea (out) of sound, it beckoned a feeling of the sea with a fictional untruth to which a new truth was imaginatively given. Streaming sound as if water into the empty seabed to *fill it in*, the performance pertained to making an actual sonic “thing” (terrain) that could be lived (as in-habited) and revealed (as co-created) in its sonic truth. Attempting a sonic “thingness” of the Aral, it tried to do away with reality of the visual encounter, instead offering the experience of an invisible projection of the Aral into space. “Is there anything more eclectic than the sound of electronica synthesised with the sight of an imaginary sea and the smell of a desert?” Suleimanov pondered, envisioning through the magics of sound a rehabilitation of the lost world.<sup>179</sup> A rave event and radical experiment at once, Stihia was his idiosyncratic project that probed the fictionwork of sound.

The 2018 lineup included seven artists from Uzbekistan and other post-Soviet countries. Moved by solidarity and speculative commitment, they travelled to Moynaq to deliver the grand vision of Suleimanov’s project. Their performances, individually unique but collectively unified, constituted a scene of sounding that provided a vivid example of intermusical space to which Suleimanov developed a compositional approach, assuming

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<sup>179</sup> This is a quote (in its original English) from the Stihia’s 2018 event statement previously available on Stihia website: <http://stihia-festival.org/#rec45658943>. The link is no longer active.

its vibratory conditions. I listen to it distantly, yet closely, seeking to attend to the individuality of each music but thinking beyond it, toward a collective process by which Stihia claimed its sonic presence.

Kyiv-born Dasha Redkina creates polyrhythmic sequences with healing tones. A blend of electroacoustic improvisation and radical mixology, her music builds spaces of transformation conspiring the listener to live through a fictive travelogue, moving from fearful nostalgic freeze-time experiences to playful resurrections of hope. HVL (a.k.a Gigi Jikia), Tbilisi's native techno monk, transmits sensations of intense euphoric sound currents. Their rhythmic psychedelia shreds reality into pieces, styling it to a puzzling insurgency of unknown dimensions. Punk-techno duo Interchain (a.k.a Andrew Lee and Jenya Gorbunov), who are originally from Tashkent, bring to Stihia frenetic beat, mesmerizing with rhythmic blast sequencings. Orgatanatos, a low-key post-digital project from Uzbekistan, produces energetic and glittery mixes of glitches and bumps, opening imagination to textural effects that lend intricacy to linear melodic passageways. SHMN (a.k.a Yury Khodjayev), also the Uzbek techno producer, brings to the floor a deeper shade of house music that compels one to trust its captive processes. Tashkent-based Maria Breslavets pushes sound into a race, mobilizing on speedy build-ups and shock waves travels. Finally, Stihia's main shaman Kebato (a.k.a Otabek Suleimanov) hypnotizes to the core, adding intellectual shortcuts to futurescapes built on sci-fi references.

“Echoing the rainmakers who were once part of the region's nomadic tribe,” the artists followed shamanic orders, co-creating the making of the sea through the magics of

intermusical performance.<sup>180</sup> Opening the performance to experimentation that did not restrict the scope of realism to visual logics, they attempted not only to speak the wishes of the struggling community but to make them come true in a uniquely situated way. *The Guardian* wrote about the event, picking up on its imaginative engagement with a new actuality of the sea: “On Friday, the deserted, dried-out bed of the Aral Sea in a remote part of Central Asia will echo to the sound of an electronic music festival, as activists try to raise awareness of the catastrophe, and put the sea back on the map, figuratively, if *not literally*.”<sup>181</sup> *Al Jazeera* also mentioned Stihia’s mission of “revival”, interpreting it as a form of revitalization: “Some attendees even believed the music might have a magical touch, hoping that perhaps techno beats and good energy could encourage the sea’s revitalisation.”<sup>182</sup> Its commentary focused in some detail on Suleimanov’s “new vision” of building a community by radical ideas, seeing Stihia as a creative act of response to the Aral Sea crisis and a practical project of solidarity and support. Suleimanov’s statements on rainmakers and sonic ways of the Aral’s revival mostly puzzled reporters who tried to read into the experiment but stayed focused on the political platform of the project. *The Times*, for instance, described Stihia as an effort to draw attention and “drum up support for dried-out Aral sea,” dropping the “revival” rhetoric completely.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Since the official statement on the 2018 edition was removed from Stihia’s website, see a section of it from which I quote here: “<https://ra.co/events/1127530>

<sup>181</sup> My italics. Joanna Lillis, “Techno Fest in Ship Graveyard Aims to Revive Vanished Aral Sea,” *The Guardian*, 14 September 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/14/techno-fest-in-ship-graveyard-aims-to-revive-vanished-aral-sea>

<sup>182</sup> Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska, “Deserted Aral Sea hosts electro gig with environmental twist,” *Al Jazeera*, 17 September 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/deserted-aral-sea-hosts-electro-gig-environmental-twist-180916215734566.html>

*The Calvert Journal*, an alternative news outlet covering electronic music culture in the post-Soviet space, extended an understanding of “revival” to Stihia’s humanitarian mission and cultural initiative. It wrote: “Set to take over the small town of Moynaq in mid-September, the Stihia (“Elements”) Festival plans to be the first of its kind in Central Asia, pumping out abstract electronic music into the desert. But it also wants to leave a lasting impact in the area: employing local people and boosting the local economy by bringing tourists to a little-visited part of the world. A heady dose of Uzbek culture and eco-awareness is spread throughout the festival programme”.<sup>184</sup> While acknowledging one activist mission of the project, the article also spoke of another, reading deeper into the Uzbek emancipatory processes and reflecting on Stihia’s share of these processes. Suleimanov’s project was seen as “signs of life” in the country that was used to be an extremely isolated place struggling to break out of cultural, economic, and political stagnation consistent with the colonial, repressive, and authoritarian politics of past regimes.

Stihia then was perceived as part of a growing movement toward an Uzbek cultural renaissance. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan’s autocratic president Islam Karimov worked to abort any attempt at democratic consolidation of power, censoring and penalizing cultural projects that were not ideologically relevant. As anthropologist Laura Adams argues, Uzbek culture was shaped by discourses of

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<sup>183</sup> Tom Parfitt, “Music Festival to Drum Up Support for Dried-out Aral Sea,” *The Times*, 4 September 2018, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/stihia-electronic-music-festival-to-drum-up-support-for-dried-out-sea-v7c7w52pl>

<sup>184</sup> Katie Davies, “Signs of Life: Does a Music Festival in a Desert Offer Hope for Cultural Reform in Uzbekistan?” *The Calvert Journal*, 30 August 2018, <https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/10619/signs-of-life-stihia-festival-aral-sea-uzbekistan-censorship>

conservative nationalism that legitimized Karimov as the Uzbek leader. It was invested in the “spectacular” forms of participation, as well as patriotic, ideological, and outdated content, which discouraged any effort of novel thinking. Electronic music certainly did not fit with the agenda of the regime. It was associated with the wicked popular culture of the West that did not reflect the values of the Uzbek society, bringing to expression new emancipatory gestures. According to Adams, it was seen on a par with other “evils” of the globalized world, such as “caricatured female sexuality” for instance, and hence constituted a threat to traditional cultural norms through which abusive powers of the regime long operated.<sup>185</sup>

This explains why the electronic music scene that started to emerge in Uzbekistan had gone underground, remaining in the eyes of cultural authorities a rebellious statement against politically convenient traditionalism. Ethnomusicologist Kerstin Klenke noted that Uzbek electronic music was labeled “alternative” in relation to the state-sponsored national *estrada* (the Uzbek equivalent of pop), for it did not fit the norms of patriotism to which Uzbek music productions had to conform. Same applied to other troubling “alternatives” such as rock, punk, and rap – all of which, along with electronic music, were seen hostile to the politics of the state and ultimately harmful to the “cultural values and ideals of the Uzbek nation”.<sup>186</sup> After the death of Karimov in 2016, electronic music scene in itself became an activist project invested in the emancipatory promise, working

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<sup>185</sup> Adams, *The Spectacular State*, 156.

<sup>186</sup> Klenke, “Popular Music in Uzbekistan,” 622-623. Also see her recently published monograph *The Sound State of Uzbekistan*, in which she further elaborates on the politics of exclusion that posits electronic music in opposition to state-sponsored *estrada* that dominated Uzbekistan’s public sphere in the Karimov years, helping Karimov gain support of the masses.

to fuel the post-Karimov rebirth of Uzbekistan.<sup>187</sup> Stihia was a big part of it, pushing electronic music out of club to open air and making it accessible to wider Uzbek audiences looking to finally gain a sense of freedom after many years of living under the oppressed conditions of the Karimov regime.<sup>188</sup>

A move from state policies that pressured electronic musicians to those that helped them was truly unprecedented. Suleimanov received endorsement of the Uzbek new authorities, the “reform-minded” government of Karimov’s successor Shavkat Mirziyoyev, and was able to produce Stihia with relatively minor hurdles.<sup>189</sup> The project served multiple ends, being seen, among other things, as a practical commitment to providing economic benefits for the vulnerable community. It was marketed as a retreat which offered a unique experience of electronic music, local food, and indigenous culture, while also opening onto a spiritual quest for ecological awareness and ethical responsibility.<sup>190</sup>

Suleimanov wanted to grow a movement of accountability, inviting travellers to seek a “better version” of themselves by walking the Aral site and connecting with the

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<sup>187</sup> For a recent ethnographic account of such emancipatory expressions, see Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska, “Tashkent’s Youth Spread Their Wings as Underground Raves Take Root in Uzbekistan,” *The Calvert Journal*, 28 March 2019, <https://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/11094/tashkents-youth-spread-their-wings-as-underground-raves-take-root-in-uzbekistan>

<sup>188</sup> Joanna Lillis, “Dancing in the Desert,” *Voices of Central Asia*, 17 September 2018, <https://voicesoncentralasia.org/dancing-in-the-desert/>

<sup>189</sup> See the travelogue where Stihia is discussed in the context of current political changes in Uzbekistan: Armin Rosen, “Autocracy in Transition: A Dispatch from Uzbekistan, a Country Caught Between Its Past and Present,” *City Journal*, 7 June 2019, <https://www.city-journal.org/uzbekistan>

<sup>190</sup> Paul Bartlett, “Uzbekistan’s Stihia Festival: Riding Sound Waves in the Vanished Aral Sea,” *Lonely Planet*, 18 September 2018, <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/articles/uzbekistans-stihia-festival>

surroundings. The 2018 Stihia statement read: “Conceived by a group of enthusiasts, Stihia is a caravan for voyagers, a manifestation of escapism, a network of cultures, all disassembled and put back together in a reinvented reality awash with secrets to uncover. A festival on the edge of the dried-up sea is an enormous canvas for creative personalities, who are in constant pursuit of better version of oneself. Let Stihia become internal amplifier of your voice of accountability, hope and harmony...”<sup>191</sup> Urging a pedagogy of the self and responsibility for the others, Suleimanov hoped to build a community of followers who would come to Stihia annually as music tourists to help the local economy. He estimated that the festival would significantly increase revenues of Moynaq businesses and benefit the revitalization of the town.<sup>192</sup>

Joining electronic music to environmental activism and the larger project of regional and cultural revival, Suleimanov sought a form of political participation that would not only speak the lived tragedy of the Aral Sea’s desiccation but also act this tragedy in the interests of Moynaq community, the Karakalpak and Uzbek people, and Uzbekistan in general. Stihia was more than his personal investment in electronic music, it was his way of collective action by and beyond the art of sounding, an action that gathered sounds of resistance and made them perform a political, cultural, and economic role, while also resounding an activist appeal to the world, a plea to be heard through the shamanic act of Stihia’s untelling and retelling the story of Aral Sea’s loss.

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<sup>191</sup> Stihia’s 2018 statement (originally in English) could be found here before website became inactive: <http://stihia-festival.org/en>

<sup>192</sup> Tom Faber, “Stihia: An Electronic Dawn In Uzbekistan,” *Resident Advisor*, 15 October 2019, <https://www.residentadvisor.net/features/3546>

## **The story of loss: reading into the Aral Sea disappearance**

The loss of the Aral Sea is a scar of colonial history, which carries the memory of violence against peoples and natures subjected to coercive politics of the Russian pre-Soviet and Soviet imperial regimes in Central Asia. The conquest began in the late nineteenth century with a series of expeditions-turned-incursions aiming at seizing what Russians envisioned as an inhospitable, primitive, and wasteful territory. Planning to control the area between the Aral and the Caspian, Russians started a “civilizing” mission targeting the “uncivilized” peoples of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan, all of whom were considered backward nations. Putting the myth of “backwardness” into operation, they appointed officials, military officers, scientists, engineers, and private settlers to oversee the accomplishments of civilization and ensure that locals remained committed to support the tsarist rule.

Central Asians were subjected to ideological manipulation, being pressured to participate in the project of radical transformation that was deemed necessary for the agriculturally “backward” region. Holding out the promise of prosperity, the Russians promoted cultural and scientific superiority over “primitive” societies that dreamed of technological advancement, in their view. In the Russian imaginary, the “poor” lifestyle of Central Asians had to be improved by better living standards which could be achieved with a new economic priority. The plan was to transform the arid landscape into a greater physical environment suitable for growing water-intensive crops like cotton, in such way integrating local populations and resources into imperial markets. This scheme was nothing but “pipe dreams”, as the Aral Sea historian Maya Peterson rightly called it, discussing Russia’s settler plot as an experiment through brute force, which was doomed

to failure. She argued that the “grandiose” project to transform the region into a cotton colony was in the end a plan to sacrifice the Aral Sea and ecological wellbeing of the region for greater profits.<sup>193</sup>

Started by Russia’s tsarist government, the project was carried over to the Bolshevik and Soviet authorities. These authorities tried to appeal to local populations, distinguishing themselves from their tsarist predecessors with a new emancipatory agenda whereas in fact pursuing the same goal – the *Russian* transformation of the region. Their vision of “progress”, just like the tsarist one, was shaped by the ideology of conquest, which was strategically presented to locals as a “decolonization” reform.<sup>194</sup> Claiming to decolonize the indigenous lands seized by the tsarist troops, they pledged loyalty to Central Asians who had opposed the previous regime. In truth, the Soviet Russians continued to control and harness Central Asia’s peoples and resources. Using anti-colonial slogans, they gave the tsarist project of economic modernization a new sense of economic “equality”, justifying the principle and practice of levelling and collectivization. Their politics of coercion directly benefitted from the existing myths of backwardness and enlightenment, which served to justify the imperial, capitalocentric, and ecocidal logics of the Russian rule.<sup>195</sup> The so-called Sovietization of the region

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<sup>193</sup> Peterson, *Pipe Dreams*.

<sup>194</sup> For a closer look into Bolshevik and Soviet power-building practices, which were introduced as liberating and progressive, but, in reality, remained imperial and colonial see Peterson, *Pipe Dreams*; Teichmann, “Canals, Cotton and the Limits of De-colonization,” 500-501; Obertreis, “‘Mertvye’ i ‘kul’turnye’ zemli,” 207.

<sup>195</sup> On the Enlightenment goal to “perfect” society and order it to the state see Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*; and Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 9-10, where she discusses a more general Enlightenment-driven agenda narrated as an “Out of Backwardness” story. On labor as a duty to the Soviet state see Lo, *Soviet Labour Ideology*, 20.

cancelled traditional culture with its land-based practices, seeking to forge an “advanced” Soviet society. Branding the indigenous agricultural methods as “bad” farming, the Soviets preached a “proper” stewardship of Central Asian lands. They launched a series of the large-scale hydraulic projects, neglecting the environmental changes these projects could bring.<sup>196</sup>

Aral Sea came to the center of the Russian crude pursuit of harnessing the Central Asia’s water resources, becoming pivotal to colonialist schemes. The story of its loss traces back to 1869 when the military engineer A.I. Glukhovskoi developed a plan to build a canal between the river Amu Daria, which fed the Aral, and the Caspian Sea. This human-made waterway would connect Asia and Europe via Russia, opening opportunities for trade, entrepreneurship, and irrigation. The Russians envisioned their ships sailing down the Volga to the Caspian and all the way to Turkestan, generating a new national pride. (39-40) The project was formally considered by the tsarist government in 1893 but put on hold until the Soviets came back to it in 1925. (256-257) It was predicted back then that reversing the Amu Daria away from the Aral Sea into the Caspian would have dire consequences. As Peterson pointed out in her study, the risk of the Aral’s disappearance was known in the 1860s and reassessed again in the early 1920s.<sup>197</sup> The Russians, however, proceeded with the plan, seeking cheap transportation, opportunities for the increased levels of crop production, and much greater capital gains.

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<sup>196</sup> Peterson, *Pipe Dreams*, 215-264.

<sup>197</sup> See Peterson’s discussion of the 1867 report “The Disappearance of the Aral Sea in Inner Asia” in the German publication *Globus*, as well the 1923 article entitled “Sud’ba Aral’skogo moria” in the Tashkent-based journal *Vestnik irrigatsii* [*Irrigation Herald*] in her PhD dissertation *Technologies of Rule*, 411-412.

They discussed the mission as economically and ecologically beneficial to the people of Central Asia who had long faced the scarcity of water and soil resources.<sup>198</sup>

Russia's civilizational imperialism thus went hand in hand with ecological imperialism that entailed the actual conquest of natural environment in order to overcome the obstacles to Soviet progress. As environmental historian Christian Teichmann argues, a large-scale construction of irrigation systems was the Soviet path to power, while the physical environment was a serious impediment to the administration of this power. The Soviets had to embark on a "battle mission" when building the Amu-Caspian waterway, dealing in a most violence way with the "caprices" of the river and hostility of the people. The mission was radical and intrusive, resulting in irreversible damage to local ecosystems.<sup>199</sup>

The environmental history of the Aral Sea region hence must be read as a continuity of the Russian colonial regimes, all of which were invested in the ecocidal culture. As historian Julia Obertreis writes, the tsarist network of imperial appointees essentially became the Soviet network, continuing to develop the region into an oppressive place of cotton plantation but calling it a prosperous colony.<sup>200</sup> Both the tsarist and Soviet ideologies of conquest were invested in the narrative of enlivening the "dead

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<sup>198</sup> On the Russian framing of the mission as favorable, see Peterson, *Pipe Dreams*, 257, where she quotes the Russian professor Rybnikov as one of many influential voices who helped shape the official narrative of the initially Glukhovskoi's plan.

<sup>199</sup> See Teichmann, "Leviathan on the Oxus," where he discusses a Soviet way of dealing with "capriciousness" of nature – and that is a way of improvisational, incompetent, and totally chaotic administrative approach, as if there was no way out of permanent emergency.

<sup>200</sup> Obertreis, "'Mertvye' i 'kul'turnye' zemli," 208, where she discusses shared intellectual resources of the Russian imperial regimes, essentially contributing Russia's larger historical project.

lands” (*mertvye zemli*) to “resurrect” Central Asia from decline. This narrative became more complicated by the Soviets’ own narrative, that of national undertaking (*vsenarodnoe delo*) which urged a new line of ideology – the creation of a single Soviet people directly benefitting from the Central Asian cotton fields. (210) It glorified imperial progress and justified brute Soviet-style productionism, largely disregarding potential environmental damage. Obertreis showed that the Soviets, for instance, did not hesitate to overuse fertilizers to attain high productivity goals, contaminating local soils with toxic chemicals and ignoring the immediate and long-term risks. (213)

All this is to say that the Russian way of transforming the landscape of Central Asia from the barren lands into a fertile valley to create a cotton-growing paradise in the deserts of the region ended up being a path to defeated nature and broken dreams. Settler colonialism and state capitalism were major forces that brought the region to what is now widely regarded as “failed transformation”.<sup>201</sup> The Russian imaginary of Central Asia as backward promoted a profound neglect of indigenous knowledge and sustainable ways of living, as well as the ecological needs of the Aral Sea. Making this imaginary operational through the utopian narratives and practical projects of unsustainable irrigation systems, the Russians advanced their imperial rational at the cost of losing humanity’s vital need – water, and its major source – the Aral Sea.

### **The road to recovery**

It was not until the 1970s that the environmental emergency unfolding in Central Asia was brought to public attention and linked to Soviet irrigation policies. As the shrinking

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<sup>201</sup> Fierman, *Soviet Central Asia: The Failed Transformation*.

of the Aral Sea became more pronounced, politically engaged Soviet publics started to express their concern by launching grassroots initiatives and seeking a more organized response to the crisis. Gorbachev's newly imposed policy of glasnost worked in favor of this growing environmental movement, for the first time affording free speech rights to Soviet citizens.<sup>202</sup> It made possible to talk about the plight of the Aral Sea using state-run media platforms and publishing houses. Some citizens took it to top literary journals to push for action, others went on to organize "fact-finding" expeditions into the region, bringing indisputable truths about the catastrophe and publicizing them. As a response to public outcry over inaction of the government, the Soviet leadership went ahead with an "improvement" mission, which, among other things, put a stop to further development of river diversion projects in the region.<sup>203</sup> Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, international community showed much concern to people directly affected by environmental and socio-economic situation of the Aral Sea basin, offering help to the newly formed Central Asian republics.<sup>204</sup>

As the environmental scientist Philip Micklin further examines, this global response fueled a new dream of the region's renewal and was heavily invested in technoscientific solutions. Some solutions were not viable from the start, offering quick fixes and risking more irreversible damage to environmental ecology. They included, for instance, rehabilitation schemes that would try to restore the Aral by abandoning the Soviet irrigation systems on which locals relied or launching yet another radical water

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<sup>202</sup> Obertreis, "Soviet Irrigation Policies under Fire," 118-127.

<sup>203</sup> Micklin, *The Water Management Crisis*, 68-82.

<sup>204</sup> Micklin, "Introduction," 5-8.

diversion system by rerouting the Siberian rivers into the Central Asian deserts. Such radical approaches favored accelerationism, giving false hopes and leading to potentially dire outcomes. Other solutions advocated the slow pace of change, focusing on more reserved approaches to replenishing the Aral Sea, such as its gradual restoration through residual lakes and degraded deltas of Amu and Syr Daria where zones of relative stability could be created and maintained.<sup>205</sup> As Micklin wrote elsewhere, slow replenishment schemes indeed afforded a partial rehabilitation of the Aral, promising the hope of a complete restoration of the Sea.<sup>206</sup>

What researchers like Micklin and his academic allies propose in the activist and political intent of their scientific contributions is to pursue a technoscientific mobilization that does not need to fit any capital-oriented timeline but instead is led by future-focused decisions that are based on ethical obligation to meet the ecological needs of the Aral Sea.<sup>207</sup> This, of course, is a positive move toward an ethics of care that condemns a productionist ethos committed to the politics of extraction and environmental rights abuse. It is a move in the service of ecological interests and economic survival to which science could successfully participate.

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<sup>205</sup> For an overview of these solutions, see Philip Micklin's talk entitled "Anatomy of an Ecological Catastrophe: The Destruction and Partial Rehabilitation of the Aral Sea," presented on 29 June 2010 at University of Chicago's Centre for International Studies. The talk was published on *YouTube* channel by UChicagoCISSR as "Philip Micklin – Desiccation of the Aral Sea: A Water Management Disaster of the Soviet Union," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ArnAeE5e3Wk>

<sup>206</sup> Micklin, "Efforts to Revive the Aral Sea," 368.

<sup>207</sup> I refer here more generally to Micklin's academic and activist work focused on developing collective intelligence aiming at serving the Aral's needs.

On the ground, the participation of the international community did not always translate in what it sought to achieve, being overshadowed by the existing tensions between local elites, international donors, and contributing intelligences.<sup>208</sup> These tensions were perceived as political failures that did not produce the desired change for the region. The state of the Aral Sea basin, with the exception of some areas where partial rehabilitation proved successful, remains affected by dramatic consequences of desiccation, such as climate change, species extinction, pollution, poor health, unemployment, and economic decline.<sup>209</sup>

The Aral Sea crisis then, is also a crisis of global response, and thus of what makes it a response. There has been a significant investment in intellectual and financial resources to help the degraded region survive the post-apocalyptic terror and cope with the loss of the Aral world in its ecological, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions. Rehabilitation of the Sea became a priority for local and global governments supporting the larger restorative justice movement in Central Asia. However, the formal way of response was insufficient to address and deal with the collective trauma and its everyday impact. Stihia, in this context of formal attempts to face the effects and consequences of the Aral Sea disaster, appears more of an informal project the goal of which is to facilitate recovery in a uniquely shamanic way.

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<sup>208</sup> For more on these tensions see Erika Weinthal, *State Making and Environmental Cooperation: Linking Domestic and International Politics in Central Asia*.

<sup>209</sup> Micklin, "Introduction," 1-4. Scientists report on the increasingly polluted state of the Amu Daria River basin in the republic of Karakalpakstan, exactly where Stihia took place. See Reimov and Fayzieva, "The Present State of the South Aral Sea Area," 192-199.

## **Rave, ritual, and the radical enactment of the Aral**

The 2018 article in *The Guardian* discussed Stihia as an unconventional form of response to the Aral Sea crisis, suggesting that its “different approach” was a reaction to the failures of formal politics. “They’ve tried dams, dykes and dialogue over the years in vain attempts to reverse one of the world’s most stunning environmental disasters,” the article read, assuming that Stihia’s trying “to lure waters back to parched sea bed” was a credible attempt to do something different. Thinking with Stihia’s different activist logics, I want to expand the account of the project beyond the bounds of what makes it recognizable as rave event, asking what the lure in the framework of Stihia’s performance may be and how sound performs it by playing off imagination and tricking into living a new experiential truth of the Aral Sea’s return.

My understanding of Stihia is shaped by Suleimanov’s statements about the project, which emphasized its resemblance with shamanic performance. Imitating the rainmakers who could turn magic on the desert to summon rain, Stihia pertained to a mimetic procedure of casting a spell to achieve transformative effects. Implicating the collective body in a dance with the riddle of Aral’s haunting presence, it emerged into the performance space where sonic imagination was taken up for activist aims of the “compassionate” rave experiment. *Lonely Planet* described the experiment as pertinent to “riding the sound waves in the vanished Aral Sea”, hinting at some ineffable stirring at the core of the seemingly typical rave.<sup>210</sup> Suleimanov once spoke of it in general terms, as

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<sup>210</sup> Paul Bartlett, “Uzbekistan’s Stihia Festival: Riding Sound Waves in the Vanished Aral Sea,” *Lonely Planet*, 18 September 2018, <https://www.lonelyplanet.com/articles/uzbekistans-stihia-festival>

something other than a “glamorous rave”, referring to Stihia as an “art installation” which was conceived to become a “beacon”.<sup>211</sup>

As a rave project, Stihia was inspired by the popular Burning Man festival in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert. Burning Man is not just a music event that celebrates radical self-expression of rave enthusiasts, it is also a movement toward an anarcho-libertarian ideal shaped by eco-renaissance ideologies. Reawakening a collective sense of the sacred, it fosters a greater emphasis on new ways of ecological preoccupation through neo-pagan spiritualities and mystical worldviews. In a more situated sense, it is a place where one seeks inner growth and healing through a communal effort. As anthropologists Robert Kozinets and John Sherry argue, music plays a key role in creating the necessary environment for such a pursuit, nurturing the spiritual sensibilities and facilitating deep connections with the surroundings. Desert is transformed into a dancefloor where electronic sounds pound almost 24/7, directly engaging people sensually, collectively, and conceptually. The repetitive techno beat helps create a ritual space by reassembling human bodies and bringing the collectivity of their shared experience. It facilitates the Burning Man’s transformative intent and therapeutic purpose, working to forge a techno-tribe that performs and celebrates the healed body.<sup>212</sup>

Carrying with the Burning Man’s mission to create a tribal space through which one could nurture ecological consciousness and seek collective healing, Stihia coupled techno music and spiritual ecology, staging a dream of the Aral’s revival in radically

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<sup>211</sup> Katie Davies, “Signs of Life: Does a Music Festival in a Desert Offer Hope for Cultural Reform in Uzbekistan?” *The Calvert Journal*, 30 August 2018, <https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/10619/signs-of-life-stihia-festival-aral-sea-uzbekistan-censorship>

<sup>212</sup> Kozinets and Sherry, “Dancing on Common Ground.”

expanded terms. Its version of enchanted desert contained the same sort of patterns revealed in the Burning Man performative space: walking the desert, sensing the ambient environment, reassembling through trance dancing, performing the ritual by setting a wooden artwork on fire. However contrary to Burning Man, it had a historically grounded agenda, operating from the humanitarian incentive and ecological justice perspective to contribute to the revitalization of Moynaq and deliver a new expression to the scene of the Uzbek political struggles. In other words, it worked toward specific ends rather than a generalized condition. Its performative method of turning a dream of the Aral's revival into sonic evidence embraced a range of concerns and made thinkable a new path of attending to them.

Being perceived through contextual similarities and differences with Burning Man, Stihia both met and defied expectations. Claims that the project “promised to be” the Burning Man of Central Asia circulated across the ethnographic accounts that placed the spotlight on location.<sup>213</sup> Such claims implicitly rested on the fact that Stihia and Burning Man took place in remote areas which were characterized by harsh environmental conditions but turned into hospitable environments with the positive effects of sound. Positive effects served a shared process by which both projects operated in their performative spaces marked by the provocative intentions and subversive attitudes of the raving body. Stihia, however, was less invested in provocation, seeking more of a magical evocation of its activist vision through the unconventional experiment.

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<sup>213</sup> See, for instance, Grace Zhou, “Shifting Seas: The Lived Landscapes of Aral,” *The CESS Blog*, 21 December 2018, <http://thecessblog.com/2018/12/zhou/>; Psikho Daily, “Uzbekskii reiv: kak proshel pervyi festival’ elektronnoi muzyki na Aral’skom more,” *Zen Yandex*, 28 September 2018, <https://zen.yandex.ru/media/psychodaily/uzbekskii-reiv-kak-proshel-pervyi-festival-elektronnoi-muzyki-na-aralskom-more-5bacf86c9dae9900a9d87488>

Its tribute to Burning Man was not exactly complete, despite the symbolic orders of the performance. For instance, the ceremonial burning of the installation made of three wooden letters that spelled out the word “sea” appeared quite extraneous.<sup>214</sup> As one participant wrote: “The music stopped. Everyone crowded around the big wooden letters spelling ‘sea.’ Three men arrived with flaming sticks and set them ablaze. Compared to the symbolic torching of the ‘man – the establishment – at Burning Man, the incineration of the word ‘sea’ seemed a little confused on the level of symbolism. Exactly why were we setting fire to the sea? What did it represent? But it was hard to get caught up in such questions. Wincing from the ferocity of the fire, the crowd was united in a final moment of spectacle and togetherness.”<sup>215</sup>

Stihia embraced the Burning Man spirit for its own political needs, mobilizing the therapeutics of rave and ritual to achieve the fulfillment of the activist idea. It worked in the healing mode of techno-shamanic consciousness, experimenting with trance techniques and seeking benefits of communal catharsis that the very process of rave entailed. In his seminal text on technoshamanism, cultural anthropologist Scott Hutson develops an argument for rave as a “form of socially produced spiritual healing”.<sup>216</sup> He asserts that the DJ acts like a shaman who leads the ravers on a spiritual journey to “paradise – a presocial state of nondifferentiation and communitas”. (54) Techno, which is the type of music typically played at rave parties, averages 120 beats per minute and

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<sup>214</sup> See photo of the installation here: [https://i0.wp.com/nuz.uz/uploads/posts/2018-09/1537368072\\_31.jpg?ssl=1](https://i0.wp.com/nuz.uz/uploads/posts/2018-09/1537368072_31.jpg?ssl=1)

<sup>215</sup> Tom Faber, “Stihia: An Electronic Dawn In Uzbekistan,” *Resident Advisor*, 15 October 2019, <https://www.residentadvisor.net/features/3546>

<sup>216</sup> Hutson, “Technoshamanism,” 53.

produces the insistent throb of sound. In combination with spinning lights, lasers, and fluorescent glow sticks, it creates an intense experiential reality – the “hyperreality” that overexcites the senses and exhausts the body. Rave is the very making of such hyperreality, the space of synaesthetic excess in which one lives the ecstatic experiences. In Huston’s words, it is “an overwhelming yet depthless barrage of the senses that transforms the dance floor into a magical megasurface, ‘a text of excitement’... that gratifies a relentless and intense desire for pleasure”. (58) Ecstatic meditation to which rave compares opens onto a shamanic trance, the state in which one may access the divine. The DJ facilitates this experience, taking the role of navigator, or technoshaman, who guides the dancing bodies, the followers, through a “tapestry of mind-bending music” to transcend ordinary reality. (61) The “drumbeat-driven pulse of techno” operates similarly to rhythmic drumming that is employed by shamans to design their sacred spaces. (63) The sacred space of rave, as Hutson concludes, is the very course of therapeutic shamanic session to which the psychic voyage of ravers essentially pertains.

In a direct political sense, rave is a technique of creating a community by sensory orders established through the rhythmic cues and synaesthetic interactions of the dancefloor. “The sensory order... is not just something one sees or hears about; it is something one lives,” as David Howes writes, speaking of the human body as the cultural body emerging in situated practices.<sup>217</sup> Examining the sensory workings of techno-tribal dancefloor milieus, the dance scholar Graham St John suggests that rave culture is a culture of technoshamanic spirituality defined by synaesthetic awareness of the collective

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<sup>217</sup> Howes, “Introduction: Empires of the Senses,” 3.

self. He defines rave in Kodwan Eshun's terms as a "synaesthetic community wherein 'each dancer in the crowd becomes a medium transmitting sensory current,'" and talks about a communal moment of rave as that in which bodies are organized into a collective singularity by the rhythmic event.<sup>218</sup> Bodies are bonded with each other and with the world through the project of relational totality that dissolves certainty and identity and reassembles pan-human values. This kind of togetherness – the *communitas* is defined by the experience of universality and the sense of equality by which participants of rave events are gathered and geared toward reinforcing the core universal values of peace, love, and unity. As St John writes: "The 'communitas spirit' resonates with millenarian and revitalization movements as it 'presses always to universality and ever-greater unity'". (28) In his view, rave in itself is an activist project of becoming 'pan-human', a project to which a rhythmic formula of wellbeing is inscribed. It embraces a positive alliance with sound in forging a more egalitarian inclusive spiritually-connected and environmentally-concerned society.

Stihia as a project of techno-*communitas* is a contextually unique undertaking of rave. It builds on the political implication of rave experiences to propose a magically transformative time of summoning up a vision of wellbeing that is tailored to the needs of local community. The project commands sound to the already instituted context of the Aral Sea disappearance and the collective dream of the Aral Sea return, seeking to create a magical moment of communal belief in the possibility of living the sonic actuality of this dream. The magic of invisible presence that the project seeks lends itself to the

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<sup>218</sup> St John, "The Difference Engine," 29.

intervention through which one confronts the reality of ecological despair to find ways of coping and living in the end times.

Anthropologists of the magical art Lynne Hume and Nevill Drury write of magic as practice of many forms but narrowed down to one thing – the experience of something other than what we know as one real world. They contest the very premise of one possible world, talking about magic as a way of accessing the plurality of worlds. Magic in their understanding of it can mean anything from the anomalies, otherworlds, forces, entities, illusions, nonordinary realities, speculations, paradoxes, and spiritual journeys. The practice of magic is a practice of letting off rational thought and permitting a play of intuition, imagination, and emotions. On a more conceptual level, it is an effort to break apart the dichotomies of fact and fiction, real and imaginary, human and nonhuman, and see beyond the boundaries that set distinctions.<sup>219</sup> As they make explicit, a magical moment is a moment created in the process of psychic and sensory connection with lived realities, a moment in which a new real is discovered and performed. In some way, it is quite a normative moment of living an ineffable occurrence anticipated in its actuality: “Magical experiences are emotional, sensory, evocative, wondrous, or terrifying events, and as we are physical entities, they are felt through the feeling, sensing body. A magical experience is nebulous, rather arbitrary, and while it might range from a brief but notable feeling of strangeness to a completely life-changing dramatic experience that brings about deep inner change or an intuitive knowing, there is almost always the feeling that something highly significant has happened.” (30) Understanding the magical experience as a particular advancement of the sensing body through relational spirituality, Hume and

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<sup>219</sup> Hume and Drury, *The Varieties of Magical Experience*, ix-xiii.

Drury argue for a broader field of magic as a contemporary political power to act in the interests of the collective world. They examine manifestations of this power in the rise of the environmental justice movement that is invested in the indigenous, pagan, and shamanic ethics, and riddled with a quest for magical intervention for the purpose of activism. Magical intervention, in this regard, is a critical pronouncement on formal approach through unorthodox actions that extend to developing a spiritual kinship with the land, place, and planet. It is also a response to environmental despair and apathy with a uniquely engaging pro-active stance. Examples of such intervention range from ritual practices and healing ceremonies of the indigenous people to Goddess revivalism and Earth worship of eco-feminists. They share a concern for environment and display a spiritual sensitivity toward other than human, coming together as an alternative space for doing politics with the ritual process of which environmental consciousness and awareness of interconnectedness of all life is part.

I think of Stihia in the performative plurality of magics that Hume and Drury try to foreground in their anthropological study and the activist politics in which these magics participate. The project of Stihia is a project of (techno-) shamanic ritual charged with sacred meaning. It pertains to the sound-led worship of the Aral as deity but extends worshipping to the actual creation of the Aral on sonic plane. The performance goes beyond the visual gratification one may expect to derive from the encounter with an artwork that makes a claim on a possibility of experiencing the disappeared Sea. It creates a different spatial proposition that constructs reality that one can gain access to and inhabit. The desert is turned into a sea of sound, in the figurative and literal meanings of the word, both simulating and stimulating the performance of the Aral subject. It is

sonically transformed to allow for a radical realist endeavor to meet the sea on new terms of its existence and inexistence, through the paradox of its presence and absence.

Sounds generate worlds, and we enact these worlds, inhabiting and performing their invisible volumes, as Salomé Voegelin maintains in her philosophical account of sound. Arguing for a plurality of reality that is confirmed in the actual sonic possibilities of our life-world, she speaks against an absolute identity, location, and view of reality, seeking to articulate a generative process of sounding and listening, the process from which more than one real can be made discernible. She writes: “Sound does not propose but generates the heard whose fictionality is thus not parallel but equivalent: it produces a possible actual fiction rather than a possible parallel fiction and sounds as ‘world-creating predicate’. Sonic fictions do not propose a bridge between the actual and the possible but make the possibility of actuality apparent, building reality in the contingent and rickety shape of its own formless form. Thus, the sound artwork as sonic fiction is a phenomenological, a generative fiction, rather than a referential fiction.”<sup>220</sup> Rethinking the invisible world of sound in a plurality of “slices” of what the real could be, Voegelin calls for a radical imagination of possibilities produced in the creative, reciprocal, and fluid entirety of the sonic encounter that allows for ongoing “inter-action”, “inter-vention”, and “inter-invention” of what there is to be experienced. Sound pluralizes the world and, in the direct realist sense, gives the world many possible truths.<sup>221</sup> It lays a

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<sup>220</sup> Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds*, 51.

<sup>221</sup> Voegelin’s work takes as its point of departure literary theory of possible worlds to argue for an essentially different sonic realism. She draws on Ruth Ronen and Marie-Laure Ryan, as well as on Umberto Eco’s articulation of “small worlds” and W. H. Auden’s “secondary worlds” to argue for a clear-cut difference between the worlds “projected by the text” and the possible worlds of sound. Literary fictions (“logical worlds”) are autonomous (parallel) realities that bear no consequences to actual reality, being “unable to intervene” in the creation of real events,

different track to how we think of the actuality of encounters that fall out of representation, precipitating in the sonic deliveries of fact. Soundwork can be accessed as a “real possible world” which can be lived and performed in its invisible space and temporal simultaneity: “To travel via sound into the world of the work enables a critical immersion, to live in reciprocation of what there is, to explore its aesthetic materiality, and work out its sense and meaning from within its sensorial composition. It is not a matter of literary empathy, nor of reading a text, producing a synthesis of its entities, but of living in the actuality of the work as a real possible world and, from this complicity, to work out meanings and consequences for an actual reality through the complex and mobile connecting, disconnecting, and reconnecting of possibilities.”<sup>222</sup>

Stihia can be understood through the propositional tasks of Voegelin’s philosophy to override the logics of visibility, identity, and fixity with a creative participation in “the world’s mobile form”, one that cannot be grasped with certainty and determination. The formless space of sound in its voluminous dimensionality and contingent situation is not governed by “a tyranny in the visual form that holds us in a certain place and demands a certain name,” as Voegelin points out.<sup>223</sup> It fosters a fluid and generative connection to the world, one that does not call for a distinction between fact and fiction, real and unreal, but insists on the possibility of living an indistinct sonic truth. Stihia’s provocative insistence on more than one reality in the actuality of the Aral’s spatial sonic presence was marked by the project’s purpose to orchestrate a break with the given visual

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whereas sonic fictions are counterfactual as they create “real variants of this world”. (Voegelin, *The Political Possibility of Sound*, 26)

<sup>222</sup> Voegelin, *Sonic Possible Worlds*, 60.

<sup>223</sup> Voegelin, *The Political Possibility of Sound*, 119-120.

geography and render possible a new “sonic thing” of the Sea. The lure of the possible sea (out) of sound as attempted by the project was directed toward practical ends in the situation of hopelessness and despair, in which the making of a new real was part of a healing ritual through which larger benefits for the community could be realized.

The radical enactment of the Aral Sea as enactment of a fantasy, dream, and otherworld was complicated by the techno-shamanic project of rave while also conveyed by the world-making possibilities of sound to which radical realist view offered one potential explanation. Stihia engaged with the invocational task of sound to put the Aral Sea back on the map, to give that which was lost to the community, to grant the collective wishes. Its rehabilitation effort to materialize the inexistent sea with its fictional sonority was a curious attempt at a “magic trick” that did not seek to create an effective illusion but rather a possible world that can be lived and experienced. The performance conjured a sonic image of the sea and the world of this image as a measure of recovery in discovery of the ineffable non-representational indeterminate truth through the encounter by which the magicalized tale of the Aral’s revival was made into a new given.

Ascribing a magical quality to sound, Stihia sought to express a religious impulse, a faith in the wonders of sounded possibilities that the techno-shamanic ceremony could uniquely afford. It also sought to extend its experiment to far-reaching consequences, making its way into the regional politics of ecological and economic emergencies, and obliging toward a collective wellbeing. The project was inspired by the shamanic care ethics of ancestral rainmakers the role of whom was to assure the survival of the others, granting salvation to the desiccated land. And it acted on this inspiration, confronting the apocalyptic vista of the Aral Sea with a promise of recovery and a hopeful stance toward

the future. Suleimanov conceived Stihia as a practical formulation of Jeff Mills' renowned proposition that techno music "wasn't designed to be dance music, it was designed to be a futuristic statement." He wanted the project to hold a futurist conviction and have the effect of positive and decisive anticipation of the Aral Sea's return.<sup>224</sup> Stihia became such a project, bringing out in its refusal to engage with the language of the end of the world the very spirit of collective working toward a different possible future in which the human bond with habitat is strengthened through creative propositions of alternative political actions.

### **"Pushkin Laboratories": the making of "eco-institutions"**

I want to extend my reflection about the situated response to local crises by way of what I called shamanic sounds to another case of activist involvement which was invested in magical insight and therapeutic effect. In the summer of 2016, a group of young Russian poets from the greater St. Petersburg area launched a uniquely integrative outdoor performance that joined poetry reading to a sound healing experiment. The poets made a circle, setting up a stage for what sounded to me like a ritual. They recited their texts as if chanting a mantra, carefully adjusting to the sound of Tibetan singing bowls played in a random harmonic sequence. One of them would strike the bowls to find a singing tone while another would calibrate their reading to the tone, locking in resonance with the sounding space of the instruments, the voices, and the background. The process was a feedback loop: what was listened urged a response, and what was responded urged a new listen. It was a way of fine tuning to some greater frequency through the continually

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<sup>224</sup> Tom Faber, "Stihia: An Electronic Dawn In Uzbekistan," *Resident Advisor*, 15 October 2019, <https://www.residentadvisor.net/features/3546>

changing dialogical contributions of sounding counterparts.

The performance was a meditative journey that emerged in the rhythms of sounding and listening. As the poets were taking turns around the circle, they pushed further to new intensities, fostering the onset of daydreaming. Their collective coming pertained to a procedure through which one could facilitate being present in a new sensational way, awakened by an encounter with the ineffable. The curator of the event Vladimir Beliaev called the action the Sowers of Space [*Seiateli prostranstva*], seeking to foreground its pedagogical intent to foster a collective making of the world that is marked by intensive listening and responsive becoming, and that is framed by one's situated being in a shared habitat. The action required an attitude of focus to create a kind of tonal relation with the surroundings, a state of wholeness and wellbeing. The sound of Tibetan singing bowls facilitated collective attention, rendering a connection with the space of the other through the spiritual exercise that invested the surroundings with a new sacred meaning.

The project was an attempt at commanding a sound healing session to artistic and political needs. Beliaev worked as sound therapist, performing sound massage treatments with Tibetan singing bowls and teaching sound healing techniques to local audiences. The Sowers of Space was his personal endeavor to step up engagement with the therapeutics of sound for creative principles and activist goals of collective assembly. As artist, Beliaev was not drawn to revolutionary rhetoric or frontline confrontational activism like some of the Russian poets with whom he collaborated. His own poetry did not exactly integrate any explicit political statements, oppositional narratives, or formal propositions, remaining abstractly potential and meditative in content. It however was

bound to political moments when it was brought to public gatherings and joined to activist intentions. Beliaev sought expressions of solidarity and active dialogue through the ethical imperative of poetic participations rather than articulations of concrete texts. The project “Pushkin Laboratories” of which the Sowers of Space action was part in 2016 was such a quest for a functional and expressive contribution to community and its localized struggles and political encounters.

“Pushkin Laboratories” were launched when political opposition in Russia was particularly strong and public activism dovetailed with commitment to the anti-Kremlin movement. In the Pushkin-Pavlovsk townships where Beliaev resided, protests kept gaining momentum, resonating broadly with the population. Socially engaged publics formed communities and coalitional groups, speaking to what was happening across Russia but keeping focus on local experiences and concerns. Among several initiatives, the organization *Grazhdanin Pushkin* came to prominence in its efforts to fight Russia’s authoritarian and capitalist system at municipal and borough levels. It was founded by Aleksandr Beliaev, a local activist whom Vladimir Beliaev showed unwavering support. In its early days, the project was invested in human rights advocacy, bringing to attention the 2011-2012 political arrests and critiquing the regime. But it shortly shifted focus to local environmental concerns, presenting them as an outcome of Russia’s extensive corruption and crony capitalism.<sup>225</sup>

Vladimir Beliaev actively popularized the agenda of *Grazhdanin Pushkin* on the social media platforms of “Pushkin Laboratories”, standing in solidarity with the

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<sup>225</sup> For an overview of *Grazhdanin Pushkin*, see Tatiana Vol’tskaia, “Dazhe esli pridetsia sidet’, ia ostanus’ zdes’,” *Radio Svoboda*, 10 February 2016, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/27534013.html>; also see the organization's social media account: <https://vk.com/pushkingo>

organization on many issues. “Pushkinskie Laboratorii” *Vkontakte* page, for instance, became a display of activist camaraderie and participation in the local environmental movement.<sup>226</sup> Among many concerns that spur the movement, most urgent were the illegal privatization and deforestation of Babolovsky Park, poor management of Volokhonskaia landfill, and large-scale development of the settlement Iuzhnyi that put at risk of severe degradation local rivers, forests, and wetlands. These issues were at the core of crisis that revealed the rapidly advancing capitalist takeover of local natures.

The virtual *mise en scène* of “Pushkin Laboratories” marked by frequent references to local crises was reflective of the project’s political stance. The actual format of the project was a creative adaptation of this stance. Vladimir Beliaev did not resort to the clichéd form of protesting, instead seeking a more unconventional way of showing up to local concerns. He referred to “Pushkin Laboratories” as an expression of “artisanal actionism” [*kustarnyi aktsionizm*], encouraging a space of appearance created through self-installation and land squatting [*samozakhvat*] of the areas to which capitalist endeavors tried to claim possession and ownership.<sup>227</sup>

The project involved a series of walking tours and urban occupations across the parks and green spaces of the Pushkin-Pavlovsk townships, with occasional detouring to the city of St. Petersburg. Beliaev sought to expand poetry practice to what he imagined as a process of “affective transactions”: that of practical poetry actions through which one

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<sup>226</sup>See <https://vk.com/pushkinlab>, where Vladimir Beliaev posts about activist concerns and environmental politics, along with more general community affairs.

<sup>227</sup> The artist statement and description of the project could be found on its website [www.pushkinlab.ru](http://www.pushkinlab.ru), which had been inactive.

could foster new bondings and new beings with the surroundings. The process pertained to landscaping, directly conveying the title of the project – the landscape poetry festival. Instead of planting the trees, the poets deposited poetry, walking around and leaving visible and invisible traces of their action. “Texts and spaces constitutive to the route-as-plot structure of the project were the process of creating an artwork,” Beliaev explained, imagining a dialogical model of poetry and its possible constructive role in putting new values in the place of those fostered by destructive capitalist interests. (Ibid)

Performing from the oppositional stance to capitalism, “Pushkin Laboratories” engaged with the psychogeographical principles of the *dérive*, seeking to confront the capitalist production of space in the local context. Taking to account social and ecological histories of the performance sites, Beliaev charted a preliminary “plot-route” [*siuzhet-marshrut*] for a series of *dérives* and used poetry as a way of producing ambiance maps. *Dérive*, or drifting, is a concept developed by French artist and revolutionary Guy Debord in the 1950s. Defined as a “technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances”, *dérive* is one way of encountering urban surroundings and developing awareness of their psychogeographical effects.<sup>228</sup> The performer “penetrates” the city to navigate “self-contained” ambiances and drafts a psychogeographical survey.<sup>229</sup> The idea is to nurture a relation with the city by disregarding demarcated areas defined by physical distance,

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<sup>228</sup> Debord, “Theory of the *Dérive*,” 151. Psychogeography, defined here in reference with Debord’s work, means a study of the effects of geographical environment on the emotional and behavioral lives of people. (Debord, “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography,” 34.)

<sup>229</sup> Debord, “Theory of the *Dérive*,” 158-159.

instead trying to localize “distinct psychic atmospheres” through the making of psychogeographical guides.<sup>230</sup>

Transition from a map that measures the distances to a map that registers a change of ambiances breaks with the assumption that the urban experience is anticipated by preconceived social conditions associated with physical borders. For Debord, who critiqued alienation and passivity of the capitalist society in his 1967 manifesto *The Society of the Spectacle*, psychogeographical investigation of the city was a tactic of confronting the capitalism’s seizure of the environment through the reign of the visual and the spectacular. The spectacle as “a social relation among people, mediated by images” sustained the expansion of capitalism, its tentacular operationality driving society’s colonization by capital.<sup>231</sup> It was “the heir of all the weaknesses of the Western philosophical project which was to understand activity, dominated by the categories of *seeing*”. (19) In this regard, the practice of the *dérive* entailed being anti-ocularcentric. It meant to reject the visual organization of spaces, contours of the terrain, and scenes of the spectacle, cultivating a more “blind”, deranged and aimless, way of relating that would challenge the hegemony of the eye and reveal another sense of reality. Opposing the influence of propaganda by which capitalism persuaded the masses to buy into the “spectacular” experience of space, Debord approached space with a radical denouncement of inequality, consumerism, and capitalist ideology. The urban landscape could not be assumed by the status assigned to it by elegant streets or poor

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<sup>230</sup> Debord, “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography,” 38.

<sup>231</sup> Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 4.

neighborhoods, he argued, calling for a demystification of all the envisaged figurations of cityscape.<sup>232</sup>

“Pushkin Laboratories” were inspired by Debord’s renewed cartography, drawing both from its model of ambience as a navigational compass and its critique of capitalism as a guiding principle. In 2016, one of the performing poets Nikita Sungatov gave a talk on the *dérive* as part of the “plot-route”, examining the neo-Debordian intent of Beliaev’s project. Conceptualizing the *dérive* as a practice that carried on with the battle cry of the avant-garde – the merging of art and life, he spoke about the revolutionary potential of the Situationist agenda and its appeal to the Russian poets-actionists who waged a battle against the capitalist organization of life.<sup>233</sup> “Pushkin Laboratories” came up with a poetry-based version of the *dérive*, making an alternative map of local sites to contest the right of the state and its affiliated businesses to owe public spaces and transform them for capital gain.

In a series of constructed situations, the poets occupied green sites, attempting to remake them through the material encounters with poetry. They dressed up the sites like living spaces, positioning objects of poetry (*tablichki*) against tree trunks or around tree branches, bringing things like portable closet and kitchen oven for a close analogy with the household, using various script-bearing artefacts to personalize the space. This was their way of creating landmarks by which they designated a form of intervention directly pertinent to the *dérive*. Along with landmarking, they used “soundmarking” to signal

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<sup>232</sup> See Debord, “Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography,” 38-40.

<sup>233</sup> See recording of Sungatov’s talk that took place in Pushkin’s Nizhnii park on 19 June 2016, “Pushkinskie Laboratorii 2016. Kafedra bystrogo prigotovleniia,” *YouTube* video posted by Alisa Beliaeva on 9 January 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zr6h-ePZQpw>

their actions and map them along the way. When Beliaev was still developing the concept of the project, he called soundmarking a “dialogue of the spoken word and space in which it resounded” (*dialog slova i prostranstva, v kotorom ono zvuchit*), making it integrative to the idea of “eco-institutions”.<sup>234</sup> He once wrote, contemplating about the relational possibilities afforded by the project: “It is the fourth time that the landscape poetry festival “Pushkin Laboratories” performs a series of occupations across the parks of the Pushkin-Pavlovsk townships. What drives the “Laboratories”? Is it a desire to rethink festival as a format, an aspiration to artisanal actionism, a dream of creating eco-institutions that would be set up in the (metro)polis to renew it?.. The project is a conjoining of the psychogeographical *dérive* and research, an inquiry into the relation between poetry and space of its performance. It maps out a route that is replete with poetry creations. Participants may decide to be an audience or engage in a collective action. For some the process may seem nothing more than a tour, but it is the very act of touring that offers the benefits of total attention, as it relates to the experience during the breaks when the poets take rest, catching their breath while summoning the word and the voice, and learning that the word and the voice in turn summon them too.”<sup>235</sup>

Seeking to creatively revitalize contested sites, Beliaev advanced his political stance against local revitalization projects that did not ensure any measure of ecological sustainability. “Pushkin Laboratories” took place in Babolobskii, Pavlovskii, and Nizhnii (Otdelnyi) Parks, each of which had become an ecologically mistreated area. Babolovskii

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<sup>234</sup> “Landscape poetry festival ‘Pushkinskie laboratorii’,” *Gorod Pishkin Info*, 5 June 2012, <http://gorod-pushkin.info/puskinlab-16-06-2012>

<sup>235</sup> See the 2015 “PushkinLab press-release”, [https://vk.com/doc404065\\_393667407?hash=54348d1c2262291237&dl=75f6b9da9a6d9e4582.5](https://vk.com/doc404065_393667407?hash=54348d1c2262291237&dl=75f6b9da9a6d9e4582.5)

Park was sought as a site for a resort development project funded by a network of corrupt businesses.<sup>236</sup> Pavlovskii Park was sought for an expansion of the massive suburb construction project Iuzhnyi.<sup>237</sup> Nizhnii (Otdelnyi) Park was long neglected by the authorities, steadily turning into a landfill.<sup>238</sup> Multiple petitions made a plea for saving the parks of the Pushkin-Pavlovsk townships from aggressive land developers, showing a greater concern with the illegal privatization of public space.<sup>239</sup> Beliaev's project emerged in the context of this local protest movement, coming up against the capitalist imperative to turn urban green oases into profitable commodities. It sought to foster a sense of connection to a common habitat, making claim to ecological citizenship through a conceptual frame of "eco-institutions".

"Eco-institution" as I understand it after Beliaev is a project of eco-instituting that enacts a neo-Debordian move toward an anti-spectacular ethics. It seeks an ecological cohabitation of the world in a lived situated manner, bringing one in touch with the surroundings and raising awareness of shared space through the multisensory spatial experience rather than solely ocular gaze. For Beliaev, eco-instituting entailed a form of commoning that countered alienation, apathy, and anaesthetization encouraged by the

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<sup>236</sup> See petition "Save Babolovskii park!" (*Sokhranim Babolovskii park!*) launched by Grazhdanin Pushkin: <https://www.change.org/p/спасём-баболовский-парк-от-застройки-коттеджами>

<sup>237</sup> See petition "Why Do We Protest on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May and Call for Your Support" (*Pochemu my idem na 'Marsh v zashchitu Peterburga' 1 maia i prizyvaem vas prisoediniat'sia k nashei kolonne?*) launched by Grazhdanin Pushkin: <https://www.change.org/p/1354001/u/20141300>

<sup>238</sup> See "Igor' Alekhin za chistyĭ gorod i iasnoe myshlenie," *Gorodskoi Kaleidoskop*, 11 June 2015, <https://www.gk-news.ru/2015/06/11/игорь-алехин-за-чистый-город-и-ясное-мышление/>

<sup>239</sup> See petition "Save the *Tsarskie* parks of Pushkin and Pavlovsk!" (*Sokhranite Tsarskie parki Pushkina i Pavlovskia*) launched by Grazhdanin Pushkin: <https://www.change.org/p/сохраните-царские-парки-пушкина-и-павловска>

spectacular society that he set himself to oppose. In the very first year of doing the project, he spoke about overcoming alienation and recovering the experience of collective agency by direct poetry action that could extend beyond the production of texts to a production of movements, sensory presences, and ambiances. He later restated his intention, reflecting on bringing the process of poetry “into the woods” to generate ecological connections through the “Brownian motion” of the walking “humans-texts” [*ludei-tekstov*], among other creative ways.<sup>240</sup> In trying to create an environment of collective making, Beliaev hoped to bring the focus to alternative ways of activism that could enact interventions on behalf of the Pushkin-Pavlovsk community which had been opposing for-profit regulatory endeavors of the authorities.

The Sowers of Space action engaged the ethico-aesthetic imperative of “Pushkin Laboratories” and provided a new grounding for Beliaev’s ideas. When I asked Beliaev about the action, he spoke about it in ethical terms, trying to foreground its relational aims, at the same time addressing its distinctly aesthetic pursuit of what he called a “poetry of sound”. Tibetan singing bowls in this case were the needed instruments to probe what a sound, the poetry of it, can do. “For me, the sound of the singing bowls is a poetry of intensities (*sostoianii*) and visionary ventures (*vizionerstva*), one that engages with the transformation of energy, a poetry without proof (*zaveshchaniia*), without evidence (*svidetel’suva*), a poetry of direct action,” he wrote to me, mentioning about some relational “totality” (*total’snosti*) that could “yield intense affective impressions” (*pozvoliaet dostich’ moshchnykh affektov vospriiatii*). Beliaev sought a positive affective valence associated with the healing sonorities of Tibetan singing bowls, the kind

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<sup>240</sup> I refer here to a series of actions in Nizhnii Park. See the 2016 program of the festival: [https://vk.com/topic-38056524\\_33637445](https://vk.com/topic-38056524_33637445)

of valence that made sound a *source* of direct action. He was deeply invested in the project not only as poet but also as sound practitioner who looked for a link between music, ecology, and shamanic ritual, and tried to speak his activist intent through this link.

### **“Good vibrations”, or performing the magicity of sound**

Tibetan singing bowls are objects that embody the promise of wellbeing. They are used in clinical and ritual settings as technologies of positive “affect engineering”.<sup>241</sup> The practitioner plays the bowls to catalyze affective transformation in the subject, exploiting so-called “good vibrations” to provide physical, emotional, and spiritual comfort typically associated with a positive affective spectrum. The affective program of healing sessions comprises the progression to a situation in which the subject experiences physiological and psychological benefits in the process of reaching a state of energetic balance. This state of balance can be described in terms of parameters of physical and mental health.<sup>242</sup>

The practitioners playing the bowls are called masters of sound. In the past, they were monks who learnt the secrets of playing from lamas. Today they are more of clinicians working in health and meditation centers. Some are even mainstream medical professionals who integrate complementary medicine treatments into their practice. Oncologist Mitchell L. Gaynor, for instance, used Tibetan singing bowls on cancer

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<sup>241</sup> “Affect engineering” is a term that I borrow from Paul Jasen’s discussion of sound design approaches. See Jasen, *Low End Theory*, 15; 65-67; 102-114; 168-170.

<sup>242</sup> Goldsby at al., “Effects of Singing Bowl Sound”; Landry, “Physiological and Psychological Effects.”

patients, expanding the established treatment protocol. In his book on the beneficial effects of sound, he argues for a more holistic care for people living with life-threatening illness, presenting the case of vibrational medicine. I borrow the term “good vibrations” from him. Gaynor writes about effective health improvements during sound-centered meditation, advocating for a more widespread use of the singing bowls. He identifies “life-affirming” prospects of sound therapy, given the improved physical condition and “positively altered” emotional state of those who experienced vibrational treatments.<sup>243</sup>

Medical anthropologist Karen Brummel-Smith writes about sound healings as interventions that pertain to a “science of the ineffable”. The ineffable in her articulation is legitimate knowledge that may inform a conventional biomedical perspective. Ancient wisdoms, indigenous traditions, shamanic practices can expand the Western science premised on Cartesian mind-body dualism, conveying a more holistic experience of being in the world. They prompt asking broader questions about the physical and spiritual aspects of health and foster an understanding of life in terms other than those of dichotomy. As Brummel-Smith shows, non-Western perspectives on health, such as those of indigenous healers, begin to shape Western practices that have long dismissed the ineffable and presented illness outside the complex forces of life and dynamism of our existence. Sound healing brings back these forces and locates the secret of health in the shared vibrational energies. If all life is vibrational and vibration impacts wellbeing, illness and the general state of ill-being may be directly connected to vibrational dissonances. Sound healers attend to these dissonances, discovering healing resonances

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<sup>243</sup> Gaynor, *Healing Power of Sound*, 107-113.

and endeavoring a holistic mending of the body, mind, and spirit through energy fields that connect the human being to life all around.<sup>244</sup>

As master of sound, Beliaev was fascinated with the vibrational continuum of life and sought to embrace it in the Sowers of Space action. He wanted to design an environment of good vibrations, exploring the positivity of collective wellbeing that relating through vibrating could afford. The sound of Tibetan singing bowls operated as an ethical-affective strategy that fostered the obligation of care and guided the process of healing that assumed some universal relations of vibration that held everything together. It served to create a ritual performance in a uniquely audiogenetic way, something that Beliaev thought could disclose a sacred mystery of the all-embracing meditative state.

“Audiogenetic” derives from *audiogenesis*, a term that was coined by cultural anthropologist Donald Tuzin who used it to describe the formative process of low-frequency sound and vibration in the numinous experience of the Arapesh people. In the Arapesh culture, certain acoustic events (like thunder or animal roar) were mystified because they were experientially complex. Tuzin studied their complexity, identifying the subaudible component to which the Arapesh were particularly vulnerable, showing signs of anxiety, fear, and dread. The subaudible is that what is felt but not necessarily heard, it is a vibrational input of sound that operates in the logics of sensation. As Tuzin argues, the Arapesh summoned the subaudible in their ritual activities, using the throb-, drone-, and din- producing musical instruments, such as bullroarers, amplifying pipes, and large drums, to design spaces in which they could be seduced into belief. Their own interpretation of low frequency vibrations echoed the studies of infrasonic exposure.

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<sup>244</sup> Brummel-Smith, “Music and Meditative Mind,” 309-310.

Infrasonic vibrations assail the body, disrupting its sensorimotor and psychomotor functions and bringing it into an altered out-of-balance (“out-of-body” and “out-of-time”) state. It is in this state that the body becomes conducive to the religious participation.<sup>245</sup>

Recently, sound theorist Paul Jasen offered a more enactive understanding of audiogenesis, exploring the settings in which vibration was taken as a strategy to facilitate numinous encounters. With examples of Christian ritual spaces and bass-led dancefloors, he presents the wider extent of audiogenetic engagements. What brings these engagements together is a preoccupation with “the sonic body” that becomes “unhomed” by vibratory relations and begins to act from a different position, making itself prone to modulatory and manipulatory processes. Numinous sound design or affective engineering, as Jasen explains, entails awareness of these processes and further experimentation with them at the visceral-bodily level. It calls for a project of numinous assemblage (Church-organ, for instance) and emergent mythic becomings of the sonic body.<sup>246</sup>

I follow from Tuzin and Jasen to pose the Sowers of Space action as one that employs audiogenetic strategy to design a ritual space of good vibrations and healing powers, a space on the positive affective vector through which the process of divine intervention could be extended to an activist act. My use of the term “audiogenetic” does not bind audiogenesis to the subauditory conditions and negative affects of vibrational milieus, as in Tuzin, instead it seeks to expand the connection between vibratory relations and spiritual sensibilities. When Tuzin talks about appropriation of sound as “the medium

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<sup>245</sup> Tuzin, “Miraculous Voices,” 584-586.

<sup>246</sup> See Jasen, *Low End Theory*, 3-31; 63-112.

through which to exchange messages with the gods”, shifting attention from music to the material workings of sound, he suggests that what “arouses feelings of the uncanny” emerges in the process of vibrational force that can appeal, seduce, and convert.<sup>247</sup> According to him, it is a vibratory makeup of sonorous environments that charges bodies, and the field between bodies and surroundings, opening the channel through which to spark moments of collective becoming. Exploring this process of charging and modulating the collective space, the process of sound’s “magicality”, Tuzin interrogates particular materialist strategies and material encounters of making the transcendental body. I think of Beliaev’s engagement with Tibetan singing bowls along the operative logics that Tuzin examines, but on a different affective spectrum. Just as there are anxiety-arousing vibrations, those that unhome, unsettle, and confuse, there are comforting and calming ones, those that give the sense of clarity, deep presence, and connectedness. What Beliaev sought was exactly these active links of creating the rehomed conditions for bringing the collective body into balance, facilitating its spiritual becoming marked by harmony, collectedness, and relational awareness. The vibrational energy of Tibetan singing bowls was channeled to draw connections to the divine as the basis for a situated environmental stewardship into which Beliaev’s activist efforts was greatly invested.

### **Conjoining the neo-shamanic aspirations with an etho-ecological experiment**

The Sowers of Space action must be seen within the context of broader engagements with Tibetan singing bowls in Russia where shamanic tradition and clinical practice are deeply

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<sup>247</sup> Tuzin, “Miraculous Voices,” 580-581.

intertwined. Russia's historical ties to Tibet, Nepal, and Siberia informed cultural perspectives on Buddhism and shamanism, as well as current religious (spiritual) trends among the Russians who are open to neo-shamanic ideologies and healing methods. Russian healthcare system is divided between the private and public sectors that operate in parallel, making it possible for complimentary medicine practitioners to offer services outside the centralized mainstream care system. Masters of sound established themselves within the community of alternative healers, running neo-shamanic treatment and training centers across the country. One of Russia's most acclaimed masters Viktor Ogui is an exemplary case for understanding Russian neo-shamanic cultural subjectivity and resistances it nurtures. Ogui is a successful practitioner who has many followers and several treatment centers. Inquiring into his work may help determine the values of Russian neo-shamanic culture to which the artist and healer Vladimir Belyaev belonged and assess how these values could have been mobilized for a vibration-based activist performance that Belyaev attempted.

Ogui promoted the institutional culture of healing with Tibetan singing bowls, developing a concept of clinic that combined performance and pedagogy. A clinic was a place of worship, a place of knowledge, and a place of empowerment where one could seek spiritual gains, physical improvement, and deeper connection to the world. It was a place that held out a promise of "a more caring and happier becoming". And for Ogui, it was a space of certain messianic expectations from the sacred sounds of Tibetan singing bowls to life around. Like many other Russian masters of sound working with Tibetan singing bowls, Ogui adhered to the Russian shamanic traditions and Buddhist fundamentals and framed sacred journeys with Tibetan singing bowls as a neo-shamanic

project of recovery that could set itself against the capitalist culture of stress, overwork, and carelessness. Advocating for collective care, he preached about societal change for the sake of constituting a community that would be mindful of the ills of society and seek a living harmonized with both common sense and the world. This coming community was imagined as a form of cohabitation of the human being and environment, a form of assemblage of sounding and listening, of giving and receiving, of greeting and staying grateful.<sup>248</sup>

Ogui's philosophy of gratitude was centered on the idea of a common world in which desires of things (like car) and goals (like success) were replaced by passions and imperatives of love for the world and the Earth. It extended to sound healing practice that encouraged ecological mindfulness and the pursuit of deeper connections with nature.<sup>249</sup> Framing spiritual performance with Tibetan singing bowls as a new occulture of care in the contemporary moment of the capitalist process that encouraged consumption, competition, and neglect, Ogui promoted a ritual responsibility for the world wellbeing, holding environmental subjectivity against the limits of the existing relational efforts. He wanted to broaden the understanding of recovery toward a sense of place and sense of planet, inviting his followers to discover the "sites of Power of the planet" (mesta Sily planet).<sup>250</sup> Lake Svetloiar, for instance, was one of the places he would bring people to,

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<sup>248</sup> See interview (in Russian) with Viktor Ogui: "Tibetskie poiushchie chashi: 'Ioga zvuka' ili 'lovushka dlia uma'?" *Hanuman*, 17 August 2015, <https://hanuman.ru/blog/intervyu-s-masterom/tibetskiye-poyushchiye-chashi-yoga-zvuka-ili-lovushka-dlya-uma>

<sup>249</sup> See interview (in Russian) with Viktor Ogui: "Samyi prostoi sposob garmonizatsii prostranstva – eto blagodarnost'!" *Vegetarian.ru*, 28 July 2015, <https://vegetarian.ru/interview/samyi-prostoy-sposob-garmonizatsii-prostranstva-eto-blagodarnost-.html>

seeking a deep encounter with cosmic energies which the outdoor performance of healing with Tibetan singing bowls could amplify. Performances in the natural settings of sacred fields, woods, lakes, and mountains to which Ogui referred in his philosophical discussions embraced the healing paradigm that stressed the importance of ecological relation and vibrational completion of living and that advanced the anti-capitalist stance of neo-shamanic propositions.

The Sowers of Space action echoed the ideological arguments of neo-shamanic aspirations to probe vibrational fields that enabled a healing process extending beyond the individual scenes of treatment to shared acts of worldly participation. It constructed a situation of intervention in which the neo-shamanic project of wellbeing was joined to the agenda of the Situationist *derive* in order to incite anti-capitalist politics in the local activist circles. The action by extension was a healing session in which the healer-poet probed the world of positively valorized sounds, making these sounds a process of poetry and relationality.

For Beliaev, poetry was more than an art of it in a written, spoken, or crafted form, it was a relational process. The 2016 performance with Tibetan singing bowls to which I referred so far was followed by a series of other similar performance which Beliaev did not document. One of such performances was the 2017 Sowers of Space action, also called the Sound-led Genesis of Vortices (Seiateli prostranstva. Chashetvorenii vikhrei) – a “ritual of purifying the urban space with the sound of Tibetan singing bowls” (ritual ochishcheniia gorodskogo prostranstva tibetskoi poiushchei chashei). The action started at the gates of Ekaterinskiy Park (Orlovskie vorota) and

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<sup>250</sup> See for instance, Ogui, *Tibetskie poiushchie chashi*, where he briefly discusses such pilgrimages.

continued through the Aleksandrovskiy Park into the area of the Large Pond (Bolshoi prud) of Ekaterinskiy Park where Beliaev delivered a healing ceremony. Drawing on the Situationist project, he wrote: “Exhaustion of our society of the carnival, the society of the spectacle, with its own self points to the necessity of doing everyday rituals, seeking the real, that which is not mediated by indirect relationships, the real that connects all the living and breathing.” He sought connections that did not assume a form of belonging or possessing but rather a form of exposing a bare truth, bare life, and bare poetry, something that he imagined as a manner of “vortices”. The state of tension associated with the organization of life in the capitalist society of the spectacle was juxtaposed to the state of equilibrium, the primordial vibrational field at its most vital potent germinality. The action took on the conditions of genesis, the outset of poetry beyond words, poetry beyond poetry. The “bare poetry” of sound was freed from assumptions, conceptions, and rationalizations. It assumed an orchestration of vibration into a co-formation of what was around – “the making of vortices”.<sup>251</sup>

The practice of poetry extended into a vibrational mode of collaboration, or, more precisely, a cohabitation involving the healer-poet and the habitat-world. Isabelle Stengers has argued that “there is no identity of a practice independent of its environment,” rethinking practice toward an ecological condition defined by its milieu. In calling for an approach that takes practice not as what it is but what it may become, she emphasized thinking “par le milieu”, or through the environment. She wrote, proposing an etho-ecological understanding of practice, which recognized the entangled messy and uncertain character of being in a common world: “...no theory gives you the power to

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<sup>251</sup> See “Pushkin Laboratories”, *Vkontakte*, 21 June 2017, [https://vk.com/pushkinlab?w=wall-38056524\\_301](https://vk.com/pushkinlab?w=wall-38056524_301)

disentangle something from its particular surroundings, that is, to go beyond the particular towards something we would be able to recognise and grasp in spite of particular appearances. Here it becomes clear why ecology must always be etho-ecology, why there can be no relevant ecology without a correlate ethology, and why there is no ethology independent of a particular ecology.”<sup>252</sup> The Sowers of Space action invested in the etho-ecological format of poetry, pushing poetry against its formal limits, experimenting with what it may become as practice converging with sound therapy. It shared Beliaev’s aspiration for “eco-institutions”, which manifested in the experiment of eco-clinic – an outdoor clinic inspired by ecological thought, a clinic where etho-acoustic strategies of wellbeing drove the alliance between neo-shamanism, Situationism, and anticapitalist activism, and where the magical will invented a way of practical response.

### **The scenography of magics**

Designating ritual as an admissible form of activism, this chapter probed the therapeutic possibility of sound and the political use of this possibility when the ordinary politics of activist participation did not deliver a positive intervention. The therapeutic possibility connects sound to therapy as its condition and gives elaboration to a distinctly valuable proposal of activist performances that make use of shamanic sounds. I have presented the two case studies of such performances, exploring their shamanic approaches to dealing with local crises and examining how these approaches were pursued through sonic technologies of wellbeing: hypnotic technobeat in the Stihia event and “good vibrations” in the Sowers of Space action.

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<sup>252</sup> Stengers, “Introductory Notes,” 187.

A shamanic approach stands on the grounds of the promise to conjure away the reality of ill-being, invoking a magical touch of sound and investing it with transformative potential. It entails devising a therapeutic intervention for the sake of ethical principles and political gains in the situation of existing urgencies. I have discussed the situation of the Aral crisis in its humanitarian clause and historical and environmental consideration, showing that the loss of the Aral Sea was a material encounter which could be grasped in a range of situated connections with traumatic histories, ecological injustices, economic concerns, and political assertions. As an outdoor performance staged in the desert on the exposed dried bottom of the sea, Stihia was a direct engagement with a sense and the scene of loss, the surrounding environment and living conditions. It operated in the violence of contact with the reality of extreme weather events, arid climate, sandy soils, and severely degraded landscapes. And it aimed at lending itself to this reality with a uniquely radical proposition to make a sea out of sound. The sea of sound was more than an artistic contribution to the restorative justice movement or rehabilitation politics in the region. It was a situated sonic action that embraced healing and divining magics, connecting the ancestral tradition of summoning the rain to the ethico-political goals of techno-communitas. The performance sought a sonic imagination of the lost sea, holding the space as place one could inhabit as a new condition marked by compassion and hospitality as opposed to hostility typically associated with the desert's harsh environment. It nurtured spiritual sensitivity, affirming and strengthening the emotional bond with the natural habitat and advancing a sacramental approach that pursued the unity of humanity and nature as a stance against

the onslaught of the capitalist order and its corresponding ethics of ecological violence to which the Russian politics in the region had given the lived manifestation.

I have also studied the “Pushkin Laboratories” project and the Sowers of Space action with Tibetan singing bowls as part of it, exploring how creative activism took form of ritual engagement that adjoined poetry performance to sound healing session in the pursuit of neo-shamanic eco-centric ethics and the Situationist ideals of a liberated life. I have contextualized this endeavor and examined it as an effort aligned with the orientation of local protest culture and the Russian neo-shamanic project of resistance to the capitalist process. The Sowers of Space action along with the other actions of “Pushkin Laboratories” took place in the green zones of St. Petersburg suburbs, which were the sites of conflict between local residents who joined the fight against environmental offenses of corporate businesses involved in the privatization of communal spaces and the authorities who promoted the profit strategies of these businesses, neglecting greater environmental risks to local natures. The action as much as the entire project was a counteractive measure to the regional politics of land grabs. The poets performed urban occupations, using Situationist techniques of the *dérive* and constructed situations to engage in the critical project of breaking with capitalism by rendering their critique into a propositional force of cohabitation with the world that surrounded them. Tibetan singing bowls as technologies of wellbeing used in therapy and spiritual endeavors served the poets’ needs to put the idea of cohabitation into practice. The performance was a form of dialogue between the poet and environment, poetry and habitat, enacting principles of cohabitation in the ceremonial space created through a

process of “good vibrations” that endowed the activist project with a communicative alternative to formal discursive critique.

I’ve approached *Stihia* and *Sowers of Space* from the place of my listening to their compositional scenography that combines shamanic (stage)craft, environmentalism and justice activism and reclaims a magic conception of matter that leaves a sense of sound’s material participation in the re-enchantment of the world as a harmonious whole. Both projects resound with connections to nature, the shaman-healer, and creation myth, complicating the view of “reality as it is” with that of what it can be in every production of an invisible place that the magics of sound enable. The magics of sound imply the ineffable ways by which sound operates in spaces, opening them to therapeutic possibilities. These are spaces in which divine and activist passions are brought together into one relational project that is extended to a compositional mode of being in the world, one of which Stengers writes in regard to politics that pursue a new organization of collective powers. Stengers elaborates a project of composition with Gaia as a project of collective instituting in which humans attend to life within the habitat they live, learning to think and act with the presence of others in a cosmopolitical way. Referring to ritual contexts of ecofeminist performances as a particular activist arrangement with magics and pragmatic concerns through which a compositional practice can be nurtured, she treats rituals for environmental cause as techniques of involvement in stewardship not as we know of it in its wider institutionalized framework but as we can imagine of it in the “art of paying attention”.<sup>253</sup> Ritual practices of activist witches, for instance, are seen as a system of values that drives the partnership with the living world, a relation from which

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<sup>253</sup> Stengers, *In Catastrophic Times*, 62; “Reclaiming Animism,”; also see Tola “Composing with Gaia,” 15-16.

to resist colonial and capitalist politics. Practical rituals that I studied in this chapter must be seen as compositional efforts to relate to the surroundings through site-specific scenographic actions that engage sound in the act of magic to benefit politically from the therapeutic encounters with the spiritual, ineffable, and divine.

## **The Prophet**

I shall sing until my land is free.

Zavoloka, 22 April 2022

### **Introduction: From the uprising to a revolt in the name the future**

February 2014 was a deadly month in the history of post-Soviet Ukraine. More than a hundred protestors lost their lives to the violence of Berkut police that laid siege to the streets of Kyiv during the Euromaidan uprising. The main plaza Maidan Nezalezhnosti and adjacent streets became a site of massacre, bearing witness to the warlike moments in which Ukrainians had to live to make their way to democracy. What started as a peaceful protest, accompanied by Ukrainian songs and popular slogans, turned into a scene of frantic terror pervaded by the sound of shootings and explosions, screams of the terrified crowd and groans of the wounded protestors.

For Ukrainians who over the years of independence claimed their right to peaceful assembly, such an escalation of nonviolent resistance to a violent end was unprecedented. It incited greater national resentment towards the political regime of the old-fashioned Putin ally Viktor Yanukovich whose efforts to repress Ukrainian rights and freedoms were strongly opposed by the democratically oriented Ukrainians. Yanukovich was openly supported by Putin's closest cronies who sought geopolitical gains. Many Ukrainians considered Yanukovich's alliance with the Russians to be detrimental to the democratic sovereignty of Ukraine, seeing their country on a European rather than Eurasian path. Thousands took to the streets, condemning the violence of Berkut police and demanding the immediate resignation of Yanukovich and his government. The civil unrest quickly spread across the country, turning into the Euromaidan movement which

became known as the Revolution of Dignity. The Euromaidan brought an end to the Yanukovich regime and inspired different forms of resistance to Russia's neo-imperial politics in Ukraine.

Ukraine's leading electronic music artist Kateryna Zavoloka took part in the uprising, recording the madness of it with her small Zoom recorder and then integrating the recorded material into EP "Volya", which was released in late 2014, shortly after Russia's occupation of the Ukrainian territories. In the 2017 interview with the Romanian music critic Miron Ghiu, in which she recalled how she decided to put recordings to work, Zavoloka reflected on her activist practice. She said: "And just after the revolution finished I didn't think to use those field recordings, but when Russia occupied Crimea and started war in the East of Ukraine – I wanted to say something, to make like a prayer, mantra protection for my home country and composed the album called Volya, that can be translated as 'Freedom' and 'Will' from Ukrainian." Her collaboration with protestors during the Euromaidan was built on what she described as "anthropological interest". She wanted to "capture the history" by documenting the collective experience but ended up creating her own version of the event, making the documented sound a site of technological engagement: "I used those samples, mostly as drums and combined them with synthesizers."<sup>254</sup>

Zavoloka was deeply moved by the original sound of the uprising, calling it a symphony of freedom. She said to Ghiu: "This symphony was so impressive to me – you hear those sounds all around yourself, like multi-channel powerful freedom music – that

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<sup>254</sup> Miron Ghiu. "Synthesizers and Sound Modulation. A Conversation with Kateryna Zavoloka," *Black Rhino Music*, 11 December 2017, <https://blackrhinomusic.ro/interviews/synthesizers-and-sound-modulation-a-conversation-with-kateryna-zavoloka/>

was very strong.” “Volya” indeed embraced the powerful sonorities and rhythms of the Euromaidan, sounding out the intensity of revolutionary fervor while also inventing with it toward a new sense of truth.<sup>255</sup> It coupled the real with the fictional, reordering the lived experience of revolution to a vision of the Ukrainian future scripted along the historical struggles for freedom, sovereignty, and statehood, and giving expression to Ukrainian sensibility, grounded in the passions of fighting Russian neo-imperialism, and its “Russian world” ideal.

When Zavoloka said that “Volya” was her direct response to Russia’s politics in Ukraine, she also suggested that it was her investment in the force of the fictional: a synthesized universe of the revolution by which she as artist could speak the Ukrainian will. While protestors whom she recorded struck burnt-out buses with metal sticks to make their voices sound against the given order of things, she turned to electronic music to counter the powers of the given. “Volya” was an act of refusal to accept the conditions imposed, scenarios lived, and futures made. It was a statement against the outcomes predetermined by Russia’s conquest of Ukraine, a move toward imagining a going elsewhere, thinking from a new determining point. In other words, it was an attempt to speak into the *future* that was different from the one Ukrainians were given to live under the terms of Russian aggression, the *future* that was void of russocentrism, neo-imperialism, and military orders, the *future* that broke free from the myths justifying Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

In this chapter, I study the Ukrainian techniques of foreclosing what lies ahead of the neo-imperial present that Ukrainians are living now, exploring how sound is put to

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<sup>255</sup> See <https://zavoloka.com/zavoloka-volya-new-cddigital-ep-is-out-now/>

work for Ukrainian freedom dreams, how it lends support to staging a revolt in the name of the future shaped by a vision of altered destiny. Referring to this process of resistance as the making of Ukrainofuture – the term that denotes a dealing with historical injustice by setting in place new conditions from which futures are imagined, I write toward a Ukrainian project of sounded participation that is ethically situated by its political purpose.

The British music critic Lottie Brazier has compiled a mini anthology of Ukrainian electronic music artists' works for the online platform *Bandcamp Daily* where she suggests that electronic sound productions in Ukraine express and make room for the political. Including Zavoloka's "Volya" on her list, she writes: "The creative work happening in Ukraine is often the direct result of the country's political unrest".<sup>256</sup> Her short essay points to the ways in which Ukrainian electronic music artists engage the political, both explicitly – by setting up activist initiatives like the Construction festival in the eastern city of Dnipro, and implicitly – by taking a vanguard position and developing a project of oppositional sound. Brazier makes it clear that the electronic music scene in Ukraine remains inseparable from the political processes in the country that has been in turmoil since the Euromaidan uprising and Russia's war. It remains inseparable from the processes of collective becoming and living through cultural and political transformations. Thinking with Brazier's initial registering of the activist impulse in the community of Ukrainian electronic music artists, I explore the field of Ukrainian sonically signified collective actions in the context of Ukrainian resistance politics. I

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<sup>256</sup> Lottie Brazier. "Ten Artists From Ukraine's Vanguard Electronic Scene," *Bandcamp Daily*, 20 March 2018, <https://daily.bandcamp.com/scene-report/ukraine-vanguard-electronic-list>

come to imagine these actions as spaces of defiant presence, spaces in which one can come up against unfreedom that has kept Ukrainians confined to the conditions of the Soviet past and neo-Soviet future, the conditions of Russian imperial dominance. I elaborate from my encounter with these spaces and my understanding of them against the backdrop of Ukrainian historical experience, asking how Ukrainians resist – in a most soundful way – what governs the course of history. Along with the activist project of Zavoloka, I study the projects of Construction and Atom, addressing them within the post-Euromaidan scene of anti-neo-imperial agitations.

Ukrainian response to Russia's neo-imperial ambitions and threats of expansion has been marked by radical distancing from the Soviet past. Ukrainians called for a renunciation of Russia's imperial claims to Ukraine in a wave of decommunization that spread across the country. They demolished Soviet monuments and renounced Soviet heroes, while Russians, on the contrary, embraced the Soviet past with its imperial grandeur and politics of dictatorship. Attending to these stark differences in the post-Soviet experience, I think about the Ukrainian effort of breaking with the imperial scenarios around which Ukrainian futures are shaped as a constructive endeavour of which sound is also part. The works that I address build into a project of sound that carries invisible pressures, displaces the outlived visions, and supports collective dissent. Sound lends itself as a doer of Ukrainian imagination, operating as the prophet of Ukrainian (anarchic) desire. It delivers a mandate for a different future, performing a violation of what invigorates the neo-imperial passions and acts in the service of Russia's colonialist dreams. Its activist procedure operates in an enabling manner, creating the conditions for corrupting and overturning the established codes that drive the imperial

process today, and performing a prophetic calling on Ukrainian life unbound to the cycle of Russia's past and present imperial realizations. This chapter gives account to the prophetic work of sound, gathering from the passionate politics of the Ukrainofuture effort and imagining toward the possibilities that emerge out of these politics. I begin with the discussion of the Ukrainian experience and myths that held Ukrainians in subjection to the Russian imperial will. I proceed with locating the expressions of Ukrainian insurgency in the Euromaidan movement and post-Euromaidan decommunization campaign which were essentially the historical processes of contestation over these myths. I then make a case for Ukrainofuture as a collective endeavour to rise against Russian supremacy and rethink Ukrainian life at the end of the "Russian world" – the world of war and occupation.

### **The Ukrainian experience: the myth of inferiority**

The centuries-long struggle of the Ukrainian people for freedom and national sovereignty did not come to an end with the 1991 Act of Declaration of Independence of Ukraine. It continues today under new conditions of Russia's attack on Ukraine that began in the spring of 2014 and rose to new heights in 2022.<sup>257</sup> To understand the present moment of Russian aggression and the Ukrainian commitment to resist it, I want to draw on the history of systemic imperial and colonial violence against Ukrainians who were subject to enforced inferiority. Russia's latest geopolitical mission to absorb the Ukrainian

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<sup>257</sup> For an overview of Russia's territorial expansionism and nationalist imperialism see Plokhy, *Lost Kingdom: The Quest for Empire and the Making of the Russian Nation*; Bertelsen, *Revolution and War in Contemporary Ukraine*; Grigas, *Beyond Crimea*; and Kushnir, *Ukraine and Russian Neo-Imperialism*.

territories into a neo-Soviet Eurasian imperium is deeply aligned with the old logics and integrationist approaches of the Russian state that has always sought the ideological legitimization of war and occupation through the myths that propagate the Ukrainian inferiority doctrine (aka greater Russia doctrine). I examine these myths, showing that they forge an ideology of Russia's hegemony and call into question the very existence of Ukrainians as a people.

Russia justifies its conquest of Ukraine by evoking a mythical ideal of Russian civilization, or the "Russian world". The geopolitical project of the "Russian world" takes Russianness as a foundational identity to which Ukrainians and other non-Russians who may speak Russian must conform. It entails a creation of a new nation-state of the Russian-speaking "compatriots" living outside the internationally recognized borders of Russia. Rendered as a Eurasia-making mission the goal of which is to restore Russia's imperial grandeur, the "Russian world" project is a quasi-Soviet formation based on a supposed superiority of the Russian people. The ideologue of the "Russian world" and Putin's informal advisor Alexander Dugin spoke frequently about Russia's exclusive right over the people and territories of the former Soviet republics, conceiving of Ukrainians as inferior persons who had to accept the conditions of war in the name of a greater imperial future.<sup>258</sup> Back in 2014, he claimed that Russia's war in Ukraine was

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<sup>258</sup> On Dugin, see Menon and Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine*, 95-96; on his call for violence against non-Russians, see Hovorun, *Political Orthodoxies*, 77-79; on Putin's expansionism shaped by Dugin's narrative, see Gessen, *The Future Is History*, 434-437; on practical pedagogy and patriotic youth culture tied to Dugin's worldview, see Bertelsen, "Introduction," 19; on the anti-Ukrainian agenda of Russia's neo-Eurasianism, see Dugin's own book (in Russian): Dugin, *Ukraina: moia voina [Ukraine: My War]*.

“inevitable”, calling on expanding Russia’s offensive and annexing a larger part of Ukraine into a Novorossia province of Russia.<sup>259</sup>

The term “Novorossia” [New Russia] goes back to 1764 when the Russians conquered the northern Black Sea and Azov lands controlled by the Crimean Khanate and assembled them into an administrative district of the Russian empire. The region was identified by the name until 1917 before subsumed into the Ukrainian SSR (Soviet Socialist Republic). The re-emergence of Novorossia as a geopolitical imaginary in 2014 matched with Putin’s ambitions to re-colonize Ukraine and ensure the empire’s longevity. The Novorossia myth itself has colonial origins, revealing the true nature of Russia’s warmongering. The suffix “new” (Novo-), similarly to “new” in “New England” or “New South Wales”, suggests that “New Russia” is not a region that has “belonged to” or been a “part of” Russia, but rather a product of colonization invested with the idea of otherness.<sup>260</sup> Since 2014, the myth has served to frame Russia’s war in Ukraine as emancipatory and associate the “Russian world” civilizational agenda with Russia’s imperial statehood. It has also served to formulate a new messianic interpretation of the Russian character and nurture a sense of exceptionalism and superiority by virtue of one’s proper Russianness.

Both the “Russian world” and “New Russia” narratives run Russia’s political machine held responsible for past and present warfare operations. They employ the

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<sup>259</sup> See Vladimir Pozner’s interview (in Russian) with Dugin on 21 April 2014, in which Dugin justifies the invasion of Ukraine, *YouTube* video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEwSPzOJvaI>; also see a quick overview of his 2014 statements, Dina Newman, “Russian nationalist thinker Dugin sees war with Ukraine,” *BBC News*, 10 July 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28229785>

<sup>260</sup> Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, 166-167.

superior/inferior dichotomy, subjecting Ukrainians to a minor people status – “a people by the mythmakers of the empire” who had been called “little Russians” [*malorosy*], among other derogatory terms.<sup>261</sup> Just like the Novorossiiia myth, the Malorossiiia [Little Russia] myth has been also revived with a new colonial pronouncement and taken up by the pro-Russian militants in Donbas to speak out Putin’s ambitions to invade the entire Ukraine.<sup>262</sup> Today it fuels Russia’s geopolitical imagination that is coupled to assertions of superiority and warfare-centered conceptualizations of Russia’s “greatness” which justify a violent solution to the Ukrainian question. Together, the Novorossiiia and Malorossiiia myths are the instruments of Russia’s information warfare against Ukraine, and the stakes of Putin’s argument for Russia’s “historical destiny” within which the making of Ukraine is to be seen. They inspire the concept of the *other* (“little” [“malorosy”] and “new” [“novo-rosy”]) Russian subject around which Ukrainian identity is shaped and from which Ukrainians are imagined as less worthy of their “greater” Russian counterparts who self-identify as “big/great” Russians [“veliko-rosy”].

The Russian war on Ukrainian identity goes back to the tsarist empire and its colonial politics. In his study of the Ukrainian subject in Russian imperial thought, Myroslav Shkandrij explores how Ukrainians were perceived by the Russians as illegitimate anarchic persons. They were identified with uncivilized and primitive behaviors and assumed to be lacking independent political will. Examining the rise of

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<sup>261</sup> Shkandrij, *Russia and Ukraine*, 20.

<sup>262</sup> See interview (in Russian) with the leader of Donetsk People’s Republic (Ukraine’s region under Russia’s control), “Zakharchenko o sozdanii Malorossii: Donbas nikogda v zhizni ne poidet v Ukrainu,” *Ukraina.ru*, 18 July 2017, <https://ukraina.ru/digest/20170718/1018923537.html>; also see Khrushcheva and Tayler, *In Putin’s Footsteps*, 43-44.

Russian hegemony, Shkandrij argues that the myth of Ukrainian inferiority was created to maintain the colonial status quo and justify inequalities, racist logics, and imperial attitudes toward Ukrainians. Studying the 19<sup>th</sup> century archive, he reads for the evidence of colonial logics and locates Russian entitlement and Ukrainian subjection early on in Russia's imperial course. Ukrainians, for instance, were compared to Black slaves, called "white negroes", or referred to as "southerners", lending themselves to body politics defined by race and status.<sup>263</sup> And Ukraine was imagined as a reserve borderland available for "harnessing" as a productive force. (168-176) In Shkandrij's detailed critique of politics that historically devalued Ukrainian life, it becomes clear that Ukrainians internalized the way they were perceived, developing an inferiority complex in surviving and resisting Russian colonialism.

In course of the next imperial conquest of Ukraine, the ideology of Ukrainian inferiority became integral to justifying the colonial rule of the Nazi authorities who, similarly to the Russians, saw Ukrainians as a lesser people. Historian of Eastern Europe Timothy Snyder who wrote extensively on the Ukrainian subject notes that the Ukrainian inferiority complex was aggravated by experiences of living under the Nazi occupation. In the Nazi imaginary, "Ukrainians were by nature a colonial people", in other words, "blacks," as Snyder points out.<sup>264</sup> They carried the feeling of the lower status at the heart of their collective experience: "When German occupation came in 1941, Ukrainians themselves made the connection to Africa and America". They felt like slaves. (18) Africa was turned into "a form of thinking" to refer to Europeans living east of Germany,

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<sup>263</sup> Shkandrij, *Russia and Ukraine*, 80; 170-173.

<sup>264</sup> Snyder, *Black Earth*, 19.

and Ukrainians in particular. (17) “Ukrainians, above all, were conceptualized as blacks or as Africans, since their land was seen to be the secret to German self-sufficiency as the keystone to a new German empire,” as Snyder writes in one of his articles.<sup>265</sup> And in a talk, he says: “The Ukrainians were to be at the center of a project of colonization and enslavement. The Ukrainians were to be treated as *Afrikaner*, as *Neger*, the word was very often used, as those of you who read German documents from the war will know, by analogy with the United States. The idea was to create a slavery-driven, exterminatory regime in Eastern Europe with the center in Ukraine.”<sup>266</sup>

The work of Shkandrij and Snyder provides a necessary understanding of the politics that fostered oppression, denigration, and derision of Ukrainians as a people. Another researcher Oksana Grabowicz wrote an article on the impact of these politics. Referring to Ukrainians as a “subjugated group” [*ponevolena grupa*], she presents the case of the collective trauma resulting from many years of living under oppressive conditions. Her goal is to rethink the Ukrainian experience in connection to the Black experience and in the context of global colonial politics.<sup>267</sup> Writing within the relational arc of colonial experiences, she understands inferiority complex as a symptom of colonial alienation that afflicted Ukrainians in ways that remain shared. She draws on the work of Frantz Fanon to define the psychic violence of colonialism in its distributed sense and

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<sup>265</sup> Snyder, “Integration and Disintegration,” 697.

<sup>266</sup> See Snyder’s talk “Nazi Dreams of an Enslaved Ukraine: The Blind Spot of Germany’s Historical Memory,” 20 June 2017, available both in the recorded and scripted forms at *Euromaidan Press: News and Views from Ukraine*: <http://euromaidanpress.com/2017/06/23/nazi-dreams-of-an-enslaved-ukraine-the-blind-spot-of-germanys-historical-responsibility-colonialism/>

<sup>267</sup> Grabowicz, “Kolonial’na spadshchyna v s’ohodnishnii Ukraini,” 14.

speaks about Ukrainian suffering as aligned with experiences of others. In her account, the legacy of colonialism must be addressed through the entangled histories and common struggles, as a shared narrative within which the voices of a colonial world can be joined.

In thinking about Ukrainians as colonial subjects who were historically deprived of their agency, their will, and their collective voice, and who were compared to and treated as Blacks, I am thinking about injustice that Ukrainians endured and harm that they experienced as conditions from which we may understand their struggles for freedom, national recognition, and collective dignity, as well as their revolutionary endeavors deriving from a position of refusal to accept the destined superiority of imperial subjects, those of the past and present.

### **The Euromaidan as an assertion of dignity and self-definition**

To bring forward a Ukrainian position of refusal, I want to turn my attention to the latest Ukrainian revolution, the 2014 Revolution of Dignity, which embraced Ukrainians' claim to dignity and right to act as post-colonial subjects who decide on the course of their future. An assertion of dignity was more than a response to its violation – it was an expression of Ukrainian resilience that testified to collective vulnerability and historical experience of colonial violence. Ukrainians sought to break with the inferiority complex and rediscover a new Ukrainian consciousness that would no longer be subjugated and controlled.

To refer to the Revolution of Dignity in the context of the Ukrainian freedom struggles is not to say that it was an anti-colonial event. As historian Ilya Gerasimov argues, this uprising did not entail “transcending one’s subalternity” in the process of

gaining independence.<sup>268</sup> Rather it was a “pursuit of forging or upgrading Ukrainian collective subjectivity” in a new act of resistance which he termed “the first postcolonial revolution”. Gerasimov writes: “The Ukrainian revolution is a postcolonial revolution because it is all about the people acquiring their own voice, and in the process of this self-assertive act they forge a new Ukrainian nation as a community of negotiated solidary action by self-conscious individuals.” (23) Ukrainians sought to rethink their experience outside the inferiority/superiority dichotomy and the colonial order of things, pursuing self-reinvention, maturation, and the creation of post-traumatic conditions.<sup>269</sup> They embraced dignity as a value governing the process of collective becoming, refusing to owe their future to the colonial past in a stance that was oppositional to the politics of “the idealized past in the future” which reaffirmed Russia’s imperial intents.<sup>270</sup> In reclaiming their right to self-determination, Ukrainians shared a fight against the intertwined forces of Russian imperialism, hegemony, and colonial action, the forces that acted upon what yet to come.

The 2014 revolutionary movement was initially driven by an ideology of the radical break with a promise of the Eurasian integration around which the Ianukovych’s and Putin’s vision of Ukraine was built. It started as a movement against Ukrainians’ giving their allegiance to Russia, which Ianukovych’s refusal to sign a planned

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<sup>268</sup> Gerasimov, “Ukraine 2014,” 25.

<sup>269</sup> See note 30 in Hundorova, “Ukrainian Euromaidan as Social and Cultural Performance,” 169, where she writes about the Ukrainian Maidan as a characteristic of the ongoing process of self-making and recovery from the colonial past, “a factor that helped collective post-traumatic consciousness awaken and to a certain degree recover”.

<sup>270</sup> Gerasimov, “Ukraine 2014,” 37.

association agreement with the European Union essentially meant, and in support of Ukraine's pro-European trajectory. However, the movement turned out to be more of an action consumed by the idea of national wellbeing, one which was not identity-centered but value-oriented.<sup>271</sup> Ukrainians did not want to be constrained by the operative logics of integrationist narratives but rather become emancipated from them. People were mostly concerned with the transformation of Ukraine into a democratic society, taking equality and pluralism as core values that embody the future they wanted to live. "The space and place of dignity – Maidan – annihilated social hierarchies instantaneously, erasing the boundaries between the center and peripheries: Independence Square became a place where different Ukrainians and generations co-existed, befriended one another, built and fought, for the first time experiencing the powerful feeling of togetherness," as the Ukrainian cultural theorist Tamara Hundorova has put it.<sup>272</sup> Claiming dignity through solidarities built on the duty to assist, contribute, and strengthen the relationship between people from all walks of life, nationalities, and cultures, Ukrainians created a "laboratory of the social contract" in the process of emerging as a new civic nation.<sup>273</sup>

The Revolution of Dignity was an expression of Ukrainian insurgency in the postcolonial moment, when Ukrainians had not yet experienced Russia's neo-colonial incursions. When protests started there were no signs of Russia's imminent invasion of Crimea and Donbas, and so the 2014 revolution was indeed an affirmative event, a

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid, 28, where the author draws on Yaroslav Hrytsak to suggest that the Euromaidan downplayed the identity politics, sharing a collective preoccupation with common values.

<sup>272</sup> Hundorova, "Ukrainian Euromaidan," 171.

<sup>273</sup> Shore, *The Ukrainian Night*, 44.

favorable development fostering a democratic becoming. The occupation of Ukrainian territories, following the Euromaidan, was an unprecedented act of Russian aggression in the postcolonial history of Ukraine. It was a new colonial turn which marked Russia's open imperialist endeavor to conquer Ukraine. The conquest of Ukraine and subjugation of its people to which Russia's war against Ukraine attests is a violent gesture directed at non-Russian others, both Russian-speaking and not. Since 2014, there has been a mass exodus of non-Russians from the occupied territories as a direct result of the repressive political situation and violence of the Russian authorities who seek neo-colonial attitudes.<sup>274</sup> The mythologization of Ukraine as a part of Russia, and Ukrainians as a people of empire serves these attitudes and governs the planning of a deeper military intervention.

### **Volya's mythopoetic fiction**

I have referred to the Ukrainian experience as one shaped by the violence of colonial myths that served the purpose of the empire, framing the expressions of Ukrainian subjectivity as illegitimate. I now want to discuss Ukrainian resistance and shared struggle in the face of Russian aggression and politics of neo-Soviet becoming. I present the case of Ukrainian insurgent adoption of electronic sound for activist projects that aim to confront and counteract the formative processes of transformation of the sovereign Ukraine into Russia's new imperial frontier. I gather the projects around their stance to discard or violate memorial reclamations of Russian imperial history and imagine away from Ukraine's colonial past toward a realization of a divergent Ukrainian future. I

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<sup>274</sup> See recent "Territory Reports" in Repucci, *Freedom in the World 2020*, 1337; Charron, *Russia's Recolonization of Crimea*.

position them against the newly expressed enthusiasm for an imperial ideal among the Russians to show one of the ways in which Ukrainians come up against the culture of Russia's imperial affirmation and invest in an ethic of Ukrainian empowerment.

The first project is Zavoloka's most political EP "Volya", which is dedicated to Ukraine. As mentioned earlier, the work developed from the artist's own experience with the Euromaidan, from her participation in the revolutionary movement and her activism in post-revolutionary times. Like many artists in the Ukrainian electronic music community, Zavoloka publicly condemned Russia's war against Ukraine, calling the annexation of Crimea and the 2014 military intervention in Donbas an "aggression", "invasion", and "terroristic act".<sup>275</sup> During the period of working on "Volya" and after the release of the album, she used social media to draw attention to the collective experience of her people, and her Ukraine as she put it, speaking with a sense of collective voice that expressed Ukrainian tragedy.

Composed of three tracks – Vilna (03:01), Sylva (04:54), and Slavlenyya (07:26), "Volya" exposes the stakes of Ukrainian resistance. Vilna is a feminine form of the Ukrainian adjectives "free" and "self-willed", which is an intentional choice. Zavoloka speaks to a juxtaposition of Ukrainian and imperial views along the lines of the female/male dichotomy, encoding in the title of the track an expression of the familiar trope of Ukrainian unfreedom. Ukraine has been historically addressed in the language of domination as a virgin land available for conquest by the "great" Russia evoked in the strong masculine urge.<sup>276</sup> The current situation of renewed aggression against Ukraine

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<sup>275</sup> See Zavoloka's 2014 *Facebook* posts <https://www.facebook.com/zavoloka.prostir>

<sup>276</sup> On a feminine profile of Ukraine, see Shkandrij, *Russia and Ukraine*, xi-xvi.

lays bare the same predatory instincts and imperial ambitions that Russia demonstrated in the past, and makes space for the old Russian stereotype of Ukraine as a helpless victim. Ukraine is perceived as a defenceless “other” and expected to surrender to Moscow. Zavoloka is deeply aware of this sensibility, directly engaging and disengaging with the victimized position of Ukrainians. She contends with the legacy of oppression and colonial violence, seeking to transcend victimization through empowerment in every moment of confrontation with the documented reality. Vilna is both a way of remembering and forgetting on a path to becoming, to forging a future of freedom that is never to be lost. The track opens with a peaceful melodic sequence before turning powerfully percussive. It sounds like a giant engine running on the rhythmical intensities of the Ukrainian revolution that Zavoloka archived in a very personal way. She sought a coalescing of the documented reality into a fiction, as underlain by the merging of life and art, history and autobiography, memory and destiny. The world of Vilna both gathers and breaks free from references, figuring as a dream that is to be lived through a frame of sound.

The second track Sylva, which means “power” and “strength”, lives up to the claim of Ukrainian empowerment. It delivers a manifesto of no surrender, conveying the ambition of Ukrainians to withstand anything that is thrown at them. Zavoloka builds on the force of repetitive action (repetitive rhythms), assuming a militant posture of Ukrainians and stand of collective self-defence. Sylva is about a trial of endurance as a presumed option for survival. It sounds in concert with what Ukrainians are given to experience today under the terms of Russia’s war. In my listening to it, the track is a rendering of battlefield. It starts as a warning of something coming, a setting for emergent

figures that are yet to appear against the background of noise that Zavoloka masterfully creates. Slowly it paints the dawn of day, the dawn of time, for us to watch in listening a sudden burst of sound, a strike weapon. One line of rhythms cuts open the other which bleeds across pieces never gathering again. Syla finally ends with warm surges bringing into relief and a space of healing harmonics. It connects to the stakes of the present and future situation, making the Ukrainian experience of endurance and survival newly intelligible in a mythopoetic sonic tale.

The last track *Slavlennya*, which translates as the act of glorifying or the state of being glorified, encrypts the Euromaidan slogan “*Slava Ukraini!*” (“Glory to Ukraine!”). Zavoloka fictionalizes Ukrainian subjectivity, evoking its expression in the sonority of the Euromaidan uprising. The track pertains to a testimony of the Euromaidan, which the artist additionally presents in the audio-visual format.<sup>277</sup> However it is not exactly a testimony as we know it in a form of document. Zavoloka does not bring the authority of documentary to the imagination of the track, rather she brings the authority of fiction to documentation process. *Slavlennya* is a sonic canvas within which one cannot differentiate between the truth of field recordings and that of synthesized sounds, finding oneself in Zavoloka’s universe of pulsed time created through different patterns of a rhythmic continuum. The track does not represent the revolution but presents its force, using the recordings as one of the structuring elements. The Euromaidan slogan becomes a sleeper cell that incubates and multiplies inside the body of the track’s fictional imagination, holding secret knowledge of insurgent Ukrainian aspirations.

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<sup>277</sup> See the video “Zavoloka – Slavlennya,” *ZAVOLOKA*, video published on 19 February 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f6iW68j5gWQ>

Volya takes form of legending by resounding (as retelling) the experience of the Ukrainian revolution – “its blood and fire”, its violent refusal to accept the givens of the Russian will. The project attests to what Zavoloka defines as “the liberty napalm of transformation,” the long and sustained agony of Ukrainians striving for national freedom and recognition of their collective will.<sup>278</sup> Zavoloka’s other electronic music projects, ranging from 2003 *Suspenzia* (being caught in a suspension of action and passion) and 2005 *Plavyna* (living a symbiotic whole) to more recent 2017 *Transmutatsia* (experiencing a metastable state), 2017 *Syngonia* (seeing into formation of crystals), 2018 *Promeni* (bathing in primordial fire), 2019 *Sobor* (bringing all to unity), and 2020 *Ornament* (seeking a geometrical dimension of sound), pertain to a study of processes which the artist explores through a series of propositional formulations. Volya sits well with these other works. It also probes the process, essentially becoming part of the process. All the three tracks prophesy what Zavoloka invites us to see as an end of Ukrainian unfreedom, a possibility of “post-” that can be realized if Ukrainians act today. In its activist proposition, the project enters a space of politics shaped by the necessity to stand up against the myths and imaginaries on which the claim to the conquest of Ukraine has been made. It works in support of anti-neo-imperial desires and longings of Ukrainians for life that is no longer upheld in its current iteration to being a colonized “other”. It presses against the existing dispositions of the empire, acting into a future that Ukrainians have long dreamed, struggled, and died for, a future that has been mapped by shared insurrectionary gestures.

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<sup>278</sup> See Zavoloka’s description of Volya, <https://zavoloka.com/zavoloka-volya-new-cddigital-epis-out-now/>

## **Construction's urban experiment**

The second project that I bring to attention is electronic music series of Ukraine's most politically charged experimental media art festival Construction which opened in the city of Dnipro in the fall of 2014 when Ukraine was several months into the Donbas war.

Dnipro is the capital of the region that is adjacent to Donbas. It was greatly affected by the proximity of the war and the existing threat of its expansion westward. Construction assumed a response to this situation, operating as a platform to creative expressions of Ukrainian resistance. The project afforded a route for contending with Soviet legacies that served the rise of Putin's empire and justification for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and that lent themselves to the making of Ukraine that was not of the present, but of a future past.

The organizers planned a series of urban interventions by which one was able to navigate the ruined landscape of empire and track its tangibility in the city that was too close to being hit by Russia's new imperial war. They wanted to stage a sustained *constructive* experiment that would convey the ongoing commitment of Ukrainians to break the historical cycle of destructiveness that the Russian imperial control of Ukraine intended to create. The project was implicitly defined against the renewal of imperial idea that the Russians pursued by putting the Soviet legacy to work for the Putin regime. It was envisioned as a local community festival that could come in alliance and solidarity with Ukrainians' nationwide anti-imperial anti-Soviet dissent.

"Everything started with an egg ... exactly where the statue of Vladimir Lenin used to be," as a local reporter wrote about Construction. A group of activists arrived at Dnipro's central plaza to install a three-meter-high geotextile egg to replace the recently

dismantled statue of Lenin. The action symbolized what they saw as a fresh start for their country: “In all cultures and mythical texts, egg is a good sign. As a symbol of life, it carries hope for renewal, revival, transformation, and new beginnings. This is exactly why the egg we made is meant to fulfill its symbolic function on the former Lenin Square. To follow Slavic traditions – we wanted to ‘roll out’ the Lenin Square from our collective consciousness as something totalitarian, violent, and imposed on us. So that we could make this a starting point for accepting and rethinking our history.”<sup>279</sup> Replacing Lenin – the symbol of the dark years of Soviet dictatorship – with the white egg was above all an act of refusal to keep carrying the “burden of the past”.<sup>280</sup>

Ukrainians have been haunted by the ghost of communism and Soviet empire which latched onto their everyday life. The experience of the Soviet material conditions, architecture in particular, left them with a sense of confinement to which they wanted to oppose, grasping for the emancipatory promise of anti-Soviet campaigns. Construction in a way was such a campaign that invested in the desire of Ukrainians to free themselves from references that affirmed their post/colonial position. The organizers sought to probe and contend with the connection to the communist past that they felt their city continued to perform in the post-Soviet years. Until 2014 Dnipro remained usurped by the Soviet-era architectures and urban designs that safeguarded Russia’s imperial pomp in Ukraine.

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<sup>279</sup> Leonid Ostapenko. “V Dnepropetrovske vmesto Lenina postavili iaitso,” *Vgorode*, 3 October 2014, [https://dp.vgorode.ua/news/dosuh\\_y\\_eda/238093-v-dnepropetrovske-vmesto-lenyna-postavyly-yaitso](https://dp.vgorode.ua/news/dosuh_y_eda/238093-v-dnepropetrovske-vmesto-lenyna-postavyly-yaitso)

<sup>280</sup> Here I speak to a more general understanding of Ukrainian experience as shaped by “the burden of the past” as argued in Wylegała and Głowacka-Grajper, *The Burden of the Past*. I do not necessarily share the position of the editors and authors in this book on all aspects, but I agree that thinking through what constitutes the “burden” in the Ukrainian case is necessary.

The festival worked to summon the Soviet archive to new conditions of the post-Euromaidan reality, fostering a necessary transition from what the activists described as a state of “the post-Soviet limbo”: “4 years ago on Dnipro’s central square we replaced Lenin with an egg, thus giving birth to Construction festival and deconstruction of the post-Soviet limbo our city was stuck in.”<sup>281</sup>

The project conducted a range of urban transactions that contributed to the objectives of the decommunization process in Ukraine. Instead of a dramatic dismantling of the Soviet heritage and demolition of monuments, it approached decommunization in a constructive way, as a form of radical renewal that was not reduced to a singular expression. Construction initiated a politics that did not begin with destruction or settle into a complete elimination of all things Soviet from public space but that sought to give these things a different purpose. The intention was to come up against the past not by discarding the repositories of the Soviet power but by making them available for possible coalitions, actions, and behaviours through which Ukrainian resistance could gain new expression. Activists sought to renew the city in such a way that it would lose its Soviet charm but find a new productive capacity of past architectures.

Decommunization as a continuing post-Soviet process had several waves. The post-Euromaidan wave began in 2014 during the revolution and lasted for several years following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Ukrainians had been removing Soviet symbols from public spaces, contending with the politics of imperial greatness, which took form of real war. By removing the traces of empire, they tried to dematerialize the world of the

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<sup>281</sup> Construction Facebook post of 5 October 2018:  
<https://www.facebook.com/constructionfestival/photos/a.1775814459111459/2653158984710331/?type=3&theater>

past while also departing from the world of the future premised on the violence of Russia's neo-Soviet regime. Hundreds of Lenin statues were taken down and dumped into local wastelands, storage rooms, and collectors' backyards.<sup>282</sup> The sheer scale of Leninfall (Leninopad) was unprecedented.<sup>283</sup> The wave had swept over the entire Ukraine, including the city of Dnipro where activists brought down the statue of Lenin on the night of 21 February 2014. The process of demolition was of shared passion. Even police and local communists did not interfere, letting the falling of Lenin happen to public cheer.<sup>284</sup> Cultural historian Marci Shore described the scene as a collective endeavour involving no experts or officials, but a group of engaged citizens who came to Dnipro's central plaza unprepared but determined to succeed: "The dismantling was spontaneous; initially there was no plan, people began to phone friends who had friends who had trucks or cranes or other tools. Iurii Fomenko, who had experience with construction equipment, arrived and advised the others on technical details of how to remove such a heavy head. The decapitation was celebratory."<sup>285</sup> After that night, decommunization in Dnipro became a matter of utmost importance. Activists removed all

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<sup>282</sup> Liza Premiyak. "Looking for Lenin: Hunting Down Banned Soviet Statues in Ukraine," *The Calvert Journal*, undated, <https://www.calvertjournal.com/features/show/5790/lenin-soviet-monument-ukraine>

<sup>283</sup> Charlotte Alfred. "Leninopad, Ukraine's Falling Lenin Statues, Celebrated As Soviet Symbols Toppled Nationwide," *HuffPost* (formerly *The Huffington Post*), 24 February 2014, [https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/leninopad-falling-lenins-statues-ukraine\\_n\\_4847364?ri18n=true](https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/leninopad-falling-lenins-statues-ukraine_n_4847364?ri18n=true)

<sup>284</sup> "V Dnepropetrovske snesli pamiatnik Leninu," *Zerkalo Nedeli*, 22 February 2014, [https://zn.ua/UKRAINE/v-dnepropetrovske-snesli-pamyatnik-leninu-139457\\_.html](https://zn.ua/UKRAINE/v-dnepropetrovske-snesli-pamyatnik-leninu-139457_.html)

<sup>285</sup> Shore, *The Ukrainian Night*, 224.

of the Lenin “traces” until the very last bas-relief on a student dormitory of the local medical academy.<sup>286</sup>

Decommunization pushed Ukrainians up against the epidemics of pro-Soviet nostalgia that had been spreading in Russia. Russian leadership promoted the idea of a great Russian state modelled on the former Soviet Union, preparing the Russians to accept the war in Ukraine as a necessary condition to rebuilding the fallen empire. The historian of Soviet and Russian state violence Anton Weiss-Wendt critically addressed this preparedness (and willingness) of the Russians to serve the imperial and military makeover of their country, showing that the imperial idea was increasingly popular with the people who had grown to honour the Soviet most ruthless leader Joseph Stalin after all the crimes he had done. Weiss-Wendt examines the cult of Stalin as a necessary step on the road to re-Stalinization, or re-adaptation to the old Soviet policies that now justify repression and mass violence in Putin’s Russia. Putin holds firm on his plan to restore Soviet glory and re-establish Russia as a great power, seeking to mobilize Russia’s violent past for the making of a new empire. Commemorative practices that change public opinions about Stalin serve his political goals and cement his authoritarian rule while also uniting people around the idea of Russian greatness. As Weiss-Wendt argues, Russians are now trapped in the violent project of a historical empire which Putin has renewed and rehabilitated. “In Putin’s Russia, obsession with the past comes in lieu of

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<sup>286</sup> “V Dnipri demontuvaly ostanni barel’ef iz zobrazhenniam Lenina – aktyvisty,” *Radio Svoboda*, 30 October 2019, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-dnipro-lenin-barelief/30244231.html>

plans for the future,” he says early on in his book, reading Russia’s historical path as continuity of stasis and repetition.<sup>287</sup>

Thus, while Ukrainians have been making their way into the future, leaving the Soviet past behind by radically withdrawing from empire, Russians have been engaged in re-Sovietization, summoning the past and proving their loyalty to empire. These divergent paths and arising tensions informed and triggered actions that brought Ukrainians and Russians further apart. Construction was born of these tensions. It was an action infused with imagination of activist being and anti-neo-Soviet becoming; a process of community operating as a counter force to Russian power. On a practical level, it was a concrete intervention in the present, in the situation of the coming war.

In the fall of 2014, the city of Dnipro was in the state of emergency. It was preparing for Russia’s military operation fashioned after the familiar pro-Russian rebel deployment that had success in Donbas. *BBC*, for instance, reported on the situation as characteristic of imminent “rebel advance”: “For all the hopes of peace, the expectation in this frontier region is that the war in Ukraine will continue and possibly expand. If it does, there are men with scores to settle - and fresh memories of confronting Russians on battlefield - who are ready for the fight.”<sup>288</sup> The launch of Construction was happening exactly in this time when the residents of Dnipro were practically figuring out what they would do if the war that was just a hundred miles away finally reached their city.

Timothy Snyder spoke of Dnipro in that moment of threat as of a city that was living an

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<sup>287</sup> Weiss-Wendt, *Putin’s Russia and the Falsification of History*, 2. On re-Stalinization see *Ibid*, 149-165.

<sup>288</sup> James Coomarasamy. “Ukraine Crisis: Dnipropetrovsk Prepares for Rebel Advance,” *BBC*, 6 October 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29503377>

anticipatory self-defense: “Dnipropetrovsk [Dnipro] became a center of resistance to the Russian invasion under its new governor, Ihor Kolomois’kyi, who put a bounty on the head of Russian soldiers.”<sup>289</sup> The Ukrainian authorities in charge certainly played a big role in resisting Russian information and military warfare, but they were not the only players who mobilized around local struggles. Initiatives like Construction afforded new ways of bonding and joining against the Russian order that dictated the war, and that threatened the peace.

Construction so far had seven editions, each tracing back to the first 2014 project of de/constructing the city of Dnipro and rendering it out of the post-Soviet limbo. Its urban experiment was unconstrained to a focus on the city. It extended to broader preoccupations with the subversion of imperial logics, those of stagnation and status quo, in favor of renewal and transformation. Its programmatic start with the installation of the geotextile egg in place of the fallen Lenin statue was rather illustrative of this, carrying the Ukrainian experience over into the symbolism and realism (practical goals) of the action. Construction opened decommunization to expressions of urban creativity, creating a space of engagement with the imperial ruins in their material and processual dimensions. In the ideological choreography of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, the ruins attested to collapsed borders and forwarded to histories of past conquests. They were sites of actual forces involved in memory wars from which Russia derived its need to conquer Ukraine. Construction’s urban experiment was a direct confrontation with these forces, an attempt to exert pressures and assert presences that would adopt from the Ukrainian

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<sup>289</sup> Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom*, 170.

experience as an oppositional position. It worked to nurture creative resilience, rendering it sensible, among other ways, in the projects of electronic sound.

### **TSEKH: RAVE in the former palace of Ilyich [Lenin]**

Among many events organized by Construction over the years, the 2018 TSEKH: RAVE in the abandoned Palace of Ilyich stands out. I take it up as a sounded action that works in the mode of intervention that I want to call sonic vandalism and relate to the Ukrainofuture making effort. The term “sonic vandalism” is inspired by imagining graffiti art on sonic terms as simultaneously vandalizing and inventing with sound, as putting sound in act, in the face of and up against the existing. It denotes a way of entering space by sound to violate its order and disobey its orthodoxy, leaving a *trace* of fictional world that is to be lived: loved or loathed. Construction was created to infuse the ruining (dying) landscape of the Soviet past with possibilities of different life – reengaging to disengage, deconstructing to construct, violating to reclaim, and transforming to envision. TSEKH: RAVE certainly delivered on this mission, giving the performance an activist format and reformative end, as well as a certain anarchic sense of conviction amidst the conditions and experiences of historical empire.

On 9 June 2018, people gathered in the Palace of Ilyich [*Palats Illycha*] for an all-night full-on rave staged by Construction enthusiasts. The Palace of Ilyich is an architectural castoff of the Soviet era, which lost its value but did not fully lose its charm. Being called an icon of Soviet Constructivism, it served the myth of Soviet greatness and imperial legitimation of the Russian regime in Ukraine. Built in the 1930s when the Soviet Union achieved standing as a world power, the Palace was part of the Soviet ideological infrastructure. It operated as a house of culture [*dom kul'tury*] where workers

and their families had leisure activities while growing loyalty to the imperial regime. One of many palaces of culture designed by the Soviets for the purpose of imperial pedagogy, it functioned to instill belief in the Soviet project.<sup>290</sup> The Palace was a space where the authorities promoted values of the Soviet culture, and where people were subjected to ideological control. It worked to forge an identity of Soviet man living in a Soviet state that needed a uniform culture, an orthodoxy. In other words, it provided a means of manipulation to achieve the goal of Sovietization and the Russian (Communist) takeover of Ukraine.

*Atlas Obscura*, a platform for ethnographic reporting, has recently published a photographic essay by Lucas Vogt and Artem Kolomoiets who travelled to Dnipro to document the Palace of Ilyich as the past's haunting object that had lent its presence to nostalgic longings. We encounter the Soviet world in all of its glory, long time dead yet somehow immortal: Lenin sculpture in the ruins of the library, torn books and Soviet propaganda posters, theatre props bearing Soviet symbols, red mosaics and the statue of Soviet workers. The Palace is home to things that commemorate Lenin's leadership and associate with Soviet monumentalism. It remains imbued with the sacred truths of a living empire. Vogt and Kolomoiets describe the building as disgraced to the state of disrepair and left to local scrap metal scavengers and curious urban explorers. They however speak about it as a site that is remembered for its role in creating and imposing a quasi-religious value system that became the basis of the Soviet imperial order. Providing visual details from which to contemplate the power of the site, they write: "Soviet

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<sup>290</sup> On making palaces of culture a part of Soviet ideological infrastructure see, for instance, Zhuk, "'Dances for the Masses'," 314.

ideology declared religion a scam, accusing it of luring society's most vulnerable citizens into addictive and deceptive mind tricks. It could be argued that the Palace of Culture concept was devised as a replacement for the moral guidance and sense of community which the church had provided.”<sup>291</sup>

Extending to the idea that establishments like palaces of culture took place of churches and bore a resemblance to sites of worship helps explain the importance of these architectures in the lives of Ukrainians who were ordered to the Soviet nation through a culture of relationships with surroundings that materialized an aesthetics of the Soviet holy. In this context of experience, Construction can be imagined as coming in an unholy alliance with what became constitutive of the Soviet sacred topology outlasting the decommunization process and continuing to exist in the tangible legacies of Ukraine's colonial past. In a gesture carrying out the violation and profanation of the site – as resorbed in the encounter of rave – TSEKH: RAVE reassembled the Palace of Ilyich into a structure of vibration, a mega dancefloor enlivened by fantasy and charged with expressions of futurity. Electronic sound was made a means of subverting the empire that had outlived its fall in the material body of living architectures. It was made a carrier of a new different memory, creating a sense of defamiliarization by preventing the space from giving itself to the eye and instead channeling the relationship with it through the ear. The world of the old was turned into a world of the new, as if painted over with sonic graffiti that left marks and mobilized a new story of solidarity in a nightly mission that became a scene of a beautiful crime. What emerged in this moment was the realization of a

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<sup>291</sup> Lucas Vogt and Artem Kolomoiets. “Inside the Abandoned Ruins of a Ukrainian ‘Palace of Culture’,” *Atlas Obscura*, 5 August 2016, <https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/inside-the-abandoned-ruins-of-a-ukrainian-palace-of-culture>

possibility for envisioning beyond one's current situation that is directly linked to historical circumstances, those of empire, toward a different order that is not reduced to former history. TSEKH: RAVE operated on a promise of a new (sonic) memory, crafting itself through elaborations of the Ukrainofuture effort and giving back to the Ukrainian freedom dream by fueling implicit emancipatory intensifications of Ukrainian anti-(neo)-imperial performance.

TSEKH: RAVE was hosted as a three-in-one dancefloor (TEXFLOOR, SUB125BPM STAGE, and EXPERIMENTAL CHAMBER) across which techno artists performed under the Construction's slogans of deconstruction and invention. The Palace of Ilyich was played to instances of poetic creativity which gave the Construction's "revolution" its material form. The performance sought an experience of liberation from memories of the Soviet past, an experience from which participants could build anew their relation to the future, dislodging what was rendered visible and uploading what extended invisibly into their surroundings. It provided a way of delivering an interruption onto what was already in place. Electronic sounds became integrative to the very project of Construction, one defined by its urban vision of collaborative survival in the conditions of imperial ruination. The futurist composition of TSEKH: RAVE challenged the inert grid of representation, a stasis of reality that pressed with its visual meanings – the givens of the Soviet past, by carrying a sonic fictional touch and keeping-in with a stance of experimentation and compassionate creativity that Construction initially developed.

The lineup of TEXFLOOR-makers favoured cross-cultural playtime and off-cultural detailing of poetic approaches. It started with Pacou (Tresor) from Berlin. His

music output is a striking combo of pressure tactics and liberating offerings, inviting the listener to be always shifting between anxiousness and ease. He is an architect of sonic universe that builds on the logics of conflicting flows. Nene H of Turkey played to submerge in a crossover of dance and hypnosis. Her dark tones are radiant pilgrimages into uncomfortable feelings and spontaneous forgettings as if a form of therapy she wants to be available to all. Vaia, sound producer from Uruguay, crafts his sound creations by articulating textural details into patterns of pointillism, which have been described as conceptually based on the “maximum in the minimum” aesthetics. His techno is not short of extravaganza, always pleasantly surprising with skips of novelty and familiarity. Latvian DJ NGC-5128 confronts reality with fantasies of rhythm and mind-blowing ambient narrations, creating a sonic vision conjured up through dreamlike chronologies of feelings. He is a superspirit and megaadventurist to me, pushing into journeys of cosmic neverhappenings with a claim to trust the belief. Ukraine’s own Deme, who is from Dnipro, astonishes with his insistently disco pulse making that conveys a sense of hectic tempo but with an offer to find a peace of mind in it. Another artist from Dnipro Evgeny Konovalov who goes by Subforms creates atmospheric electronica inspired by his psychogeographic experiences with Ukrianian landscapes. His soundworks are stripped of obvious references though, evoking spatial imageries that are not framed as versions of the “real thing” but more of unreal environments one has to dive to the depths to feel to the core.

SUB125BPM STAGE hosted a speed rush lineup. Dipswitch, electronic project from Switzerland, is a love-and-hate overdose, adrenaline and collapse, all and nothing. Norm-full and norm-free, it is heavily influenced by 70’s dub, staying true to radical

aspects of today's techno culture. Vaia appeared yet again, now accompanied by a lineup of local artists. Arseniy from Dnipro fully takes charge of the beat, coming up with his version of psychedelia while soul searching elsewhere. What he has then are beat mixes and melodic units coming together in a seemingly straightforward conjunction, which appears basic at first but turns out to be much more complex when studied for details. Amistad, the project of Dnipro-based Vasyl Lazebnyk, is hardcore EDM that feels to always feed forward and never back. Its many labyrinths can bring one to a panic state, locking into a cycle of techno beats abducting by their rhythmic process. Another Ukrainian project Stich comes to the scene as a techno purist but appears more of a composite. The project is laid with harmonic pulses, ambient overtones and weird noises. Stich gives the impression of being both a techno connoisseur and dilettante loving his trial and errors. Funky Roger, the project from Donetsk now based in Dnipro, is a quest for sonic sorcery. Driven by intellectualism and fierce conviction that novelty emerges in the art of mixing, the project makes alchemical manipulation a process through which music gets a life. Its inspirations range from Chicago house and Detroit techno to swing rhythm and vintage sequencer riffs, all coming into a manifest of living in sonodiversity. Vlad Maksimenko, also local techno auteur known as Aah&less, to me, is an energy field maker who seems to think composition strictly in the context of dancefloor music. He is the kind of DJ one usually imagines to fall for in a rare moment of bliss.

EXPERIMENTAL CHAMBER carried into its experimental mission straight from the start. Czech project Tatratak is stellar in every way. A display of textures that swirl into beautiful clusters and burst into exuberance, it feels starry without being cosmic. In its matrix of textural grandeur, I get lost. Only to find what I was looking: a

point of velocity that makes a stir across the rugged soundfield which needs to be crossed over and over until it could get discovered for all the wonders. Snediggen Snurssla, another Czech experiment, takes on an explosive sound pumping, claiming to ignite if not burn to pieces. Densely percussive, it feels like a frenzied attack on imagination that starts producing those bizarre contours aka Pollock with the invisible splashes of sonic paints. Kumanthong of Scotland is an escapee into a zone of nobelonging. The project is a power mix that feeds black metal into electronic production to come up with bold statement in every new sound. Roman Slavka, an electronic musician from Dnipro, is a glitch-inspired imaginer whose work kicks with whimsical variants of noise. The maker of intensities, he combines abrasive textures with the sustained harmonics as if wanting to create a stupor-inducing sleep. Once you get to the end of Slavka's journey, you become boosted with energy, recovering your hibernation without aches and treacherous discoveries. Zelenshum is Dnipro's industrial-tinged electronic sound project of Dmytro Reshetov who is known for his onstage improvisations. Mixing live performance with synthetic sounds and effects, it gives a flush of freshness and resists any predictable symmetry. Experimental electro Ksztalt, a project by Eugene Hordieiev (Gordeev) from Dnipro, gives closure to TSEKH: RAVE long list. Laden with the experience of post-industrial bleakness and ill-fated futures of the Ukrainian east suffering environmental collapse, Russian invasion, and economic decline, the project gets to the dirtier edge of electro, steeping in history as much as in aesthetic and cognitive spaces of Ukrainian life. Conceptually, Ksztalt breaks into a wider spectrum of electro, ingathering its different shades through synthesis. Politically, it enters activist process of making music with a sense of collective identity. Back in 2013, Gordeev would play in then-pre-war eastern

miner towns, exploring the feeling of the post-industrial Donbas reality as a constructive outlet of the lived dystopia. Being seen as one of rare perspicacious musics, the Kszalt project leaves me with no escape from the tenets of post-: post-Soviet, post-industrial and post-human.

TSEKH: RAVE brought to being a composition which was heard as a composite of multiple soundings attempting to constitute a new saying, a new feeling about the Palace of Ilyich as a site of the future, not the past. The word *tsekh* means “workshop” or “craft” in Ukrainian, and reflects back on what the project of Construction is meant to do – to set up the conditions for the emergence of a new reality, a new (different) life at the sites of imperial ruins. TSEKH: RAVE developed into a pronounced expression of this involvement, engaging techno architects in a making (crafting, *constructing*) of a sonic artifact, a new fact of formative experience. The artists – the futurists in their own right – spoke in worlds of polyrhythmic textures, mighty tremors, and outgrowing beats to leave an imprint of their scenic sonic tale on the ruin of representation, the ruin of past dreams that raised the laments of empire today. Many of them were not Ukrainians but the doing of their sounds was submitted to the Ukrainian cause.

TSEKH: RAVE gave manifestation to a Ukrainian position on empire, the sensibility that encouraged decommunization in the first place. On the one hand, the event was a performance of dancefloor musics, which was integral to the urban scenography of the Construction festival. On the other, it exceeded its status of rave, operating as a platform for confronting the past and countering its threat in the present when the empire had cast a long shadow over the future of Ukraine. In a broader sense, it contributed to the imagination of shared resources from which to operate a different

making of history, one that would not start from the position of the colonial self, the position of the Ukrainopast.

Rave in the Palace of Ilyich was a marker of nonconformity with the historical project of empire within which the Ukrainians were typically seen. It rendered imaginable a bringing of the imperial past to a close, working to advance the Ukrainian people's rejection of old futures (those that assimilated to sameness and embraced a stasis rule of imperial regimes – a futureless future for Ukraine) and press toward a reimagined present past from which a new extrapolation of what is coming could be made. It laid claims to a Ukrainian revolt in the name of the future, attempting to divert from the point of the present that Ukrainians found themselves in – the reality of occupation and war – and imagine on the consequences of what could be recovered from a nonconforming presence. Sonic vandalism as nonconformism to which TSEKH: RAVE resembled sparked a moment of creative conspiracy decrying the reduction of Ukrainian futures to imperial speculation. It engaged in the Ukrainofuture process, one of insurgency and inquiry that aimed to intervene the reproductive mechanism of empire which assumed relation with nostalgia, memory and identity.

### **Atom's museum “coup”**

The third project that I want to discuss is Atom (2016-), a festival of electronic music that is held annually in the city of Zhytomyr in northern Ukraine. I've learnt of Atom by following Zavoloka's touring schedule after the Euromaidan and discovering that her support of Ukrainian resistance was built into contexts within which she performed. Atom takes place in the museum of Soviet cosmonautics named after Sergei Korolev (1906-1966), the spacecraft designer and rocket scientist in charge of the Soviet ballistic

missile and space flight program whose identity was inscribed in the master narrative of Russia's military supremacy but lately reclaimed by Ukrainians. I am interested in taking this site-specificity seriously as opportunity for connections and disconnections that can be formed around it, trying to see beyond the artistic agenda of the Atom project toward an operational quality of its sounded events.

I think of Atom in the same line of argument as Construction and "Volya", in the line of imperative to seek a sonic technique to deal with history and memory, and to propose new possibilities for engaging a Ukrainian position of power. I take account of what operates in an insurgent logic (an ideo-logic) and works against the allure of the processes that force into stasis, of what brings Ukrainians in a defense opposition to the violence of imperial "machine" through which a contract with the Ukrainian history and culture has been maintained. More specifically, I examine Atom in the context of Ukrainian movement against a future of nostalgia for the (idealized) past, a future of processes that renew a lost imperial ideal and affirm recurrence as becoming.

A Ukrainian critical stance on empire was amplified and reinforced through Atom's performance in the museum that used to be a site of collective passions and endorsements of Soviet imperial greatness. The museum was one of many establishments in Ukraine that disseminated and perpetuated the Soviet myths, initially contributing to the realization of communist goals during the Soviet period and then sustaining nostalgic memories for what was once an empire. It operated from the narrative of the Soviet space program, continuing to credit its major protagonists and subscribe to tropes of Russia's mission of conquest, even after reclaiming and recovering achievements of Ukrainians. Promoting a centrepiece of Soviet mythology – the Korolev myth, the museum directly

contributed to the culture of remembrance that satisfied a desire for connection with the Soviet past. Sanctifying Korolev as a Ukrainian hero who was forced to work for the Russian regime, the museum continued to share the narrative of Soviet progress and offer a memorable encounter with the futuristic world of the bright future that the Soviets were set to build.

What is revealed in the broader scope of its commemorative agenda is in rupture with new movements of resistance and solidarity among Ukrainians who wish to rid themselves of the links with a past “golden age” and its cultic-mythic sphere. Nostalgic fondness and pride for the Soviet conquest of space to which the museum essentially cater get in the way of the process of withdrawal to which the new wave of Ukrainian decommunization attests. The museum is not just the site of gathering, which harnesses a nostalgic link with the Soviet past and serves to encourage an identity archive organized around the trope of the nation made of heroes like Korolev, it is also the site of decision to construct a version of the past that may enable and benefit Russia’s geopolitical agenda today.

Korolev was more of an ordinary engineer repressed by the imperial regime than a hero bolstered by memory and propaganda.<sup>292</sup> The fact that he is now presented as a Ukrainian rather than Russian national is no excuse for a mission of conquest he had to contribute to by working for the Russian regime. The Soviets wanted to take the lead in a global space race, demonstrating and enhancing their military, and essentially imperial, potential through the space enterprise. The mythmakers depicted Korolev as a founding

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<sup>292</sup> See Gerovitch, *Soviet Space Mythologies*, 7-22, where he discusses how Korolev remained obedient to the regime, taking part in coverups of the failed projects and assuring that the Soviet “history’s hall of fame” stayed clear of inconvenient truths.

father of Soviet cosmonautics and intercontinental ballistic missiles science, making him a propaganda icon. He was presented as a model citizen of the imperial state that aspired to hegemonic and superpower status. In the late 1960s, the Russian authorities launched a statewide commemorative campaign, building memorial museums, erecting monuments, naming streets, urban spaces, and institutions after Korolev, and making films that showcased his Soviet achievements. These sites of tribute to the mighty Soviet state, as assembled through the Korolev myth, directly served Russia's imperial agenda and plans to remake the past into an image of a desired future.

Today, the Korolev myth plays a distinct role in Putin's protocol to reclaim the Russianized empire that Soviet Union once was, through the glorification of Soviet patriotism and militarism. In the current situation of Russia's war against Ukraine, the myth is employed specifically to reshape the former Soviet space to Russia's geopolitical future. The Soviet space program is the subject of adoration in Putin's Russia. Its public history is very much involved in resurfacing the idea of eternal Russia and advancing the integrationist agenda of the Russian state, which is served by mythic evocations of Soviet heroes – the patrons of the “Russian world”. Putin has embraced and popularized the Soviet-era public myths, including the Korolev myth as one providing the trope of the pioneering Russian scientist – a symbol of victorious Russia in the global race for technological superiority, military power, and geopolitical order. In 2007, he delivered his commemorative speech on the day of Korolev's 100th anniversary, drawing on the stereotype of dutiful Russian citizen who must honour the Soviet past. Referring to Russia as the successor to the Soviet Union, he turned to the Korolev myth to highlight the historical continuity of the scientific empire and show the readiness of the Russians to

carry on with the conquest operations that the Soviets had started. Korolev, in his talk, was more of a poster boy for Soviet technological achievements through which Putin could promote Russia's new superior status: "Dear comrades... Sergey Pavlovich [Korolev] was more than a genius scientist – he was a true pioneer who must be remembered for the triumphant victories of cosmonautics, victories that belong to him, to our country, and the world. It is under Korolev's leadership that the world's first intercontinental ballistic missiles were made, Baikonur and Plesetsk Cosmodromes were built, a network of design bureaus was created, and the first satellite Sputnik was launched into an Earth orbit... We must not underestimate Korolev's contributions to *our national* rocket and space industry..."<sup>293</sup>

As it stands, Russia's claim to Soviet achievements is made through myths that Russians lived by. The Korolev myth appeared so important to the Russian leadership that it was taken up by new imperial mythmakers in the 2007 Korolev movie directed by Iurii Kara. The film was praised by the authorities and received a number of awards, helping generate what Gerovitch had called a "fresh Korolev myth". Evoking a Soviet image of Korolev, Kara created an updated version of the old myth in which Korolev appeared as a "larger-than-life" character willing to risk life for Russia's greater destiny. The film, surprisingly, featured scenes of Korolev's dispatch to Soviet labour camp, which were perceived by the Russian audience as discomfiting and unpatriotic. Such reaction made evident that a yearning for Soviet greatness took hold of many Russians

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<sup>293</sup> My italics. The word "Soviet" was carefully omitted in Putin's speech but implied all throughout with formal substitutions like "otechestvennyi" [domestic], "natsional'ny" [national], and "nash" [our]. It was made clear that there was hardly any degree of difference between the Soviet Russia and Putin's Russia. See Vladimir Putin, speech delivered on January 12, 2007, <http://www.kremlin.ru/transcripts/23995>

looking to fulfil their longings for an imperial world rather than facing the truth of reality, which the film, in fact, did not intend to show anyway.<sup>294</sup>

Memory politics that restores Soviet myths and feeds Putin's neo-Soviet ambitions lends itself directly to the war in Ukraine. Russia's invasion of Ukraine is centred around the old imperial paradigm constructed and linked to the mythology of imperial greatness which is predicated on the non-existence of Ukraine as a country and Ukrainians as a people. A positive commemorative culture around Soviet heroes, which memorial museums like the one named after Korolev help to engender in Ukraine, makes room for seductions of empire that hold out the promise of belonging to the "Russian world" and, by extension, contributing to what it can do both ideologically and practically. Any manifestation of Soviet memory process which ensures a pro-imperial design of the post-Soviet space must be taken into consideration for its potential involvement in what Ukrainians are living today. As Shaun Walker attests, ghosts of the past play to Russia's prerogative to control the former Soviet space to remake it through a series of illegal interventions into a new empire.<sup>295</sup>

To bring *Atom* into this space of politics and place of identity was to stage a coup, to seize power – not necessarily by cancelling the imperial culture made accessible through platforms operating the Soviet myths, but by destroying it from within, breaking its existing codes with a possibility of completely different encounters, those of nonreferential fictions – sonic fictions of their own right. This pattern of insurgency, the

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<sup>294</sup> For a more nuanced discussion of the film and public reaction see Gerovitch, *Soviet Space Mythologies*, 160-161.

<sup>295</sup> See Walker, *The Long Hangover*. I do not agree with all the Walker's statements about Russia's involvement in Ukraine, but I admit to his attempt to rethink the Putin era in terms of experience of going through "the long hangover".

pattern of creating propositional spaces in lieu of orderedness by which Ukrainians remained constrained, was a way of hacking one's way through and out of the then happening future, a way of imagining toward a collective diverting from what was already on its way of coming. The project worked to disarm imperial desire within a grid of existing identifications, giving electronic sound a radically extended reach into a Ukrainian futurity, a form of performative being that marked a rupture in a line of historical continuity to which the Russians delivered their constant efforts.

### **The 2016 Atom lineup: politico-poetic procedure**

The radical element in Atom is not a revolutionary preamble. The festival does not stand in for a message. Instead, it yields to a politico-poetic procedure that breaks free from the assumption that one needs rhetoric strategies to claim a political position. The activist project of Atom is not defined by any slogan but infused with the decommunization agenda without an explicit tie to the movement itself. The performance in the Soviet-era museum is a form of trespass that has a deeper provocation in the hold. The act pertains to a piracy mission that encompasses a creative raid on what the Soviets used to their advantage and what now the Russians fully adopted for their imperial project – the widespread cosmic enthusiasm. For Atom, the Soviet cosmos has lost its relevance to the powers of an Atom cosmos, an alien cosmos devoid of Soviet agenda but endowed with popular enthusiasm that was hijacked for the purpose of poetic immersion into the immanence of sounds, not memories.

One of the organizers of the festival Oleh Bohat'ko once said that Atom embraced the cosmic lineage of electronic music: "Do you know that electronic music has been associated with the cosmos and so the idea of organizing the festival here [the museum of

Soviet cosmonautics] is not arbitrary.”<sup>296</sup> Cosmos, in his way of logic, is a construct of progress, technological innovation, and magical moment assembled by desire to leave a relationship of command. Bohat’ko envisioned Atom as a project of emancipatory promise, interwoven with aspirations for creative anarchy. In his terms, Atom was an intellectual and artistic quest for the experiential and performative means of electronic sound expression and a platform for urban rebellion through which one could engender a collaborative form of participation in the city that he thought was in need of a renewed focus on contemporary art. In other terms, Atom was a cultural initiative ordered by a simultaneity of actions against the state of things, aesthetically and political speaking, things that Bohat’ko believed were bringing one’s life to a standstill. The museum of Soviet cosmonautics in this context of motivations was a place that both symbolized a stagnation point and invited to think away from it, becoming a perfect site and standpoint from which to explore the differing purpose of what came in formation as a sonic possible coup against the future (past).

Atom answered to political concerns in ways that bypassed direct engagement with the decommunization campaign, instead working complementary, reciprocally, and poetically. Its ambition might seem rather limited: to perform electronic music in defiance of one’s perception of the museum space laden with a weight of ideological ballast. Its experiment, however, is more expanded: to enact a mode of activism that makes sound an integral part of Ukrainian appeal to the future that requires a newly defined action in the present, a counter-action to what has been always already at work. The artists who brought Atom to life in 2016 were members of Ukraine’s engaged

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<sup>296</sup> Alena, “Zavitai na festyval’ Atom! Ne pozhalkuiesh!” *Record FM*, <http://recordfm.com.ua/novyny/zavitai-na-festal-atom-ne-pozhalkuiesh.html>

electronic music community that sought more nuanced forms of political participation, mobilizing a new passageway through which to move to greater freedom.

I listen to Atom in its individual and collective capacity, as a gesture of each artist to sound on their own terms and as a shared gesture of profiling what becomes a part of the Ukrainian archive that reclaims and recovers Ukrainian future from a canon of imperial designs one encounters, experiences, and constantly relives in the empire-keeping spaces of romanticized Soviet-era heritage sites. Each project, in its work of appearance and scene of fiction, is at variance with the content of the memorial museum experience that adds to the score of programmed actions serving as tools to code Ukrainian life as the afterlife of the former colonial order and reproductive imperial state. It becomes a code-breaker, one's procedure of a creative coup orchestrated by the collective intelligence of the Atom crowd. Together, these projects deliver a poetic vision that derives from a desire to affirm and expand Ukrainian powers to be, to construe a confrontation with what has been negating this being. The myth of Atom offers the opportunity to unmake consensual reality and find belonging elsewhere than the ruins of the Soviet past and its mythological potential in the times of Russian imperial aggression.

Mokri Dereva (KYIV) is a project of Yurii Tymoshenko who is being hailed as the rising star of Kyiv's electronic music scene. His work leaves me with an ambivalent impression, the feeling of "two-in-one": on the one hand, it is highly refined; on the other, it is heavy crude, settling into a mix of shades both pleasing and repelling. "At one time my music is like the ripple of wind on hair, at another time it's like the sound of washing machine that has been spinning a piece of brick," Tymoshenko said in a

statement.<sup>297</sup> The project translates as “wet trees” from Ukrainian, a stage name that speaks to realistic image. Wet trees, in the artist’s own commentary, are sour cherries species growing plentifully in Ukrainian gardens. Bathed in the drops of rain and brushed by the sunlight, they are the living other that Ukrainians have always cared for: “Trees like being wet, they feel good,” as Tymoshenko put it, acknowledging this kinship and deriving a creative process from it.<sup>298</sup> Joining techno to ambient, Mokri Dereva figured in the Atom lineup as a patchwork project, one that evolved from simplicity to complexity, yielding a wider range of expressions.

V4W.ENKO (KYIV) is a generative music project of the Ukrainian architect and composer Yevhen Vashchenko. Vashchenko takes up sound to express his architectural ideas, seeking the effect of the world’s massiveness in the overall layout of musical space. Using Max/MSP and Jitter software, he creates most haunting compositions that comprise remarkable coherence and beauty. The art of V4W.ENKO is a quest for autopoietic processes that stir intricacies in the prosaic, lending themselves to a new kind of novelty and dynamism. It is a dreamworld built on the fuzzy borders of human and machine (consciousness), a world that leaves me feeling as if I am trapped in a self-maintaining system the reality of which keeps changing in a chain of kaleidoscopic resonances.<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Mokri Dereva, *Sixteenplus*, <https://sixteenplus.kiev.ua/2014/band25.php>

<sup>298</sup> Mokri Dereva, *Interview*, video published on 30 May 2018 by Andrei Gorokhov, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9e1CtvFIFk>

<sup>299</sup> For more info on V4W.ENKO, see his interview on *Musicmap*: <https://musicmap.global/article/v4w-enko-interview-ukraine>; as well as his Bandcamp page <https://v4wenko.bandcamp.com/>

Ostudinov (KYIV) is a project of Dmytro Ostudinov (AKA Hatroneli), the co-founder of Peauty Fute label. Ostudinov-the-project is excessive and disorienting. It carries the feeling of the world moving, the very vertigo of life rediscovered in all of its complexities, paradoxes, and hidden asymmetries. A vibrating colour, a kind of frenzy. When you think that what you've heard is all gone, you'll learn that it's still there – a breathtaking scene that never fades, a strange moment that leaves you wonder whether it was a true blessing or an inescapable curse. Ostudinov-the-artist is a saboteur who does not stop to impress in every way taking you hostage to the dread and wonder of the world, at once. *The Calvert Journal* wrote of his “subtle synths and fragile experimental beats” as ones that “may break your heart as easily as iPhone screen.”<sup>300</sup>

SOMMER (KYIV) is a project of Serhii Zommer who co-founded Peauty Fute with Ostudinov. The project calls to mind an image of shattered glass swirling in different directions and suddenly landing on you with a lasting scar. It clutters up, it breaks, it reconstructs, into a long sentence with twisted rhythm that does not recover all bits and pieces from its version one. What emerges as raw and inarticulate carries itself to a canvas of composition that articulates from within itself, its own rhythmicity, becoming slowly complete. Zommer is a poet claiming his poetic voice through rhythmic telling, retelling that never takes a verbal form but approximates enunciation. It joined Atom as rhythmic guru who was a magic enthusiast to watch: “Operating the magic of

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<sup>300</sup> Nevinchana, Anya. “Homegrown: Ten Rising Stars of Kyiv’s Underground Electronic Music Scene.” *The Calvert Journal*, 14 March 2016, <https://www.calvertjournal.com/articles/show/5742/kyiv-techno-scene-djs-producers-cxema>

synthesizers and drum machines, Serhii Zommer creates fine convoluted rhythms and plays your feelings as if another rhythmic instrument.”<sup>301</sup>

STRUKTURATOR (KYIV/SIMFEROPOL) is a project of the Crimean electronic music artist Misha Mironenko who now resides in Kyiv. Strukturator evokes a coexistence of the opposites, the flows and counter-flows in a uniquely symbiotic relationship. Mironenko has referred to the project as a vortex-like “interpenetration of natural bio rhythms with unpredictable solfeggio of industrial city”. He draws inspiration from the Crimean landscapes, the “wind and the voice of the sea”, and urban contexts, seeking polyphonic, polyrhythmic, and polyharmonic virtuosity. Thinking in terms of the maximum of difference (and possibility), he wants to pull down the listener’s sensory defences and deliver sounds as an explosion of deep flavours. “If the music could be liquid and tasted then this cocktail would look like a microacid punch based on 40% industrialdub tincture 50/50 with hypnotic juice of funktechno and pulp of minimalpunk fruit,” he said of his project.<sup>302</sup> To me, Strukturator is both a violent shock and gentle shimmer, a burst of energy that is infinite in its variation. It throws off the equilibrium, an absolute chaos and complete bliss, a rare anomaly.

I/DEX, a project of Vitali Harmash, is a fusion of brittle electronica and minimal ambient.<sup>303</sup> Hypnotic and addictive, it contemplates sequences of repetitive ideas, a self-

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<sup>301</sup> See Atom statement on Serhii Zommer posted on Atom *Vkontakte* page, 17 March 2016, [vk.com/atomfest2016?w=wall-114946201\\_33](https://vk.com/atomfest2016?w=wall-114946201_33)

<sup>302</sup> See Strukturator *Facebook* page: <https://www.facebook.com/strukturator/>

<sup>303</sup> For more details on I/DEX see his *Resident Advisor* entry <https://ra.co/dj/idex>; *Bandcamp* entry <https://idex.bandcamp.com/music>; and *Youtube* video “i/dex @ ATOM festival 16.04.2016”, posted by ATOM festival on 27 April 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UujJ6JpJDuk>

enclosed loop of intensities that rise and fall at a given pace. Harmash makes you see into the very core of sound, its true consistency, pores and inner imperfections. He takes up sound as granular matter, highlighting textural effects and creating the experience of tactile space. His interest in the grain of sound developed from earlier experiments with synthesizer, microphone and drum machine when he started to integrate field recordings and radio noises into his compositions, eventually switching to laptop. I/DEX became a project of probing the sound's continuous fabric – of folds within folds, of processes within processes.

ANDREY KIRITCHENKO (KHARKIV/KYIV) is probably Ukraine's most versatile electronic music artist and producer who founded the now-iconic independent record label Nexsound. To listen to his project is to take a scenic route through tunnels and overpasses of a truly spectacular soundway. Rapid transitions, unexpected junctions, uncommon diversions – it is none of the templates you've known so far. From steady deep-toned to light-speed catalytic, Kiritchenko's tracks and playsets are episodes of one extensive event that summons to its power. The project is made for you – to fall for, to succumb to its absolutist demand: for you to stop being the you in joining the other. Kiritchenko does not play to initiate an interpretative meaning-making but to contend with the impossibility of it, to confront a being of sensation, the logic of other kind.

Kiritchenko is a key figure in Ukraine's electronic music scene. Over the years he advocated a particular Ukrainian affair with electronic sound, one that had grown from the work involved in producing Kotra and Nexsound labels, and experimental music festivals Detali Zvuka and Next Sound, and that signified a resistance to the suppression of Ukrainian electronic music in the post-Soviet space assumed by the leading role of

Russian artists. As music critic Denis Kolokol noted, Ukrainian electronic musicians tried to dissociate themselves from the Russian scene: “The [Ukrainian] production is characterized by a high proportion of escapism, it is more conceptual, more introverted and listens more to the inner organ of music.”<sup>304</sup> It shows the investment of collective desire to be in difference, to not conform to a logic of similarity that settles in processes that obliterate a sense of Ukrainian identity. Ukrainians reclaimed activism to escapism, primarily attempting towards their empowerment and collective capacity. Electronic sound in their struggles was a tactic of visibility, a way of presence amongst others, to which festivals like Atom greatly contributed and shared in making.

My understanding of Atom as the Ukrainian electronic music festival product is drawn from activist stance of artists and producers who nurtured a discordant political subjectivity, being unwilling to give in to the hegemonic pressures existing at the level of music producing and programming. From a more site-specific perspective, I think of Atom in connection to the post-Euromaidan Ukrainian resurgence and the politics of the new Russian imperialism that capitalized on cultures of remembrance that identified with nostalgia for the Soviet past. In this regard, Atom contributed with the share of the process that resisted the already operating alliance between museum (as former Soviet institution) and empire by corrupting the flow of codes through which this alliance had been maintained. Its performative exploration of the museum site worked to create an insurgent space through which to come up against the given of the Russian empire-building in Ukraine. Disseminating the Korolev myth and displaying enthusiastic

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<sup>304</sup> Kolokol, Denis. “Dissecting Tones under the Microscope: The Experimental Music Scene in Ukraine.” *The REDAKTIONSBUERO OST*, <http://www.redost.com/1/texts/reportages/dissecting-tones-under-the-microscope/>

embrace of the past, the museum of Soviet cosmonautics, intentionally or not, operated in the service of the “Russian world” making project which built from imperial impressions to which the Soviet myths were affixed. Atom in turn ran counter to an ideal of these existing connections, probing the ethos of disconnection that involved a coming into divergence, a branching into making a Ukrainian future not of the Soviet past.

### **Future/Freedom design strategies: detecting the bits of sonic fiction**

While doing research, I’ve come to realize that Ukraine’s electronic music community was directly engaged in post-Euromaidan agitation shaped by a collective rejection of the future that tied Ukrainians to the Russian imperial will. Music artists and curators often acted on behalf of Ukrainian desires, dreams, and mythologies, conveying a stance of revolt. They came together in the creative affirmation of the Ukrainian self, through the work of sound that afforded a way to resist imperial hegemony and come up against the politics that contributed to a neo-Soviet versioning of the future: a visioning of the future invested in a denial to Ukrainians of their right to national freedom. I wanted to understand more deeply this passage between sounding and performing into the Ukrainian future, to listen into its mythopoetic propositional contribution that invoked and engaged the imagination. I wanted to seek a greater consideration of this mode of activism cohering into the post-Euromaidan wave of decommunization in today’s Ukraine. While selecting events, artists, performances, and sound pieces, I found myself in a repository of documented material, sounds that profiled artists and festivals, and their statements and agendas. This archive of material traces brought me into a whole new world of collective expressions laden with the gesture of support for the Ukrainian cause. I began to realize that what was set astir in there was beyond my encounter with it, but I

nevertheless was narrating it from my imagination, experience, and orientation to the Ukrainian struggles. My reading into the struggles was my listening into them, not into the protagonists who had something to say or to play, but into the projects that worked toward a crossing the point of no return, a becoming that was not predetermined by past or present imperial realizations. It is in these projects that I discovered an artwork of sonic fiction, an involvement of one compelling assertion of which I was also part. I took up sonic fiction as a tool for thinking and experimenting with what was heard and overheard in every Ukrainian effort to invent a destiny of (Ukrainian) life that would be different from the one historically given. My appropriation of sonic fiction, in this regard, was not the same heuristic and propositional narration that theorists like Holger Schulze and Kodwo Eshun pioneered, but a different endeavour linked to the concept. I borrowed the term, assuming that sonic fiction could be of different arrangements and that, as long as it remained procedural in taking one further into noticing what otherwise would be left unnoticed, unheard and unimagined, it was there.

What is sonic fiction? Thinking from the premise that sonic fiction is a condition in which we live, Schulze calls on the fact that we are so inseparable from this condition that it carries us along, giving off a sense of elusiveness. “There is no sonic fiction,” he writes only to contradict himself in the next sentence: “There has always been sonic fiction.” “Sonic fiction *is* everywhere. Where one can find sounds one will also detect bits of fiction,” he says, lending sonic fiction a sense of omnipresence.<sup>305</sup> Anything that you may encounter as fragments of sound, notes on sound, or performative appropriations, operations, and gesturings of sound add this sense. For Schulze, sonic

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<sup>305</sup> Schulze, *Sonic Fiction*, 1.

fiction is a form of resistance to the known, finite, and arbitrary; it is a way of coming up against a given “mythical norm”. He writes: “With sonic fiction as a foundation... one would neither indulge in fake essentialisms and traditional truisms for analysing sounds or musics according to the latest positivist fad in the social or the natural sciences – nor would one be forced to a weird and truly unhealthy diet of fake analyses consisting of arbitrary Rorschach tests on occasion of listening to one’s favourite record; the latter I knew all too well from the self-indulgent writings and ramblings of bourgeois representatives of an outdated, rancid and patriarchal thinking: a performance in words that apparently and sadistically loved foremost to abuse the artist as their lovely little pastime jester.” Instead, Schulze works intuitively, yet problematically, taking inspiration and guidance from Kodwo Eshun’s sonic fiction classic *More Brilliant than the Sun*, to carry toward a vocabulary of an “inventive, individual and idiosyncratic heuristic”. (3)

Following Eshun who aspired to a realization of the political mission of black music, Schulze took on a task to challenge hegemonies and disengage with the institutionalized practices of sound research and writing that had been built on “white epistemologies, white historiographies, and white ontologies”. He wrote: “... the ferment of sonic fiction operates as a *force of liberation*: liberating the writing, the thinking and the sensing of (no just about) music from scholarly restraints often superimposed on sonic experiences and imaginations of musical performances and productions. Writing sonic fictions... means then unfolding those fictions inherent in cultural artefacts, musical productions and sonic performances...” (6) In my reading of it, it means mobilizing a field sensation to seek a “precision ... of higher complexities and meticulous sensibilities”, as opposed to “mere indulgence, pastime, or an irresponsible or careless

play with references, technological knowledge or sonic descriptions” (10). Or, it means valuing an actual feeling of the lived immediacy, unfamiliar and unregulated ways of black sound theory with its energetic, mythical, and corporeal explorations by “touch, contact, interpenetration and amalgamation” and its quest for “polysensory and polyhistoric knowledge” conditioned by greatly needed disconnection from the heritage of whiteness on which scholarly norms are drawn. (5)

For Schulze then, sonic fiction as a black cultural concept that starts from rejection of white musicology and white music critique is a way of urging sonic thinking into politics, of reordering the framework of white discourses to a black “mixillogic mythscience of mutantextures” (19), and of entering “an alien continuum” on which Afrofuturist writings, compositions and artefacts exist. (75) It is a way of bringing “alter nation”, “alterdestiny”, and “autohistoria” into expression, showing that there is room for “a more *multirational*, a sensorially materialist submerging into the whole *sensory spectrum of PhonoFictions* and all the *machine mythologies*”. (9) More radically, it is a proposition for putting trust in “generativity of sound”, a process of world-making that emerges in ethnographies of knowing that do not attempt to dismantle the messiness of the world to stay true to the “model of the proof”. As Eshun once said: “As soon as you realise that sound/audio space/acoustic space, however you define it, has a generative principle – that it is cosmogenetic in a sense and that it can generate its own world picture – you’re off. Then the technical machine isn’t just a technical machine, it’s a vector out in the world.” (84-85)

For Eshun, the world-making project of black sound sustained by the engine of “rhythmachine” that performs “abductions” of the sensing bodies is a project that

becomes enlivened in theory fiction writing.<sup>306</sup> His idiosyncratic narration refuses to come to terms with colonialism, enslavement, and anti-Black racism, never reconciling with these issues as historical destinies of Black life. It works to displace whiteness and stand up to subjection as such. Even alienation is taken not as something associated with exclusion but with self-reinvention. When Schulze writes on Eshun and Afrofuturism in general, he is focused on this disruptive operation of black thought as working against the white promotion of comforting origins built on hierarchies and inequalities and meant to undermine difference in the first place. The “anti-origin” experience is “at the core” of afrofuturist thinking, which does not exactly aim at just giving agency to Black resistance but works to achieve a totally new take on the world.<sup>307</sup> Eshun’s “sonology” of black history is a radical liberation from the known inventories of theoretical thought, giving writing a greater claim to experiential reality and sensibilities of the researcher. (151)

The body of the researcher whose experiences, sensibilities, and reactions drive the act of writing “*through* sound” plays a key role. Bodily presence of the writer in the act of writing enables epistemology that gives value to “actual and existing sensibilities and subjectivities of experience” and that admits to incompleteness, generativity, and differing. Following Eshun’s deeply personal theorizing of black sound, Schulze takes the practice of sonic fiction as an engagement in generative thinking that never really stops at a given objective but continues to generate “hybrids”, “variants”, and “versions” of what he calls “multiplying epistemologies”. (102-103) This process is much driven by a *concern* for the world through one’s own experientially informed reflections that do not

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<sup>306</sup> Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun*.

<sup>307</sup> Schulze, *Sonic Fiction*, 62.

need to give answers but rather leave us with “inconclusions” as admissible truths and needed insights.

Idiosyncratic fictions settle into the world as forces that fashion a new mode of contestation. The “ferment of sonic fiction”, as Schulze calls it, is where activist thought meets active listening. It is available to all. Anyone can activate “this ferment” so that it starts to “react, connect and coalesce differently with neighbouring entities, substances, processes and practices.” “It might then, indeed, generate quite different and ever more changing, altering and surprisingly transforming effects in result. Sonic fiction is a highly reactive ferment in any artistic, everyday or research activity,” Schulze explains. (142) Implying all the way through his book that sonic fiction is essentially operative of activism that rejects white futures and comes up against the politics of subjection and authority, Schulze mobilizes sonic fiction as a world designing strategy. In his encouraging efforts to not delimit the concept to the original content of Eshun’s work but to rethink it as a larger relational and participatory approach to life living, life listening, and life learning, Schulze potentially expands the scope of sonic fiction. In a set of explorative propositions (chapters of his book) that stage an encounter with “affects, intensities, passions, commitments, risks, gambles and demands of sonic fiction”, he sets out what I see as a project of sonic fiction. (151) It is not only an activist approach to experience in general, but also a way of coming up with provocations, liberations, and inspirations that mean to intervene into capitalist, neo-imperial, neo-colonial, and white-norm time. He writes: “Sonic fictions operate in the area of the political and the institutional. Sonic fictions inspire activists to use sound, sound environments, sound events and sound practices as a means of political resistance... a means of transforming

epistemologies... and a means for social progress. Through all these areas sonic fictions can alter this present world and its predominant imaginations and fictions. Sonic fictions take action and intervene.” (144) He further adds: “Sonic fictions enable critics and writers to use imaginary worlds, theoretical fictions and generative concepts by thinking sonically in general... by performing a critical decolonization of sound... and by further developing tangible utopian scenarios... Through the use and the imagination of sound, sonic fictions materialize, refine and alter the range of worlds possible for us. Sonic fictions perform critique and method.” (146) What is nurtured here leads to new ways of political input through sonic thinking, sonic doing, and sonic envisioning.

What underlies Schulze’s narration (and re-narration of Eshun’s fiction theory) is a particular belief in the *generative* purpose of sound, the purpose of reaching toward something differing as programmatic: the purpose of moving the future elsewhere, creating a different vision, or even, perhaps, turning prophetic. I think in these preliminary terms to really highlight the force of liberation of which Schulze speaks in each section of his book, as carrying us toward new possibilities, unleashing a potential of the imagined, making thinkable what otherwise is unthinkable, and, ultimately, putting trust in the prophetic work of sound. To me, sonic fiction is an actual possible opening of our political existence to utopias (imaginations, fictions, contributions) that may lead us to futures never to be lost. It is a process that reroutes journeys and reorders discourses, derailing, colliding, and bogging down the action of forces already in the field. In other words, it is a process that un-teaches us what we have learned to follow, anticipate, and trust.

We are haunted by bright futures that never happened, mourning the loss of them while discovering ourselves slowly slipping into the dark, capitalist, apocalyptic, globally imposed future the promise of which we are now told to live up to. We are, as Schulze tells us, in “an existential cul-de-sac” that gives the diagnosis of impossibility to be elsewhere than where we are brought to believe to be. What is already anticipated comes with a “constantly bitter feeling of defeat” as if we can no longer make the “empowering visions of refuge, of resistance, of subversion” work for us. (110) There must be a “possible utopia” that “does not need to be mourned and lamented, remembered and suppressed”, but made “a joyfully anticipated and eagerly awaited goal one might then actually work for, one might indeed sacrifice a larger amount of one’s everyday life for to turn it into a reality”. (121) He speaks here on Mark Fisher’s concept of acid communism, reusing it to new advantage, to recognize a prophetic desire identified with the field of generativity (perhaps another way to say (r)evolution too) that Schulze ascribes to the prolific energy of reinvention. Reinvention in his extensive analysis of sonic fiction is a coming into seeing a new destiny for the world, into foretelling, or foredoing the cancelled future that Fisher contests. It is seeking alternative (alter-) as a construct from which to imagine ways of being, or, more radically, ways of surviving. What is left to do if not to carry along with the potential of sounding situation, sonic writing, and emancipatory thinking that, as Schulze convinces us, can develop into a full-blown project of liberation from the miasma of power and domination, which has struck death into visions, utopias, and tangible scenarios of going elsewhere than the end of the world? Schulze’s follow-up on Eshun and Fisher was exactly an endeavor of locating this (r)evolutionary force turning us away from the given toward the possible. His entire

monograph reads as a promise to establish a new continuum between sound and future, made to enter through a highly idiosyncratic narration the goal of which is to think imaginatively, sensorially, and multirationally. It seeks to power up what otherwise would be left as useless connection that always existed but was never explored, to show us that a pathway to resistance (a pathway to imagining a future uncanceled) can be radically found *through* sound. The purpose is to surpass the ill of nostalgia and stop looking back to what has been already laid out or imagined for us, instead letting the “unstoppable urge” (“a continuous prolific generativity”) take over and do its magic, taking us further to evocations of the possible.

Schulze’s survey of sonic fiction is a study of desire for reinvention. It is an exploration of Fisher’s “acid”, or that what urged a possibility of “self-fulfilling and prolifically strategic progress into a new future”, which Schulze locates in the materialized emanations of sonic fiction. (122) In all of this, there is a quest for a prophecy of sound figured into politics. Schulze never calls what he explores a way of prophecy, but he seems to mean it, making sonic fiction a strategy for breaking out of myopia to see beyond hegemonies of all kinds and for leading us toward “a future that is being established from the outside, from the xenosphere, from an alternate thinking and diffracting sensing.” (Ibid) Taking up sonic fiction as activism, he makes the case for a subversive potential of prophecies, fantasies, and alter-realities that work to hack into old systems of control, initiating a differing from the established. His fiction theory itself is a way of differing, not a way of thinking but unthinking the framework of activist living as something we assume defined by realist goals, rational conclusions, and universal truths, whereas it still remains construed by uncertainties and inconclusions, involvements in

imagination and sensibility, and unperformance of the knowns through the expressive possibilities of sonic materialism. In its broader scope, Schulze's un/formulation of sonic fiction, while proposing a seemingly objective perspective through idiosyncratic sensibilities, holds sound in its prophetic capacity, calling for a catalytic and radically ambitious sonic action that we, architects of "humanoid alien"ship, can engage forward.

I've called this section "Future/Freedom design strategies" to render the Ukrainian project of electronic sound inseparable from the activist scope of the future-making and freedom-seeking projects that Schulze and Eshun explore in their books. I follow from the initial concept of sonic fiction to a more encompassing and unrestricted understanding of it, a narration that hosts a constellation of efforts to think historically and unhistorically, creatively and uncreatively, academically and not, in attempting to give the Ukrainian project of the future a sonic reading, to subscribe to it as a participant, a listener and researcher at once. In considering the activist practice of sonic fiction, I tried to foreground what I imagined as a purposefully prophetic doing of sound deemed future-specific, and, as in the Ukrainian case, life-bundling. To speak of Ukrainian life at the edge of colonial experience today when the conditions of unfreedom are newly created by Russia's war is to make room for activism that rewrites the project of identity into a project of Ukrainofuture, one a kind, and one of a need.

### **The making of Ukrainofuture**

This chapter presented the case of creative response to the empire-centric protocol for Ukrainian life. It dealt with the Ukrainian way of working the potential lying in the collective fabulation of a new fate unbound by the constraints of the colonial past and imperial future. I started with the analysis of the Euromaidan uprising and Russia's war

against Ukraine to reflect on the very conditions of the Ukrainian historical experience shaped by the stasis rule of the empire. I wanted to show that it was from the order of historical continuity that Russia's attack on Ukraine was viewed as the situation of a given to which there was always already an explanation if not justification. Ukrainian life was conformed to a preexisting stereotype (one that signified inferiority) and assumed within the historical colonial project of the greater other. It was submitted to a future that was held in comparison to what had already happened, a future of the past so to speak, as if there was always an anticipation of an apocalyptic end of days, of that which would amount to the death of a nation. I identified this urge to hold Ukrainian life trapped and determined by external forces as something that the Ukrainian mythmakers – electronic music artists and producers – wanted to resist. And I wrote the chapter with the intention to foreground this type of resistance implicated and defined by its alliance with the decommunization movement in the post-Euromaidan Ukraine that had been fighting for freedom.

I've created an account of artistic contributions from which to record and interrogate the ongoing resistance of Ukrainians to the status of colonial subjects, and to the future to be lived and shared in this status. Among the contributions are electronic sound projects that differ by form but come close in the scope of their ambitions to grasp Ukrainian life from the angle of what it *can be* rather than what it is given to be in the historical script of empire. I started with the activist project of Katerina Zavoloka, examining her deeply coherent and politically focused EP *Volya* which was produced in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. *Volya* probed the theme of stolen freedom as stolen life: Ukrainian life that had been repressed and confined to the condition of

unfreedom but sought to be irreducible to it. It gathered from experiences of solidarity during the Euromaidan uprising and shared passions for radical politics at the time of Russia's war, to imagine a place of "volya" [freedom] as alter reality to "ponevolennia" [confinement], a place of destiny that would neither inherit from the past nor from the old future to which Ukrainians had been bound.

I then moved to site-specific projects of the Construction and Atom festivals, seeking to think in terms of their operational differing from any other electronic music initiative in Ukraine. Construction was inspired and informed by a new wave of decommunization, which swept through Ukraine in the wake of the Euromaidan and in response to Russia's war of aggression that set as its goal an absorption of the Ukrainian territories into a new Russian imperium, the heir to the Soviet state. Ukrainians were driven by revolt, purging the Soviet past and rebelling against a neo-Soviet future lying ahead of them. Construction organizers were carried away by this momentum, in large part activist and anarchic, collaborating with electronic music artists on a series of events within which TSEKH: RAVE appeared most conceptually compelling. I studied the event for its interventionist approach and creative endeavour which I termed sonic vandalism. Bringing desire to violate the holiness of the empire into a rave mission, TSEKH: RAVE deployed electronic sound in the service of community in revolt, or, to say it differently, community in "Construction" of its own future that was not to be framed as a destiny of an erased people reliving the life of their Soviet ancestors but a project of inspired ravers performing the sacrilege against Soviet life. I finally turned to Atom, calling it a coup and conceiving of it as a project of insurgent imagination which worked in a mode of hacking operation that aimed to disable one's prior criteria (memories of the past) for governing

an imagining of the future. I studied the project both in terms of its site-specificity and procedural aspects, bringing into focus a production of sono-political subjectivity that drove forward Ukrainian desire to disconnect with Russian (Soviet) legacies and that served the struggle for new conditions in which Ukrainian life would not be affixed to any imperial propositions.

All the three case studies attested to ways of engaging with the political project of Ukrainian resistance to a subjugating force. I've taken these cases as testimonials of Ukraine's continuous efforts to end the colonial rule in its post-colonial affirmations and as a set of acts through which to register an anti-neo-imperial programming of the present occurring on a sonic scale, among other extents. I wanted to convey that the work of the Ukrainian electronic music artists and producers was tied to a revolutionary imperative aligned with emancipatory contestations of the empire. Speaking from a long history of denial the Ukrainian people of right to collective freedom, I located Russia's most recent potentialization of imperial tradition in the act of aggression against Ukraine as consistent with the past engendering of Ukrainian subordination that was harnessed for the purpose of securing imperial gains. In this way it became clear that, for Ukrainians, the process of removing the imperial traces from physical, ideological, and mental space was a necessary liberationist approach to living in and through the threats of Russia's war. The work of Zavoloka, Construction, and Atom in this context was a form of solidarity fashioned through the fictions of electronic sound and their propositions, something that I understood as a particular pronouncement on Ukrainian life. It is from a mythology of this collective work that I derived an impulse of Ukrainofuture which lent itself to the

process of imagining the course of history elsewhere than back into the Russian imperial past.

I use the neologism “Ukrainofuture” to draw on its precedent “Afrofuture” without rendering a comparison. Afrofuture is mapped from imaginings of the post-racial anti-classist future that does not set whiteness as a norm for humanity. It proposes a mode of solidarity grounded in desire to counter the existing power structures that devalue Black life. In other terms, it is an investment in black imaginations and sensibilities to give voice to the community “whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history.”<sup>308</sup> Powered up by radical constructivism that re-evaluates the Black experience through science fiction, speculative fiction, and sonic fiction creativities, the project of Afrofuture is first and foremost a project of black empowerment informed by emancipatory expressions and strategies of togetherness, and driven by a commitment to reinvention. When Schulze took up sonic fiction as a form of activism that stemmed from Eshun’s attempts to locate black fugitivity in sound and relate it to the Afrofuture making project, he framed it as a generative way of converging into insurgent realizations of black diasporic culture to share its concerns by detecting other manifestations of insurgent life sanctioned by structures of dominant power. What black diasporic community gave to the world was already generating, multiplying, and metastasizing, into other efforts of resistance to the oppressive violence of established systems. In Schulze’s formulation, it was a form of insurrectionary activity, a stirring that connected experiences, narrations and meanings, and that created new pathways by which to

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<sup>308</sup> Dery, “Back to the Future,” 180.

orchestrate a global dissent from repressive hegemonies toward a “differing” society.<sup>309</sup> In defining Ukrainofuture as a project of revolt in the name of the future that is imagined to differ from the one that Ukrainians have been given to live, I’ve been led by what was explicitly embedded in the Afrofuture project: a proposition of alter-, a way of counter-, a dissent against descent. My grasp of Ukrainian dissent is indebted to thinking and imagining along the experimental passageways of black resistance to which the Afrofuture project was a manifestation to both locate the Ukrainian techniques of dislodging an apocalyptic “end of Ukraine” scenario in the current moment of the Russian-Ukrainian war and to join in the Ukrainian experience the shared stakes of fighting for a change.

Drawing from theories of sonic fiction, I’ve worked toward an understanding of sound in a doing that lent itself to a prophetic effort. The prophetic effort in my proposition is an involvement in ongoing fightback on the part of Ukrainians who sought to imagine themselves into a future beyond the past. The sonic reclamations of Ukrainian (alter-)destiny that I put together in the three case studies were not exactly deliberate but rather casual, remaining constitutive to the making processes underway, those of decommunization in particular. They took the form of prophecy, disrupting any prediction conforming to hegemonic manifestations of control over Ukrainian life.

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<sup>309</sup> Schulze, *Sonic Fiction*.

## **Conclusion: Toward an Ecology of Sonic Deeds**

In proposing the concept of the sonic operative through a set of operational modalities discerned as the offender, the carer, the magician, and the prophet, I have taken an ethnographic approach. I structured the dissertation by my definition of interventions accountable for what I referred to as the work of sound. To ask what this work may have brought to the world and investigate its disruptive potential, I gathered from a range of case studies, or sounded acts and actions geared to cultivate a response to urgencies that the post-Soviet communities had faced. The dissertation is mapped from my position as a listener to these sounded projects that served as a performative platform by which one could become actionable in the world as it came to be in moments of the crises that I studied. I took up the case studies as examples of real contributions to making a space of resistance to destructive forces at work, a space that defined what I initially called a politics of refusal grounded in the insistence on living against the diagnosis of a world-ending scenario. The sonic operative, in this regard, defined the presence of those who made use of aspirations notwithstanding, of those who responded to the cry they heard, acting as bodies of noise that carried local collective intelligences into a project of cosmopolitan togetherness. I wrote this dissertation to animate their reach, considering a possibility in solidarity that the activist conditions of the sonic operative could afford, steering us toward a listening for what could arise from the sonically working efforts.

I have started each case studies chapter with a discussion of sounded events operating in the political. To delve into their depth and learn from their action, I researched how they were produced and aimed toward a situation of local crises: in response to what was imposed by given circumstances and from an attempt to intervene

in what was experienced. Highlighting their operationality and contextual grounding, I gathered toward a project of the sonic operative registered as an ecology of sonic deeds. I've conceived of the project as an expression of defiance that the conditions of its activist purpose made thinkable in disrupting what had become an existing fixity. The purpose of the offender is to lead to a rupture in the ground of things, to stir up to a chaotic condition needed to violate the status quo and make space of possibility. The work of the carer is to disrupt what governs processes of destruction and creates world-collapsing realities. It is defined by its purpose to lend support to life becoming possible where it is jeopardized. The mission of the magician is to ensue from the act of intervening which could put a community, a place, or one's shared world on the way to rehabilitation. It facilitates the passage to wellbeing broadly defined but occasioned in the feeling of recovery from neglect embedded in the world and embodied in the ecology of which one becomes part. The proposition of the prophet is to invest in the future, giving a different verdict on what seems to be happening. It is to cause a disruption of any predetermined directionality (unidirectionality) to join imagination to hope that there might be more than what the givens are, a trajectory that offers an alternative, a way of divergent outcome.

The study of the sonic operative is then thought as an ethnography of sound perceivable in ethos, in situated and implicated actions of which I delineated as ways of caring involvement. The four modalities through which I presented this involvement are rather arbitrary but nevertheless necessary to pinpoint the ethically charged participation in the (making of a different) world, the partaking that I have sought to give recognition. It has been my research goal to attend to such participation, exploring in depth the

contexts, ecologies, and relations within which activist sounds that I studied operated. This is why the dissertation may appear to run out of sounds, coming into a conversation with history, politics, and culture, and seeking theoretical reflections that may not be always in the view of answers. I begin it with the Pussy Riot case and post- Pussy Riot activist mobilizations against the Putin regime, drawing out the modality of the offender and making a link between noise, moralism, and conservatism so as to propose a new line of inquiry into the regulatory politics in Putin's Russia. With the figure of the offender, I give the example of what I call the offensive work of sound, a provoking contribution through which Russia's insurgent "noisy" counterpublics are deemed illegitimate. In examining the performances that make discordant space for contending with the normative expectations of a silenced, docile and conforming society that the Putin regime works to forge, I develop an understanding of conflict between the opposition and authority which extends to the agitating project of unwanted sound. I then proceed to the discussion of activist projects by Serhii Zhadan and Kirill Medvedev, making the case for the carer. Taking the depriving conditions of the Russian-Ukrainian war and the looming environmental catastrophe in Shiyes as ecology where life is threatened, I explore how sound is mobilized to create possibilities for life to be. The work of the carer involves a positioning against life-denying forces that give to a destructive transformation. Thinking from this mode of involvement, I explore sonic missions defined by efforts to counteract a reality where violence, death, and fear may proliferate. I find this counteraction manifesting in the scenes of alterity created by working the sound's disruptive potential and expressing toward a situation in which life can derive its chance. Positioning performances in Ukraine's warzone and Russia's combat-like Shiyes Watch camp within

the wider political context of my study in which crises in eastern Ukraine and far east Russia are linked to what I see as a highly centralized imperial apparatus of the Kremlin, I research further – through the framework of the sonic operative – into projects that stage a critique of Russia’s ruling ways. I make the Aral Sea crisis my next research destination, drawing on the history of Russia’s colonial violence in Central Asia and writing from the experience of the Uzbek and Karakalpak people who had faced grave consequences of the Aral Sea catastrophe. I study Stihia’s sound-led ritual of the Aral Sea revival as a radical rehabilitation effort invested in shamanic ethics. Analysing the project through a reference to the figure of the magician whose agency is founded on the potential of conjuring a positive change, I inquire into what Stihia promised to achieve beyond the cultural, political, and economic benefits. I think with the sense of the ineffable to which a therapeutic scene of the performance contributed, inviting a deeper consideration of techno-shamanic sounds. The ineffable in this case is embraced as a value placed on a sonic possibility of the Aral to exist and be collectively experienced. The magical scenography of the Aral coming to life that Stihia sought out is a world of its own, a sonic possible world to be grasped in what its therapeutic conditions make enabling. I try to account for the truth of this world, the sonic real of the unreal, writing from the perspective of a radical realist endeavour. To scrutinize the modality of the magician in a different case study, I move to the discussion of the Sowers of Space action with Tibetan singing bowls in St-Petersburg suburbs where eco-activist groups have long protested the capitalist takeover of local natures that served the anti-environmental imperatives of Russia’s late capitalism. I invest in the contextual understanding of the action to further detail its approach to political contestation inspired by the Situationist

critique of capitalism, and the neo-shamanic eco-centric perspective. Holding to the singing bowls as technologies of wellbeing used in therapy and shamanic crafts, the action opens to the promise of the sonic ineffable that benefits activist needs. I finally close with the figure of the prophet to draw on what I detect as a future-focused process of resistance in post-Euromaidan Ukraine, one that I call the making of Ukrainofuture. The project of Ukrainofuture is an act of revolt in the name of the future that is different from the one that Ukrainians are given to live on Russian terms. It is an act of refusal to accept living the future of Russia's imperial past, the future of war and occupation imposed on Ukrainian life. With the prophet, I imagine toward a prognostic mode of working against what is predetermined by the present situation of Russian aggression against Ukraine, locating this type of disruption in the programmatic claims to Ukraine's alter destiny that the projects that I study essentially make.

I have conceived of this dissertation as an activist affair, an involvement that remains compelled insofar as it can leave a mark in the world that grapples with asymmetries, misrecognitions, and inequalities, the world that grants chances to some but takes them from others. My goal was to make research a form of advocacy, taking up writing as a way of staying in alliance with those who I thought had to be heard and moved onto the scene of appearance through my listening and narrating, through my acting on behalf of them. My protagonists are not people but their projects, not projects but their sounds, not sounds but their doings, their being at work for the world and with the world. The dissertation is inspired by the idea of the world as a "collaborative sphere", which I borrowed from Salomé Voegelin to imagine a greater field of possibilities for connecting in and through sound, and reaching toward an ideal of shared

humanity on different participatory terms. Formulating a cosmopolitan project that urges participation in a global field from one's individual position and local affiliation, Voegelin opts for a collective imagination that initiates an alternative instituting as a way of relating and holding together in a contingent encounter. In this encounter, one is inevitably connected to the other, inter-connected and inter-acted, in a reciprocal process of exchange and recognition that does not invest in identity as we know it but identity as we invent of it. Essentially, it is not identity that matters but consequences of its performance, its sounds too, as Voegelin suggests.<sup>310</sup> The project of the sonic operative that I presented here as a series of contributions from the "locale" of the post-Soviet community gathered in sound is a project of belonging in shared exposure and vulnerability that informs existence and possibility outside the geographical boundaries of local worlds that these contributions make countable. It is a project of working from sites of conflict that, even though specific, remain commonplace in and under a globalized human condition defined by the politics of connected concerns. In this sense, it is a project of participation on the "index of sound" in a connected world of which the post-Soviet experiences, struggles, and desires are also an expression that needs to be recognized.

The dissertation itself can be thought as a form of recognition that makes stakes of one's struggle visible in the invisible condition of the sonic operative by which bodies of noise seek empowerment on the plane of perturbing presence, agitating and agitated by the collective effort to be heard. I came to complete it in the time when this effort has been at its strongest, when Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine that the world greatly

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<sup>310</sup> Voegelin, *The Political Possibility of Sound*, 53-59.

feared has begun and the sound of resistance has been bringing into view a range of insisting voices. It is now the seventh month of the invasion, which experts have compared to a genocidal reality. Ukrainian electronic music artists Dmytro Fedorenko (aka Kotra) and Kateryna Zavoloka launched a Ukrainian label for experimental music to support Ukrainian resistance and self-defense. They called it “I shall sing until my land is free,” adopting the title of the song by the British project Muslimgauze which was created in response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon.<sup>311</sup> I end this dissertation with the promise of this song that lends its practical support and prophetic calling to Ukraine and Ukrainians to whom and for whom I also speak, echoing their cry and their struggle in the elusive task of the sonic operative, and every effort of resistance it brings into sounded presence.

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<sup>311</sup> See here: <https://www.facebook.com/ishallsinguntilmylandisfree>

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