

You belong probably to the cucumbers

Electromagnetism and communication in Latvia before the arrival of the internet

1. Introduction. Communication flows before the network of networks.

“Soon people will be connected to a communication channel which can be used for any kind of media – for the first time in history or for the end of history.”¹

Friedrich Kittler, 1986

Audio quote: Jlew. A recording of a computer connecting to the internet with AOL using a dial up modem. March 3rd, (2006) <https://freesound.org/people/Jlew/sounds/16475/>

Three decades on from this quote by German professor and theorist Friedrich Kittler, we can assert that the digitalization of information has made its mark on memory, or, as Kittler said, on history itself. There is an obsession with asserting that spaces, perception, time, almost our life, have ultimately changed with the arrival of the internet. A fever of technological optimism, as mindless as it is relentless, has taken hold of many people

¹ Friedrich Kittler. “Gramophone, telephone, typewriter”, in John Johnston Ed. *Friedrich A. Kittler Essays. Literature, media, information systems*. Routledge, 1997, p. 31.

Compartir

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with the implementation of this new system, yet the idea of a communication system and a network of interconnected points as a *raison d'être* of certain aesthetic behaviors predates the internet. The simplest example is Mail Art, where the format of what was sent mattered less than shaping a community where artistic behaviors held more sway than the objects produced or the price at which they were sold.² All kinds of things were sent: postcards, naturally, letters, cassettes, and even, apparently, the odd fillet.

This series of podcasts draws inspiration from the exhibition *You've got 1243 Unread Messages, The Last Generation Before the Internet. Their Lives*, presented by the Latvian Center of Contemporary Art in Riga. The show expounded how there were networks prior to the arrival of internet that even operated independently from a seemingly free international postal service, in which Mail Art was implicitly established. Furthermore, Latvian culture constitutes a significant point of departure due to its manifold modes of communication: from memory books to photo albums whose contents were transformed as they passed from one person to the next, or, of course, all kinds of non-official texts and sound publications that were published and distributed independently.

In the coming minutes we will draw upon the aforementioned to focus on electromagnetic technologies as a common thread running through the 20th century, from the inventions of reproduced sound to the arrival of discotheques in the Soviet Union, touching on occultism, experimentation, and copying as the main points in this narrative.

² For these very reasons, and similar to other artistic behaviors that emerged in the mid-'60s and 1970s, such as aural, conceptual, and landscape art, they are difficult to define. In other words, they are illimitable, since they extended and extend beyond objects and commercial frameworks within which art operates, even today.

2. E.V.P. Electronic Voice Phenomena

Audio quote: A WebSDR is a Software-Defined Radio receiver connected to the internet, allowing many listeners to listen and tune it simultaneously
<http://www.websdr.org/>

For Friedrich Kittler, last century's two world wars played a major role in the technical inventions we see today. The Second World War was decisive in the development of what we currently understand as telecommunications media or transmission technologies, many of which moved out of strictly war environments to form part of day-to-day life in the 1940s; the same decade in which a number of maneuvers continued in the background, increasing the differences between Western and Eastern blocs, despite the widely held belief that peace had arrived. Not in vain, Kittler, inspired by the writer Thomas Pynchon, would say that "true wars are not waged over people of the fatherlands, but rather between various media, communications technologies, and data streams."³

For Kittler, moreover, "media was always already provide the appearances of specters."⁴ This is perhaps due to the fact that at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century there was not a fully formed idea of how electricity worked and the culture of science in Europe and America had not become detached from mythological and phantasmagorical thought.⁵ For example, one might think that Thomas Alva Edison, the famous inventor of the phonograph and the light bulb, understood the relationship between vibration and the energy of matter better than anyone, but it wasn't the case. As the inventor's diaries published in 1948 made clear, Edison began investigating a spirit-phone in 1870, a device that would enable communication with the dead,⁶ and in 1933 he was rumored to have performed a semi-public spiritualism session in which electricity functioned as proof of the existence of ghosts.⁷

³ Friedrich Kittler. *Ibid*, p. 30

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 41

⁵ *L'Europe des esprits ou la fascination de l'occulte, 1750-1950* 8/10/2011 - 12/2/2012 Musée d'Art moderne et contemporain de Strasbourg

⁶ "If our personality survives, then it is strictly logical or scientific to assume that it retains memory, intellect, other faculties and knowledge that we acquire on this Earth. Therefore, if personality exists after what we call death, it is reasonable to conclude that those who leave the Earth would like to communicate with those they have left here. I am inclined to believe that our personality hereafter will be able to affect matter. If this reasoning be correct, then, if we can evolve an instrument so delicate as to be affected by our personality as it survives in the next life, such an instrument, when made available, ought to record something."
Austin C. Lescarboua. *Edison's Views on Life and Death. Scientific American* 123, 446. 1920

⁷ "Thomas Edison, the famous inventive wizard, gathered a small group of scientists in his laboratory to witness his secret attempts to lure spirits from beyond the grave and trap them with instruments of incredible sensitivity. Until

This search for voices from beyond the grave provides the definition of the concept of E.V.P, Electronic Voice Phenomena, a term used to describe a particular type of manifestation with a certain resonance in popular occultist culture, and even with a direct influence on part of musical experimentation. Electronic voice phenomena are the result of recording sounds where voices of the dead can apparently be heard once they are properly analyzed. We stress this "apparently" because the explanation of the parapsychologist on what the words mean is normally vital to understanding what the voice is saying. There is generally an understanding that the origin of this practice is linked to the appearance of magnetic tape after the Second World War.⁸

Audio quote: websdr_recording_start_2018-05-12T15_51_56Z_1485.0kHz

We just heard a recording of a radio transmission created on a specific frequency: 1485 kilohertz, a position on the electromagnetic spectrum that for some is known as the "Jürgenson frequency," since this was the preferred frequency of one of the chief proponents of the study of Electronic Voice Phenomena: Friedrich Jürgenson.⁹

Born in Odessa in 1903, Jürgenson, a painter, singer, and archaeologist, claimed that June 12 1959 was a crucial moment in his life, for it was on that date, while listening to a recording he had made with the intention of capturing birdsong, that he discovered a deep voice which he thought was a man speaking in Norwegian.¹⁰

Both perplexed and fascinated by his discovery, Jürgenson began making recordings in which he captured multilingual voices of unknown origin on tape, just like the one we will hear next, which comes from a session recorded on December 28, 1959, and referred to in his book *Voice Transmissions with the Deceased*.¹¹ In the recording, we

recently only the few favored spectators ever knew the outcome of this sensational experiment. Only the few Edison intimates, assembled like members of a mystic clan, ever knew what unearthly forms materialized in the scientist's laboratory that night to give proof or disproof of existence beyond the grave. [...] Edison set up a photo-electric cell. A tiny pencil of light, coming from a powerful lamp, bored through the darkness and struck the active surface of this cell, where it was transformed instantly into a feeble electric current."

⁸ The wire recorder was the almost stricly altmilitary system used during the 1930s. During the Second World War this technology was perfected, giving way to the invention of a platform with larger surfaces for recording such as coated paper and, finally, magnetic tape, which, in changing the composition of iron oxide on plastic, was recycled during the 20th century and until the present day.

Buckland, Reynold. *The Spirit Book: The Encyclopedia of Clairvoyance*. Visible Ink Press. 2005, p. 128

⁹ Carl Michael von Hausswolff, *M.S.C. Harding. 1485.0 Khz*. Cabinet, 2000.
<http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/1/vonhausswolff.php>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "What resulted from that was peculiar. We had sat still for three minutes. On the tape you can hear muffled street-noises. Suddenly a loud male voice sounded resolutely and with clear emphasis and said, "Grecola!" For a few seconds it was quiet, then Arne's wife interrupted the silence and said with resonating voice: "If I wasn't scared,

can hear the word “Grecola,” a Latin term which, according to Jürgenson, referred to a fearful Greek in ancient times.

Audio quote: Friedrich Jürgenson. *Einspielung #5 - Recording Session 28 Dec 1959*, Parapsychic Acoustic Research Cooperative/Ash International (2000) Although his experiments were based initially on the use of a tape recorder and microphone, following the advice of one of those mysterious voices, he would soon incorporate radio into his working methodology, which, we presume, would serve as a bridge to the “beyond.” Thus, starting in 1960, the interval on the electromagnetic spectrum between 1445 and 1500 kilohertz would become the customary space where Jürgenson would make contact with these manifestations.¹²

Audio quote: Friedrich Jürgenson. *Einspielung #10 - 1960?*, Parapsychic Acoustic Research Cooperative/Ash International (2000)

Both this and the previous recording come from the album *From the Studio for Audioscopic Research*, an anthology that compiles a selection from the hundreds of recordings made by Jürgenson and produced in conjunction with the exhibition of which he was the subject in 2000. Both the album and the exhibit were curated by the artist and musician Carl Michael von Hausswolff, in charge of the Parapsychic Acoustic Research Cooperative, the members of which included other sonic explorers like Michael Esposito and Leif Elggren.

Audio quote: Leif Elggren. *Introduction and commentary*, Parapsychic Acoustic Research Cooperative (2006)

“My name is Leif Elggren, my task is to guide you through of a myriad of voices found on this cd, and to take you on a journey, a journey which owing to technological advances is peculiar to this century. I speak of the domestication of electricity, the arrival of the tape recorder and the development of sensitive measuring devices. But despite these advances, EVP remains an unsolved

I would go into the kitchen. Monika would you go with me?” Els-Marie had laid her little son to sleep in the kitchen. Only after three years would I find out what “Grecola” means, and this was through Dr. Alf Ahlberg who had visited me in 1963. “Grecola” was a term used in the old Roman Empire as a term of deprecation. It was a Latin expression for a fearful Greek. Possibly it could be rendered as: “Scared little rabbit.”

Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

twentieth century mystery, perhaps in the twenty first we'll find the solution.¹³ "

Audio quote: "This is Konstantin Raudive, you are going to have hear some samples of recordings belonging to group A, experiment done on July 17, 1965."

Konstantin Raudive. "Here Is Konstantin Raudive... Part #1" en *VVAA Konstantin Raudive - The Voices Of The Dead*, Sub Rosa – SR66 (2002)

In 1964, the Latvian Konstantīns Raudive was already up to speed on Jürgenson's experiments and contacted him, before finally working on his own inventing devices capable of turning ectoplasm transmissions into audible waves. Raudive took the E.V.P recording to a monumental scale, and the assumption is that the researcher made tens of thousands of recordings throughout his life under strict laboratory conditions, thereby earning him the nickname "the Picasso of E.V.P."¹⁴ In 1968 he published the book *Unhörbares wird hörbar* ("What is inaudible becomes audible"), reissued in English in 1971 under the title *Breakthrough: An Amazing Experiment in Electronic Communication with the Dead*.

In his book Raudive establishes that:

- "Voice entities speak very fast, in a mix of languages, sometimes up to five or six in a sentence."
- "They speak with a defined rhythm, in a way that seems forced."
- "The rhythmic manner imposes a phrase or an abbreviated phrase similar to that of a telegram."
- "[And] grammar rules are frequently abandoned and neologisms abound."¹⁵

In a seven-inch record included with the book, a speaker explains what the recorded voices are saying. This explanation, we are told, helps the ear understand the way the ghosts speak.

Audio quote: Konstantin Raudive. *Breakthrough*, Vista (1971)

¹³ Leif Elggren. Introduction and commentary. *The Ghost Orchid: An Introduction To EVP*, Parapsychic Acoustic Research Cooperative, 2006.

¹⁴ Karen Stollznow. *Language Myths, Mysteries and Magic*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. p. 123

¹⁵ Alasdair Wickham. *The Black Book of Modern Myths: True Stories of the Unexplained*. Arrow, 2012. p. 112

Raudive's book begins with a bang. The publisher of the English version acknowledges that, initially, the entire book does not need to be read to know that it was scientifically reliable, and a few lines later goes on to explain that he had to trust what Raudive says, since Raudive, a polyglot, was the only one able to understand the ghosts talking in different languages.

Raudive was convinced that part of a person, the soul, is not governed by human nature, but by a functioning "external" to body and mind, thus maintaining that "the microphone and the tape recorder are to the EVP investigator what the microscope and telescope are to the astronomer."¹⁶ Nevertheless, he doesn't resolve how it is possible for the voice of an entity with no vocal tract to sound so similar to a person with a larynx, vocal cords, and lungs, and merely concludes that incorporeal entities must have a system, just like people, but must be analyzed with different scientific laws. Raudive, as well as Jürgenson, said they had encountered the voices of Hitler, Stalin, and Churchill, but their voices, or souls, had gradually lost their abilities over the years in the other world.

Raudive apparently took his work very seriously and he believed that life after death and its manifestation as E.V.P was disregarded by materialist scientists because they could not comprehend it; nevertheless, the fascination with the figure of Raudive is remarkable. On the music side, the Belgian record label Sub Rosa released a tribute to Raudive in 2002 that included big names from the experimental scene at that time, like DJ Spooky, Lee Ranaldo, the aforementioned Carl Michael von Hausswolff, and David Toop,¹⁷ whose *Koladé Spirit* we are listening right now.

On the music side, the Belgian record label Sub Rosa released a tribute to Raudive in 2002 that included big names from the experimental scene at that time, like DJ Spooky, Lee Ranaldo, the aforementioned Carl Michael von Hausswolff, and David Toop, whose *Koladé Spirit* we will hear.

Audio quote: David Toop. *Koladé Spirit*, Sub Rosa (2002)

Audio quote: William S. Burroughs. *Lecture - Part 1*, Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics (20/07/1976) https://archive.org/details/naropa_william_s_burroughs2

"And what I'm going to be discussing is tape-recorder experiments, and this book gives a very clear, concise, summary of the experiments which I will be discussing during these lectures. It's Chapter 15 - "Your Tape-Recorder - A Tracking Station for Paranormal Voices?".

¹⁶ Konstantine Raudive. *Breakingthrough*, Colin Smythe Ltd, 1971. p. 18

¹⁷ Various. *Konstantin Raudive – The Voices of the Dead*. Sub Rosa – SR66, 2002

"It seems that recordings made with no apparent in-put have turned up unexplained voices on the tape. Now I'm quoting from the book - "Voice phenomena are done with a tape recorder and microphone set up in the usual way and using factory-fresh tape. No sounds are heard or emitted during the recording but on reply faint voices of unknown origin appear to have been recorded. Visible speech diagrams and voice prints have confirmed that these actually are recorded voices and the most complete source-book is a book called *Breakthrough* by *Konstantins Raudive* (that's actually pronounced Rau-di-vay, it's Latvian, but I think I'll just stick with Raudive, or Raudy, for short).¹⁸"

Another example of the impact of the Latvian's work on his contemporaries is the recording we just heard, which comes from a creative writing seminar given by William Burroughs in 1976, five years after the release of *Breakthrough*. The course comprised a series of lectures given at the Naropa Institute, where Burroughs used Raudive and his experiments as objects for consideration. On one hand, the writer considered that the Latvian's work shared similarities with textual or sound collages, known as cut-ups, that he himself had been developing with his friend Brion Gysin since the end of the '50s. And on the other, for Burroughs part of a writer's job was to listen to voices regardless of their provenance, so he brought the phrases which were recorded by Raudive and appeared on *Breakthrough* for his students to compare. While the Latvian researcher considered that the origin of these ghostly voices could perhaps be from our own unconscious, or from supposed aliens, or the dead, Burroughs added another possibility to these controversial hypotheses: that these phrases could be constructed from a type of coded language. The author of *Naked Lunch* considered that since the end of the Second World War experiments were being done that looked to project voices onto the brain of an individual through its exposure to an electromagnetic field, and therefore those transmissions could possibly be recorded on magnetic tape and only heard through playback, not during their recording. Burroughs would speculate on the possibility that a patient diagnosed with a mental illness who heard voices in their head could be receiving messages from a hypothetical network generated by sophisticated machines in the hands of American entities like the NSA, the National Security Agency, or the CIA.

Apart from Burroughs' particular interest in the relationships between pathology and societies of control, bordering on conspiracy paranoia, the writer made mention during the seminar of a number of phrases from Raudive's book, apparently nonsensical and presumably transmitted from the other side.

¹⁸ William S. Burroughs. *Lecture - Part 1. Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, 20/07/1976*

https://archive.org/details/naropa_william_s_burroughs2

Audio quote: William S. Burroughs. *Lecture - Part 1*, Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics (20/07/1976)

"We see Tibet with the binoculars of the people. Give reinforcement. Diminish the stopper. Sometimes only the native country loves. I am expensive. We are coordinated, the guard is manifold. You belong probably to the cucumbers.¹⁹"

And it is precisely this last phrase, related to inoffensive cucumbers ("you belong probably to the cucumbers") that is one of the most significant with regard to his hypothesis on the origin of these unknown voices recorded on tape. For Burroughs, "cucumbers" was a key word, a reference to the Central Intelligence Agency, formerly referred to in the media as "the pickle factory" due to the pronunciation of the acronym of the confidential brief with which the organization summarized current foreign policy and national security for the United States president: the President's Intelligence Checklist, abbreviated to P.I.C.L, or "pickle".

Audio quote: William S. Burroughs. *Lecture - Part 1*, Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics (20/07/1976)

"(I think he was smelling the pickle-factory)

"You belong probably to the cucumbers" - I don't know how many of you are familiar with the term used to designate the CIA, it's "the pickle-factory". "He works for the pickle-factory" means he works...he's a CIA man.

I think this designation was mentioned in Time or Newsweek and I'd already heard it from some acquaintances in the CIA. Well, what would be the derivation of the term? - To be "in a pickle" is to be in a quandary and a bad spot, and what is the CIA manufacturing but bad spots and quandaries, so I think it's quite possible that that is the reference.²⁰"

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

3. Radio Jamming and Samizdat

In 1993, during the 40th anniversary celebrations of Radio Liberty, Boris Yeltsin, the then President of the Russian Federation, said that it would be difficult to overestimate the significance of Radio Liberty's contribution to the destruction of the totalitarian regime in the former Soviet Union.²¹ Yeltsin's phrase, which in 1993 probably sounded encouraging, today sounds by turns prophetic and terrifying. It is common knowledge that totalitarianism in 2018 not only remains, but has established itself with renewed strength thanks in part to the normalizing labors of the media. A discourse that would almost sound like a throwback were it not for the fact that it describes a retro-futurist dystopia instilled in the present. Rumors of a "puppet show" organized by Vladislav Surkov to maintain Putin in power in Russia²², suspicious election results in America characterized by confusion on social media that put Donald Trump in power, different governments' obsession with neutralizing supposed fake news appearing on the internet, and the pursuit of information leaks show us that the so-called freedom of the press is nothing but another form of power.

Audio quote: N.S.C. C.I.A. *Radio Free Europe*. (09/18/1947 - 12/04/1981)

In Latvia, one of the technologies of media control to have the biggest effect on listening and culture was the Soviet government's interference with foreign radio signals. In 1948 the USSR began their radio jamming campaign under direct orders from Stalin to protect Russian ears from the Voice of America and the BBC.²³

It's interesting to note that only seven years before, during the Second World War, the USSR had strategically financed a number of radio stations all around Europe to bridge the gap between the borders of countries around which they wished to spread their propaganda. Shortly after, in the 1950s, the United States sent signal jammers to fascist countries like Spain to disrupt the signal sent by the Communist Party from Bucharest, where radio stations had been set up with Soviet financial backing in 1941. Later they would attempt the same in Chile, but they had already learned that this service was too costly²⁴. This fact, which probably occurred in many other countries around the

²¹ Evgeniya Konovalova. *The Effects of Western Broadcasting on the Soviet People in Glasnost and Perestroika Period: The Case of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. Charles University in Prague, 2012, p. 1
https://dspace.cuni.cz/bitstream/handle/20.500.11956/46118/DPTX_2011_2_11230_0_367230_0_123221.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

²² Vladimir Stepanov. *The gray cardinal leaves the Kremlin*. Lifestyle, 2011
https://www.rbth.com/articles/2011/12/28/the_gray_cardinal_leaves_the_kremlin_14123.html

²³ A. Ross Johnson. History RFE/RL: Free Media In Unfree Societies. 2008
<https://pressroom.rferl.org/p/6092.html>

²⁴ Francisco Salvador. *Una voz que vino de lejos. Memorias de la comunicación de los programas radiales ESCUCHA CHILE y RADIO MAGALLANES, durante la dictadura de Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990)*. Universidad nacional de La Plata, 2015

world, destroyed the narrative of the story that the United States won the Cold War through the airwaves by way of radio broadcasts preaching a message of freedom, while the Soviets fought against it through interference. In fact, it is openly false that countries of the so-called free bloc are characterized by freedom of speech within their borders, when actually they imposed capitalist control on the media. In radio, for example, control was established by the price of licenses and broadcast range, which rendered any local radio not controlled by certain laws illegal.

Audio quote: Benny Goodman. *In Moscow 1962, Giants Of Jazz* (1995)

Radio Free Europe began to operate in Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Romania in 1950, but did not reach Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania until 1975.²⁵ In 1972 the United States had already estimated that signal jamming cost the Soviets about 300,000,000 dollars, compared to the mere 5.3 million dollars the CIA paid to run the Voice of America, Radio Liberty, and Radio Free Europe combined. In point of fact, Radio Liberty initially had ties to Radio Free Europe during the early years of the Cold War, since they were both sponsored and strictly controlled by the CIA until 1971, and were part of a project from the United States Department of State to spread around Europe the ideology of the Voice of America, a radio station aimed at American listeners. The ideology of these two radio stations entailed sufficiently filtrating the Voice of America in a way that European listeners would think they were actually listening to a radio station that advocated civil rights, not to an imperialist propaganda organization. In 1973 the CIA decided to relax its control of content on Radio Liberty to, as they put it, cause more damage to the different Soviet republics.²⁶

Audio quote: C.I.A. *Cold War Radio Free Europe Crusade For Freedom Propaganda Film With Walter Cronkite* (1957) <https://archive.org/details/79834TowersOfTrut>

Audio quote: Muslimgauze. "Samizdat" en *Flajelata*, Limited editions (1986)

Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty adopted a strategy that, as Friederike Kind-Kovacs indicated, entailed dedicating part of their normal programming to reading out accounts of day-to-day life in the Soviet Union written by people who lived in the different republics.²⁷ These testimonies came principally from underground publications called *samizdats*, a word in which the particle *sam-* indicates the "do-it-yourself" nature of this type of texts, which emerged in the 1950s and sought to escape the control of

http://sedici.unlp.edu.ar/bitstream/handle/10915/52796/Documento_completo_.pdf-PDFA.pdf?sequence=3

²⁵ A. Ross Johnson. History RFE/RL: Free Media In Unfree Societies. 2008
<https://pressroom.rferl.org/p/6092.html>

²⁶ C.I.A. Supplemental authorization for radio free Europe and radio liberty. 5 June 1978
<https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP75B00380R000400020004-6.pdf>

²⁷ See: Friederike Kind-Kovacs. Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty as the "echo chamber" of Samizdat. *Samizdat, Tamizdat and beyond: Transnational media during and after socialism*. Berghahn Books, 2013, p. 79.

the authorities²⁸. Although these materials began to proliferate shortly after the death of Stalin, when the control of information became more lax²⁹, there was still the risk of being arrested by the Committee for State Security, also known as the KGB.

Samizdat publications were characterized by their being typed in very limited runs and then copied with carbon paper or by hand. Sometimes they were even photographed, since possessing a multi-copy machine could have grave consequences. Between the 1970s and the latter years of the Soviet Union, Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty came to house two of the largest collections of *samizdats*, with both radio stations becoming, in the words of Max Hayward, the *samizdat* "echo chamber."³⁰

One distinctive feature of *samizdat* is that the notion of authorship was subject to radical reformulation — the urgency to put into circulation content deemed clandestine, along with the lack of resources to copy complete original texts, meant the texts were often changed, and the versions produced evolved as they passed from one reader to the next or from one copier to another. The person reading knew that they ought to contribute to the text's continuing circulation, so at times they were edited in a way that was as pragmatic as it was creative, and on occasions the content was whittled down to its essential parts, which of course was highly subjective.

Discreet by obligation, *samizdat* must be understood as an example of horizontally created literature, as opposed to the dominant and paradoxical hierarchical verticality in the Soviet bloc, literature where content was just as important as the configuration of the network of anonymous readers, publishers, and distributors. It was a network that would ultimately transcend the borders of the Soviet Union and appear in the West; through radio stations like Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe *samizdat* would return amplified to the USSR, and, through oral transmission, reach a much larger audience.

The Soviet authorities' attempts to interfere with these types of radio broadcasts were unsuccessful, and in 1988 this interference came to an end.³¹ These were years of gradual liberalization that brought about Gorbachev's *glasnost*, and a time that also coincided with the beginning of *samizdat*'s decline.³²

Within *samizdat* there was room for very different types of publications that had not been accepted by official culture. One example is Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*, a literary work that did not fit with the order of socialist realism, which is why it wasn't until

²⁸ Ann Komaromi. *About Samizdat*. <https://samizdat.library.utoronto.ca/content/about-samizdat>

²⁹ Kristen Alfaro; Ann Komaromi. Uncertified copies: On Samizdat. Triple Canopy. 8 May 2012 <https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/uncertified-copies-on-samizdat>

³⁰ Max Hayward citing Friederike Kind-Kovacs. Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty as the "echo chamber" of Samizdat. *Samizdat, Tamizdat and beyond: Transnational media during and after socialism*. Berghahn Books, 2013, p. 81.

³¹ Rimantas Pleykis. Radio Jamming in the Soviet Union, Poland and others East European Countries. *Antentop*, 1, 2006, p. 78. <http://www.antentop.org/008/files/jamm008.pdf>

³² Evgeniya Konovalova. Op. cit. P. 13.

1988 (in other words, three decades later) that it was published in Russia.³³ Until then, like many other works, the only way to read Pasternak's novel was through copies brought, almost smuggled from the West, or copies made by readers who were anxious to share. Under the name *samizdat* there were also bulletins dedicated to condemning human rights violations like *Chronicle of Current Events*, or magazines on experimental poetry like *Transponans*, Rea Nikonova and Serge Segay's publication, which recovered the legacy of the early Russian avant-garde.³⁴

At any rate, accounts of the decisive impact of communication on the declining Soviet Union should be read with a note of caution, or at least that is the belief of the Byelorussian Evgeny Morozov, who in his book *The Net Delusion* minimizes the effectiveness of *samizdat* or radio broadcasts coming out of the West, reminding us that there were other variables at play that were just as decisive, among them a number of Central-European countries' increased foreign debt, the downturn of the Soviet economy, and the impossibility of the Warsaw Pact in competing with NATO.³⁵

Audio quote: Cabaret Voltaire. *The Voice Of America / Damage Is Done*, Rough Trade (1980)

³³ Philip Taubman. Soviet writers reinstate Pasternak. *The New York Times*, 24 February 1987, p. A10.

³⁴ Kristen Alfaro; Ann Komaromi. Op. cit.

³⁵ Evgeny Morozov. *The Net Delusion*. Public Affairs, 2011, p. 51.

4. Magnitizdat

The existence of an unofficial distribution circuit of cultural artifacts running parallel to the official one was not purely textual, for there was also *magnitizdat*, a neologism that operated in a similar fashion to *samizdat*, but which centered on the copy of sound materials on magnetic tape.

As Brian A. Horne mentioned, the '60s and '70s bore witness to a significant increase in the production of reel-to-reel tape machines for domestic use in the Soviet Union. In 1965, 500,000 units were produced, and in 1970 the number of tape machines doubled.³⁶ With this technology the automated copying process was much faster than the one used to copy *samizdat*, which meant that millions of tapes were put in circulation that contained recordings created with no official backing. This was the case with the singer-songwriter — or the bard, as he was called in the former USSR — Vladimir Vysotsky, whose song *Spasite Nashi Dushi*, or *Save Our Souls*, would become an anthem even though Vysotsky didn't have access to the professional technical means that were reserved for those with the authorities' consent.

Audio quote: Vladimir Vysotsky. *Spasite Nashi Dushi*, Moroz (2000)

Audio quote: Seque. *Iespieduma kļīdas*, Seque (1979)

Until the invention of the tape machine, the most widely used way to distribute music in the Soviet Union was with X-ray sheets used to press the same grooves pressed on a vinyl record, similar to a flexi-disc.

Audio quote: Seque. *Kuncendorf's China notes 2*, Seque (1978)

Records, but most of all homemade tapes, were the formats used by Juris Boiko and Hardijs Lediņš, two Latvian artists, whose output bore little relation to the lyrical poetry of bards like Vysotsky. Boiko and Lediņš would come to be known for signing their works as NSRD, Nebijušu Sajūtu Restaurēšanas Darbnīca, or Workshop for the Restoration of Unfelt Feelings, a project which encompassed conceptual practices, architectural research, and multimedia experimentation with a particular focus on sound.

Boiko and Lediņš began to work together as teenagers, before deciding, in 1971, to put *Zirgābols* into circulation, a publication in a *samizdat* format that would earn them a warning call from the KGB. Another of their earliest publications, *Seque*, would end up becoming the name of their music project, a home studio and record label they would use as their platform from the late 70s onwards. In their early work, their recordings were characterized by the predominance of instrumental vignettes echoing John Cage and other minimalist composers, but, with the 1980s now under way, and as a result of the

³⁶ Friederike Kind-Kovács and Jessie Labov (Ed.) *Samizdat, Tamizdat, and Beyond. Transnational Media During and After Socialism*. Berghahn, 2013. P. 179

increased use of voice and electronic instruments, *Seque* would open out into NSRD, giving priority to a unique re-reading of in-vogue Western styles like *new wave*. NSRD was distinguished by experimental tracks, sometimes written to be played and appreciated on the dance floor.³⁷

Audio quote: NSRD. *Nepaartrauktais*, *Seque* (1983)

Audio quote: King Crimson. *Fracture*, *Island* (1974)

From a very young age, Hardijs Lediņš showed a passion for music, driving him to create a university club to champion the most cutting-edge trends in the field of composition, as well as more unconventional rock sounds. But he needed permission from Komsomol, the Communist Party youth organization, which led him to “disguise” his unorthodox music sessions as a lecture. In these sessions the sounds would range from Charles Ives to King Crimson, and sometimes ended up with almost everyone dancing. The lectures took place between 1974 and 1977, and served as a precursor to one of the first contemporary music festivals in Latvia and one of the most fascinating projects in NSRD’s career, the *Kosmoss*³⁸ discotheque.

According to Timothy Ryback, the Soviet Union’s fascination with disco music began in Latvia, specifically in its capital, Riga, due to the fact that “the Baltic region represented the ‘authentic’ West in its Soviet socialist form,”³⁹ and at a time, in the mid-70s, when “these venues, known as discotheques, were promoted (...) as the most progressive and ideologically safe places for presenting Communist entertainment to the Soviet youth.”⁴⁰

In its search to build a vibe through different means, the *Kosmoss* discotheque connected perfectly with NSRD’s aspirations, since Lediņš had come to note that one of the defining traits of the collective was to achieve “an atmosphere letting anyone get creatively, auto-poetically involved in the processes of art and culture.”⁴¹

Hardijs Lediņš continued to organize experimental discotheques along with Leonards Laganovskis, Mārtiņš Rutkis, Imants Žodžiks and Mārcis Bendiks. These discotheques appeared in university-related spaces and sometimes were scheduled before official university events such as an ice hockey game in a sport center. Over time, the concept of the *Kosmoss* discotheque took on a new meaning when Lediņš began to organize parties for construction workers in the Cultural Center in Sarkanarmijas in 1981. The

³⁷ Ieva Astahovska, Māra Žeikare (Ed.). *Workshop For The Restoration Of Unfelt Feelings*. Juris Boiko and Hardijs Lediņš. LCCA, 2016. P. 23

³⁸ Ieva Astahovska, Māra Žeikaren (Ed.) Ibid, p. 26-27

³⁹ “the Baltic region represented the ‘authentic’ West in its Soviet socialist form” Dietmar Neutatz, Julia Obertreis, Marie-Janine Calic (Ed.) *The Crisis of Socialist Modernity: The Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the 1970s*. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011. P. 94

⁴⁰ “These venues, known as discotheques, were promoted (...) as the most progressive and ideologically safe places for presenting Communist entertainment to the Soviet youth.” Ibid

⁴¹ Ieva Astahovska, Māra Žeikaren (Ed.) Ibid, p. 21

design and décor was meticulously created and the programme brought together music, projections, and other effects designed by Laganovskis, who had earned a diploma from the Lithuanian Academy of Art for his Youth Recreation Park in *Jūrmala* in 1979.⁴²

Audio quote: NSRD. *Ciku caku caurā tumba*, Seque (1985)

Despite discotheques becoming established in the Soviet Union in the 1980s, Kosmos was forced to close in 1983 after being accused of promoting tasteless musical styles that were morally and ideologically harmful.⁴³

⁴² Ibid, p. 36

⁴³ Ibid. p. 37

5. Tape Jockeys

Cita de audio: NSRD. *Enokoto*, (1988)

NSRD's fascination with disco culture as a space to frame their artistic creations was more than just circumstance or anecdote. In fact, Lediņš claimed that "being a disc jockey means being an enthusiastic and versatile person — an actor, musicologist, electro-technician, linguist and designer at the same time."⁴⁴ The word *tape-jockey* was possibly more fitting given the scarcity of vinyl records at the time, which often made it necessary to use reel-to-reel tapes, not cassettes. Even in the 1980s in the Soviet Union it was still the most accessible way to play music that was mostly obtained through the underground.

Audio quote: Westbam. *Do it in the punk mix*, Metropol (1987)

Audio quote: NSRD. *Ziemeļbriežu Pajūgā Pa Rīgas Jūras Līci*, Blue Cow, (1992)

We just heard *Do it in the punk mix*, a track put together by a DJ from the then German Federal Republic. The artist in question, Maximilian Lenz, better known as Westbam, recorded this sonic jigsaw in the vein of early New York hip hop. However, *Do it in the punk mix* was recorded in a Riga discotheque in 1987, and in fact the record's credits show a collaboration between two local figures: Ainars Mielavs and Roberts Gobziņš, the latter a member of the band Dzeltenie Pastnieki and a collaborator with NSRD, and who, after meeting Westbam, decided to rename himself Eastbam.

The origin of why Gobziņš chose this artistic name comes from an exhibition held that same year in the Riga House of Knowledge.⁴⁵ It was there that NSRD had the opportunity to set out the creation of an immersive environment in search of new artistic forms, where the lines were blurred between music, video, performance, and text, and all fell under the name of "approximate art."⁴⁶ During the opening, Westbam, one of the guest artists from West Germany, demonstrated that as a DJ his skills on the turntables and mixer were an artistic discipline in their own right, allowing him to approach collage through other mediums, in this instance with sound. The impact was such that Roberts Gobziņš would quickly take up the German's *modus operandi*, but with one notable difference: Eastbam would try to do the same with modified tape players and magnetic tapes, instead of turntables and vinyl records.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ "being a disc jockey means being an enthusiastic and versatile person - an actor, musicologist, electro-technician, linguist and designer at the same time."

Ieva Astahovska, Māra Žeikaren (Ed.) Ibid, p. 36

⁴⁵ Ibid. P. 70

⁴⁶ Ibid P. 211

⁴⁷ Ibid P. 464

Audio quote: NSRD. *Maijas Raps*, Approximate Art Agency, (1989)

Audio quote: Afrika Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force. *Planet Rock (Instrumental)*, Tommy Boy (1982)

It would be erroneous to reduce the meeting of Eastbam and Westbam to something purely contextual, such as the introduction of a Western youth subculture in a relatively isolated context like Latvia's. In fact, the encounter between the German DJ and the local future tape-jockey is revealing, and perhaps prophetic of the geopolitical changes that would come about at the end of the 1980s.

On one side, the meeting of Westbam and Eastbam was the result of the contacts network interwoven between West Germany and Latvia, in which Indulis Bilzēns played a decisive role – Bilzēns was a Latvian artist and cultural agitator who grew up exiled in West Germany, where, along with Westbam, he would play a part in the advent of the Berlin techno scene. In fact, it was Bilzēns who suggested the name Westbam to the DJ — a combination of Westfalia, a region in Germany, and Bambaataa, in reference to the legendary electro and hip hop pioneer Afrika Bambaataa.⁴⁸ Bilzēns was equally influential for NSRD, to whom he supposedly introduced the legacy of Fluxus, as well as video experimentation and its hybridization with performance.⁴⁹

And on the other, Eastbam must be seen as a profound change in the Latvian socio-musical landscape, a watershed that marked the transition from disco culture to an imminent club scene and the explosion of rave, which in turn would have a decisive effect on the post-Soviet scene, with the parties resembling a temporary autonomous zone, free from outside control. Moreover, Eastbam would not be an anomaly, and, in fact, in 1989 an international tape-jockey championship was held in Riga, and won by Mr. Tape, the *nom de guerre* of Modris Skaiskalns. Mr. Tape is still remembered today for his torrent of tape skills at the Disco Mix Club World Championship, a worldwide competition for virtuoso turntablists held in 1991.

While Alexei Yurchach considered that Latvia, and especially Riga because of its links to West Germany, would be the first republic from the USSR to make contact with new electronic dance music⁵⁰, Viktors Buda, a Latvian electronic music promoter, would note that it wouldn't be until the mid-90s that rave culture, imported from Moscow, hit Latvia.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Will Mawhood. Era of Dance: How Riga brought techno music to the Soviet Union. *Deep Baltic*, 16 February 2017, <https://deepbaltic.com/2017/02/16/era-of-dance-how-riga-brought-techno-music-to-the-soviet-union/>

⁴⁹ Ieva Astahovska, Māra Žeikaren (Ed.). P. 307.

⁵⁰ Alexei Yurchach. Gagarin and the Rave Kids. Adele Marie Barker (ed.) *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex and Society since Gorbachev*. Duke University Press, 1999, p. 89

⁵¹ "Raves as we know them came to Latvia from Moscow in the mid-'90s as a new form of electronic music culture."

Audio quote: Eastbam. *Theme from Riga (Riga Sunrise Mix)*, Low Spirit Recordings (1990)

This series of podcasts started with Friedrich Kittler, an author who, it is worth recalling, considered that "true wars are not waged over people of the fatherlands, but rather between various media, communications technologies, and data streams."⁵² In this regard, another media theorist, Franco Berardi, who witnessed the Italian free radio movement in the 1970s, explained his conviction that video, music, and even drugs should be considered communication technologies. Berardi's opinion was in view of the increased speed and immediacy in the capacity for feedback, or the reaction to another's response, surpassing radio and other forms of textual communication.⁵³

It is in the wake of these last two reflections that we would like to conclude our journey through this multitude of transmissions, interferences, copies, and parties, and with an anonymous quote included in an article by Sergejs Timofejevs, a Latvian poet and disc-jockey. *Interrogation-90. Attempted confession* shows Timofejevs taking stock of what the 1990s meant in Latvia, once it had crossed the threshold of the Soviet implosion. In it he notes the relationships between the art scene and the burgeoning rave culture in the middle of the decade, and curiously revisits the words of a young woman that appeared in the Russian magazine *Ptjuch*, a publication at that time which was key to understanding this new cultural phenomenon:

Audio quote: Westbam & Eastbam. *Go Eastbam*, Low Spirit Recordings (1989)

"a disco... had a different atmosphere ... Someone was always staring at you lustfully. People went to disco parties to contact other human beings through music. Rave, on the contrary, makes you self-sufficient, while at the same time you are part of one whole, of some kind of archaic collective body. it is like a de-sexualized pagan rite."⁵⁴

Will Mawhood. Era of Dance: How Riga brought techno music to the Soviet Union. *Deep Baltic*, 16 February 2017, <https://deepbaltic.com/2017/02/16/era-of-dance-how-riga-brought-techno-music-to-the-soviet-union/>

⁵² "true wars are not waged over people of the fatherlands, but rather between various media, communications technologies, and data streams."
Friedrich Kittler. Op. cit. p.. 30

⁵³ "I think that drugs are a very important area of communication. We generally use drugs like a commodity. But I think that drugs are not a commodity but a communication technology."
Rosetta Brooks. Radio Alice. *Zg Press*, 10 July 2010, <http://www.zgpress.com/?p=36>

⁵⁴ Sergejs Timofejevs. *Interrogation-90. Attempted confession. Nineties. Contemporary Art in Latvia. Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art*, p. 334