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Serenella Iovino

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**Framing Environments in Russia:
Critical Reflections on Ecology, Culture and Power**

edited by Nadia Caprioglio and Roberta Sala

Introduction

Nadia Caprioglio

Università degli Studi di Torino

Roberta Sala

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We hear something in the woods, and then try to articulate it in human speech. That shift from audition to narrative involves a complicated process of translation, *pere-vod* in Russian, carrying back across the forest boundary into the world of human culture and converse.

(Costlow 2013, 11)

Often represented as primordial and formless, inert and abject, soil simultaneously attracts and frustrates attempts to give it form in our physical and cultural landscape.

(Erley 2021, 3)

No area of life, knowledge or human ability exists without some connection to water; it flows in and across human and non-human bodies.

(Costlow, Rosenholm 2016, 4)

The cultural conception and representation of the other-than-human has played an extremely meaningful role in the construction of Russian identity, as well as in the socio-political processes concerning the Russian territory. As noted by Jane Costlow, “cultural historians have long observed the importance of landscape in the dynamics of Russian history” (2013, 6). This becomes particularly evident when considering nature’s essential role in the “мегатекст” *megatekst* ‘megatext’ of Russian poetry (Epštejn 1990, 6), where the landscape, besides acting as a backdrop for socio-cultural changes, is often related to the folk values having forged the country’s national

spirit. The idea of natural environments as sites of aesthetic and moral models, largely influenced by German *Naturphilosophie* from the late eighteenth-early nineteenth century (Erley 2021, 8; 11-19), has often led to conceive nature as a symbolic *object* of human thought within Russian literary and cultural contexts.

At the same time, a flourishing ecological debate concerning environmental conservation was opened up in the second half of the 19th century, when concerns related mainly to deforestation were brought to light by several Russian scientists, writers, journalists. At the beginning of the Soviet period some important laws on conservation were issued, while scientific research on the environment intensified. In this context the scholar Vladimir Vernadskij developed his pioneering idea of humankind acting as a major geological agent, which he conceptualized by adopting the term 'noosphere' in his work of the late 1930s *Научная мысль как планетное явление* (*Naučnaja mysl' kak planetnoe javlenie* (Scientific Thought as a Planetary Phenomenon). During Stalin's regime, however, the intellectual independence of scientists was barely ensured: research in the field of natural science was supported by the government, though chiefly insofar as it contributed to the exploitation of natural resources, the domestication of the lands and technological progress. A deeply anthropocentric conception of the environment was fostered by the state's utilitarian attitude toward the other-than-human:

Stalin strove for total transformation not only of the social and political landscapes, but also of the natural landscape in his drive to control the entire society, economy and polity. [...] Conservation organizations were closely surveilled, policed, reorganized or liquidated. (Josephson et al. 2013, 110)

In the post-Stalinist period the idea of the other-than-human as a socio-political *object* was carried out by the Soviet leadership. For instance, the government's commitment in national and international projects of nature protection during the Brežnev period, following the new global awareness of the environmental crisis, was essentially aimed at achieving a leading role in the competition with the United States (cf. Josephson et al. 2013, 186, 191). Furthermore, even some of the environmental activist groups which arose in the former USSR republics provided nature with deep political connotations, since they served as surrogates for political issues excluded from public discourse (cf. Gille 2009a, 2-3).

Only after the full realization, in the years following the Soviet Union's collapse, of the considerable ecological damages caused by the regime, some broader perspectives on nature have opened up in the Russianist academic context. Relying on the methods developed in the United States within the interdisciplinary areas of the Environ-

mental Humanities, the role of human narratives in transforming nature has been increasingly investigated, due also to the meaningful heritage of Soviet science. Indeed, as underlined by Jonathan Oldfield,

the evident lack of any consequential response to the country's developing environmental dilemma by the Soviet state did not stop its scientists from reflecting deeply on the character of the changing relationship between society and the natural environment. (2021, 2)

Meanwhile, the other-than-human has gradually started to be understood as a complex biological *subject* existing independently of the anthropocentric gaze and actively shaping cultural processes. An important impulse to this trend was given by some pioneering studies in the field of Russian and Soviet environmental history, environmental sociology and environmentalism, carried out, from the end of the 1980s, by authors such as Douglas R. Weiner (1988; 1999), John Massey Stewart (1991), Murray Feshbach and Alfred Friendly (1992) and Jane I. Dawson (1996).¹ However, the analysis of cultural and literary images of nature from the point of view of ecocritical theory has not attracted significant scholarly interest until the beginning of our century. The ground-breaking works of Christopher David Ely (2002), Jane Costlow (2003a, 2003b) and Alexander Ogden (2005) have paved the way for the development of some more systematic studies considering the peculiarities of Russian landscape through the lenses of the ecological thought. In this regard, both the collection of essays *Understanding Russian Nature: Representations, Values, Concepts* (2005), edited by Arja Rosenholm and Sari Autio-Sarasmo, and the thematic cluster "Nature, Culture and Power" (2009b), edited by Zsuzsa Gille in the journal *Slavic Review*, shed light on the active participation of nature in the socio-political processes and historical transformations involving Russia and other East-European countries. The work *Other Animals. Beyond the Human in Russian Culture and History*, edited by Jane Costlow and Amy Nelson in 2010, investigates the relationship between the other-than-human and humankind as well, focusing specifically on the role of animals. Furthermore, some meaningful interdisciplinary studies examining the cultural conceptualization of Russian forests, water and soil have been published by Jane Costlow (2013), Jane Costlow and Arja Rosenholm (2016) and Mieka Erley (2021) respectively. Another fundamental field of investigation

¹ Scholarship in the field of environmental history was increased, in the 2000s, by the meaningful contributions of Andy Bruno (e.g. 2007; 2016; 2018; 2022), Paul R. Josephson et al. (2013), Jonathan Oldfield and Denis Shaw (2015), Jonathan Oldfield, Julia Lajus, Denis Shaw (2015), Jonathan Oldfield (2021).

in the area of Russian ecocriticism, considering the economic and political value of fossil fuels in the Soviet and post-Soviet period, is represented by recent research on oil and its multiple interconnections with the development of Russian cultural identity (e.g. Kalinin 2015; Rogers 2015; Etkind 2020; Porter, Vinokour 2023). Finally, on the basis of the cited studies, in 2020 Alec Brookes and Elena Fratto edited the monographic issue “Anthropocene and Russian Literature” of the journal *Russian Literature*, aimed at rethinking the other-than-human in Russian literature considering the geological impact of humankind in the Anthropocene.

Given these premises, the special issue “Framing Environments in Russia: Critical Reflections on Ecology, Culture and Power” originates from our intent to stress the raising importance of ecocritical theory and environmental ethics in contemporary research involving Russia and the Soviet Union. The idea of *framing* does not imply here an attempt to further delimit the other-than-human, this time through the cultural lens of the ecological thought. On the contrary, *framing* is understood in its meaning of *expressing, constructing, developing* new flourishing perspectives on Russian natural environment, in order to show its complexity, as well as its deep interconnections with human experience. To this end, great emphasis has been put on the agency of the other-than-human, conceived not only as an object of cultural conceptualizations, but mainly as active *matter* penetrating, transforming and reshaping physical and mental landscapes. Besides, the multidisciplinary approaches taken by the authors of this issue highlight the urgency to re-think social structures and hierarchical logics of power in order to preserve both cultural and natural environments. As observed by Wendy Wheeler,

Environmental damage [...] means both damage in nature and damage in culture; these are not, essentially, different things. Environmental literacy must be understood to encompass natural, social, cultural and, by implication, emotional literacy also. (2006, 155)

All ten essays included in this special issue address the conceptualization of the natural environment in Russia by engaging with a diverse range of cultural expressions which encompasses activist prose, fiction, poetry, art, and cinema.

Since the nineteenth century, human identities in Russian literature have been depicted as inextricably intertwined and creatively interdependent with natural forces, which, in turn, play a crucial role as agents of transformation. The opening contribution, written by J. Alexander Ogden, analyses Nikolay Nekrasov’s poem *Red-Nose Frost* (Мороз, Красный нос *Moroz, Krasnyj nos*, 1863), highlighting how nature is portrayed as an active force. In the context of the surge of environmental activity that took place in Russia at the end

of the nineteenth century (Fedotov, Uspenskij 2021, 487), Nekrasov was among the first authors who strove to find the proper balance between advocating that humans should refrain from any interference in the natural world and recognizing human dependence on natural resources. Ogden highlights that, in Nekrasov's poem, creatures, natural forces, and the natural world are all portrayed as sentient agents commanding consideration: countrymen, for instance, are fully enmeshed in the natural world, and the author displaces onto a rural Other a connection to the environment that has been lost by his implied audience, the urban elite.

The following seven essays are organized thematically according to the three geographical elements that have most significantly influenced Russia's historical trajectory: forests, steppes (soil), and rivers (water) (Ključevskij 1904, 69). The importance of these three *loci/resources* was first acknowledged by the renowned historian Vasilij Ključevskij, when – during his public lectures in Moscow in the 1880s – he delved into the relationship between material cultures and the psychology and customs of a people.

The forest, a perennial setting for Russian life, has traditionally played a major role in Russia's history. Until the second half of the 18th century, most people lived in the forest belt of Russia's plain, and the state could only consolidate itself in the far north, under the cover of forests on the steppe side (Ključevskij 1904, 69, 70). Roberta Sala's contribution provides a comparative analysis of the forest in the production of the Russian poet of Chuvash origins Gennadij Ajgi (1934-2006) and in the early performances of the Moscow conceptualist artistic group Коллективные Действия *Kollektivnye Dejstvija* (Collective Actions) (1976-77). Sala suggests that both contemporary artists displace the natural world onto an Other, in ways that echo Ogden's observations about Nekrasov. The Other of Ajgi and of *Kollektivnye Dejstvija* preserves a harmony with nature that was instead lost in the Soviet ideologized society. In their production, the non-anthropized forest appears as a marginal space of a creative encounter between human identity and an otherness, finding in nature an other-than-human "place of discovery", which extends beyond human experiences, encompassing both the realms of nature itself and culture (cf. Maran 2020, 35).

Continuing with a focus on the poetic representation of trees by Gennadij Ajgi, Henrieke Stahl analyzes the specific mystical value attributed to the 'willow tree' (*Salix alba*) through various phases of his poetry. Stahl observes that Ajgi's shift between the three Russian names for the willow – ветла *vetla*, верба *verba*, ива *iva* – corresponds to a transformation of his own poetic mysticism. Drawing from a traditional cultural context, the poet attributes consciousness and volition to the willow, considering it as natural force, influenced by a belief system that contains elements of animism (cf. Garrard 2011, 129-37).

The second element, the steppe, the soil, elicits different impressions and influences. The cultivated black soil (чернозём *černozem*), along with the grassy steppe pastures, played a crucial role in the early and significant development of agriculture and cattle breeding (Ključevskij 1904, 71). At the same time, the unpredictable nature of Russian soil has often been a source of danger, particularly when human activities have altered biodiversity and disrupted the ecosystem.

Human intervention in ecosystems has, for instance, contributed to the rapid spread of species considered *invasive*, often associated by humans with inherent malevolence. Anastasia Sinitsyna's contribution examines the multiple representations of the giant hogweed (*Heracleum*), a perilous and noxious herbaceous plant, across various art forms, from installations to photographic exhibitions. Originally introduced as a solution to fodder shortages, the giant hogweed was hailed as an emblem of the Soviet Union's scientific achievements in transcending natural constraints. However, as the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent disruption in agricultural management led to an uncontrolled proliferation of the giant hogweed around the country, the plant became a powerful symbol of the Soviet empire's far-reaching influence within the political and cultural domains of contemporary Russia, and of the adverse effects of imperial governance on native ecosystems.

Transitioning from the representation of the soil to the exploration of subsoil depths, the articles by Nadia Caprioglio and Ilya Kalinin examine the cultural and social significance of oil in Soviet and post-Soviet Russian culture. Through the analysis of three literary case studies spanning different periods, and Andron Končalovskij's film *The Siberiade* (Сибиряда *Sibiriada*, 1978) respectively, these contributions illuminate the underlying tension between the potential of oil for modernization and the conservative economic and socio-political trends that accompanied the increasing dependence on this resource. The resulting effects often manifest in unexpected ways, showing that, from the anthropocentric optimism of the Soviet era to the awareness of our times about oil as an uncontrollable *object*, oil consistently appears to be a hybrid of nature and culture, one that holds a significant place in Russian literature and cinema, and that carries various forms of utopian, mystical, historico-philosophical, and metaphysical meanings.

Alexei Kraikovski and Julia Lajus's contribution focuses on the third element, water, and provides a comprehensive overview of St. Petersburg as a center of control and management of the surrounding lagoonscape. Their analysis delves into the role of knowledge, viewed as a social construct, in shaping the city's development within the context of the Neva inlet, the easternmost part of the Gulf of Finland. By exploring how knowledge is formed through collective perception, imagination and observation, the authors contend that these three mech-

anisms have influenced the city's development and have contributed to the establishment of St. Petersburg maritime empire, in material and political terms, as much as in narrative. Additionally, the article highlights how the origin of modern Russian literature coincided with the initial attempts to depict the empire's maritime experience. The Neva River, functioning as a powerful non-human actor, provided an imaginative seascape that significantly shaped representations of this amphibious city and its intricate relationship with water.

The archetype of water in Russian Culture is most vividly manifested in the image of the river. Giulia Baselica's essay examines the role of Russia's rivers, with a particular focus on the Volga, as a multifaceted space and an important cultural motif in Russian literature. The essay traces the gradual exploration of rivers as a thematic element, their incorporation into storylines, and their growing importance as subjects of literary discourse over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These accounts encompass a wide range of popular images and symbolic representations, which evolve in conjunction with shifts in knowledge and intertwine with the construction of ideology throughout history. In particular, the Volga features prominently in Vasilij Grossman's remarkable novel *Сталинград Stalingrad* (1952), where it becomes an integral element of the ethnocultural image of Russia as a whole and plays a substantial role in shaping the identity of the Russian people.

The two final essays effectively bring our cluster to a conclusion by incorporating a diverse range of non-literary discourses that contribute to the expansion and comprehensiveness of our discussion. Specifically, the article authored by Angelina Davydova offers a distinctive perspective originating from outside the academic world. Davydova is an experienced environmental journalist and observer with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) since 2008. She is also the co-founder of the Ukraine War Environmental Consequences (UWEC) Work Group. Her contribution is a comprehensive examination of the direct and indirect environmental and climate impacts resulting from the full-scale war in Ukraine, initiated by Russia in late February 2022. In addition to the immediate consequences, which typically entail the devastation of ecosystems and wildlife, chemical contamination, and the destruction of infrastructure due to military operations, she also exposes some secondary ramifications that may have more subtle implications. These encompass the restructuring of global markets for energy, metals, food, and fertilizers, as well as the alterations observed in environmental and climate policies and actions at a national and international level. Davydova emphasizes the conflict in Ukraine as a catalyst for significant global transformations within the realms of environmental and climate governance, encompassing not only Russia's policies in these domains but also environmental activism within the country.

Before the war in Ukraine began, there was a noticeable increase in environmental activism across various regions in Russia, as demonstrated in Olga Zakharova and EGINE Karagulian's article. The authors explore the green practices adopted among the residents of Tyumen, the largest city in Western Siberia. Using a questionnaire methodology, the study's findings reveal that a significant percentage of citizens (ranging from 30% to 71%) own knowledge about and actively participate in green practices, such as cleaning and beautifying the environment, separating waste for collection, adopting sustainable consumption habits. These practices, deeply intertwined with specific ethical values and the construction of self-identity, generate a sense of satisfaction and meaningful engagement, and empower individuals to exert influence on the environmental state of the city. However, Zakharova and Karagulian's contribution underscores the significant disparity between the government's management of environmental policies and the green practices actively undertaken by individual citizens. This evidence highlights Russia as a site where significant social and ecological transformations take place, shedding light on novel dimensions of the intricate relationship between nature, society, culture, and power. Moreover, it contributes to the conceptualization of how nature evolves from being solely an object of human thought and action to becoming an active participant in socio-political processes.

The essays featured in this special issue of *Lagoonscapes* collectively contribute to our understanding of Russian ecological relationships, environmental history, and the study of Russian literature amidst the complex social, cultural, and geological contexts, underlining the significance of these intersections.

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Environments of the Post-Reform Village An Ecocritical Reading of Nekrasov's *Red-Nose Frost*

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Abstract Nikolaj Nekrasov's *Moroz, Krasnyj nos* (Red-Nose Frost) (1863) focuses on the death and legacy of the peasant Prokl and the suffering and death from exposure of his widow Dar'ja. Some relevant issues from an ecocritical perspective – creatures, natural forces, and the natural world in general – are portrayed as sentient and accorded respect and agency; peasants in the poem are fully enmeshed in the natural world – not insulated or isolated; and Nekrasov displaces onto a peasant Other a connection with the natural world that has been lost by his implied audience of the urban elite.

Keywords Ecocriticism. Nekrasov. Red-Nose Frost. Moroz, Krasnyj nos. Peasants. Folklore. Ecological Indian.



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Nikolaj Nekrasov's contemporaries recognised his love of the natural environment. Pavel Zasodimskij described Nekrasov as a writer

who so loved the open space of his native fields, meadows, and shady forests, who so subtly and sensitively felt, understood, and knew how to convey in words the reverie-inducing, dreamy charm of our northern nature. (Zasodimskij 1908, 319-20)

The view of Nekrasov promulgated in the Soviet period, however, emphasized the social content of his poetry – his role as “singer of the revolutionary aspirations of an oppressed peasantry” (Egolin 1939, 504). Nekrasov's *derevnja* was interpreted almost exclusively as symbolic of the iniquities of village social relations, not literally as the countryside environment. When ‘nature’ is mentioned in Soviet Nekrasov criticism, it is often seen in diametrical opposition to the social life of the village:

For his whole life Nekrasov preserved a touching love for the nature of the Volga region. But in sharp contrast with these enchanting pictures stood the subjugated life of the enserfed peasantry and the Volga barge-haulers. (Egolin 1954, 385)

Nekrasov's poetry certainly juxtaposes the freedom, expanse, and beauty of the natural world to the oppression, constriction, and cruel suffering of rural Russia's serfdom and poverty. But these two portrayals are not separate and contradictory: Nekrasov sees his social concerns and his sensitive appreciation for the natural environment as intimately related and, in fact, fully integrated. Natural beauty is even more poignant since it is marred by violence and injustice; human oppression is even more outrageous in a world that contains such freedom and beauty.

Too often, Nekrasov scholarship has talked about the poet's ‘pictures’ of nature, seeing the natural environment as a static backdrop for more important social concerns. Taking an integrated view of the environment as central to Nekrasov's works allows more satisfying readings. Nekrasov's perceptive portrayals of characters' physical worlds let us analyse specifics of the varied ways individuals and communities function in their ecosystems, as can be seen in a foregrounding of the environment's central role in Nekrasov's work *Moroz, Krasnyj nos* Мороз, Красный нос (Red-Nose Frost, 1863).

Andrey Fedotov and Pavel Uspenskij have shown the value of taking an ecocritical approach to Nekrasov's poetry. In a 2021 *Russian Review* article, they analyse one of Nekrasov's poems for children, “Deduška Mazaj i zajcy” “Дедушка Мазай и зайцы” (Grandpa Mazaj and the Hares, 1871), a canonical work and a staple of the elementary school curriculum. The embedded first-person narrative, told by the

peasant Mazaj, recounts his rescue of hares during spring flooding. As Fedotov and Uspenskij discuss, most readings of the poem have simplified it to “a story about love of nature and animal welfare” (Fedotov, Uspenskij 2021, 473); they argue, instead, that

the environmental pathos of the poem [...] was supposed to impart [...] a humane attitude toward, not nature, but Russian peasants, and at the same time, an economically profitable model of collaboration with them. (473)

We see, then, that the poem’s environmental issues are not separate, but instead enmeshed with central concerns of Nekrasov’s: representing peasant life and laying bare the economic underpinnings of inequality. In contrasting two ways of understanding our place in the natural world, Fedotov and Uspenskij describe both a “proto-environmental ethics”, in which “nature exists for the sake of humanity, [...] is understood in human categories, and [...] requires sporadic and precise human interventions”, (484) and a fully environmental ethics. The latter

does not consider the surrounding world to exist exclusively for humankind. It allows for the specific subjectivity of all living beings, whose desires do not coincide with the desires of humanity, and calls humanity to take this into account. [...] [It] painstakingly continues to seek the proper balance between refraining from any human interference in the natural world and the recognition of our dependence on natural resources. (484)

As they note regarding “Grandpa Mazaj and the Hares”, the poem

offers us an acceptable version of this balance: the environmental ethics of the poem does not exclude the human being from the natural world, but on the contrary, returns the human to nature. The human remains a consumer of natural resources [...] yet, as the most rational being, he becomes the regulator and protector of nature. (484)

In the poem, the peasant Mazaj justifies a rational and sustainable approach to the natural world on economic grounds: he advocates against the slaughter of the hares trapped by the flood because their pelts in spring are not valuable and argues against hunting with nets and snares since this “suggestion would increase the quantity of the peasants’ final product of hare pelts and meat” (480).¹

¹ For an ecocritical consideration of Nekrasov’s *Komu na Rusi žit’ xorošo*, see Ogden (forthcoming).

We find similar concerns and a similar approach in *Moroz, Krasnyj nos*. The *poema*, in two parts and 36 sections of varying length, describes the aftermath of the death of the peasant Prokl and the mourning of his parents, widow, and children. Much of the poem focuses on the suffering and then death from exposure to winter cold of his widow Dar'ja. From an ecocritical perspective, three issues seem particularly relevant: creatures, natural forces, and the natural world in general are portrayed as sentient and accorded respect and agency; peasants in the poem are fully enmeshed in the natural world – not insulated or isolated; and Nekrasov displaces onto a peasant Other a connection to the natural world that has been lost by his implied audience of the urban elite.

Prokl's old roan horse has a privileged place in the life of the peasant's family and in the narrative development of the poem. Introduced at the very beginning of Part One and present throughout much of the poem, the roan works alongside both husband and wife and is last seen, in Dar'ja's dream at the end of the poem, reaching out and taking their little son's ear "in his soft, kind lips" (996-7).²

The roan is the addressee for an extended exhortation in section 11, an address which assumes the horse is a rational and devoted partner, one who was raised by Prokl since his days as a foal, laboring beside him for years. This address takes up eight of the ten stanzas of section 11. It assumes that the horse can understand the concept of serving his master for the last time and has a conscious awareness of the course of his life going well beyond that usually ascribed to animals. He is treated and addressed here more as a valued coworker than as a beast of burden.

In addition to serving Prokl, the roan horse also serves the poet himself. There is a direct parallel between the role of the poet within the poem and the role played by the horse. Nekrasov's first-person speaker is not much present in the poem, but does appear in self-consciously metapoetic passages that address the construction of the poem's narrative. In a famous section on the fortitude of Slavic women, Nekrasov writes

Ты глухо, незримо страдала,
Ты свету кровавой борьбы
И жалоб своих не веряла, –

Но мне ты их скажешь, мой друг!
(83-6)

² References to Nekrasov's *Moroz, Krasnyj nos* are given parenthetically by line number and refer to the Nekrasov edition (1982).

[You suffered silently, invisibly, | With the world your bloody struggle | And your complaints you did not share. || But to me you will tell them, my friend!]

The Slavic women, the speaker suggests, will reveal their sufferings to him. And, further expanding on the poet's creative control, a stanza later, at the beginning of section 4, Nekrasov writes

Однако же речь о крестьянке
Затеяли мы, чтоб сказать,
Что тип величавой славянки
Возможно и ныне сыскать.
(92-5)

[However, this speech about the peasant woman | We've dreamed up in order to say | That the type of the majestic Slavic woman | May be sought out even today.]

In other words, the poet speaker has constructed the previous scene in order to reveal something to us, his readers. The poet's task is to move the narrative along, and the roan works in tandem with him in this process. As the roan aids Prokl's mother in pulling Prokl's coffin home at the very beginning of the poem, the poet runs ahead of them in his thought: "Привычная дума поэта | Вперед забежать ей спешит" (The accustomed thought of the poet | Hurries to run ahead of her, 8-9). The horse literally moves things forward right from the beginning, as emphasised in the extended address in section 11, which is repeated again in section 13:

Саврасушка, трогай,
Натягивай крепче гужи!
Служил ты хозяину много,
В последний разок послужи!
(423-6)

[Dear little roan, move along, | Pull tighter on the reins! | You served the master a lot, | [Now] serve for the last time!]

At the transition from Part One to Part Two of the poem, the roan once again is there, in the last lines of section 15 and the opening of section 16. As the story moves from the burial and mourning of Prokl to his wife's efforts to gather firewood and consequent death by freezing, the roan again is the conveyance. Having left her children with a neighbour, the widow heads off into the forest on the same horse (490-1). As seen in many of these examples, the horse is often there at the border between sections; we see this again near the end of the

poem (992-7). The roan and sledge convey us, readers, through the story as surely as does the poet himself.

It is not only domestic animals that are an intimate part of the poem's peasant world, dependent on humans but working in symbiosis with them for mutual benefit. This is true even of the earth and plants: the field invites plowing, and grasses ask for the scythe (575-6). In this world, elements of nature are anthropomorphized and made sentient. The crops, for example, are "rož'-matuška" "рожь-матушка" (little mother rye, 597). Even the wilder parts of the natural world are drawn in. Calling to mind the apostrophes to the natural world in folklore or in medieval works such as the *Igor Tale* or the *Zadonščina*, we find here speeches addressed to the winter nights (678) or the forest path (776). Seasons, weather, and times of day are all personified. And not all of these forces are benign. Winter deals a blow to finish off Prokl (386), and – again calling to mind folklore – the heads of rye are seen as the innumerable troops of an enemy host, as in the *byliny* былины (medieval folk epics) (624 ff).

At times nature is an impartial witness, watching with the lifeless yellow eyes of an owl (516-18); at other times, it directly reflects human emotions. As Prokl's father mourns him while digging his grave, it seems "as if all the world is dying: silence, snow, half-gloom" (220-1). Later, as Dar'ja sets out for firewood, the forest and wild birds listen to her grief (513, 526).

This natural world is also suffused with supernatural forces – the motivation behind everything from forest rustling to shooting stars. The poem includes references to God and Mary, but also to the "unclean force" of traditional folklore:

Слышу, нечистая сила
Залотошила, завывала,
Заголосила в лесу.

Что мне до силы нечистой?
Чур меня! Деве пречистой
Я приношенье несусь!
(746-51)

[I hear how an unclean force | Began rustling, crying, | howling in the forest. // What do I care about the unclean force? | Leave me! To the holy virgin | I bring an offering!]

К утру звезда золотая
С божьих небес
Вдруг сорвалась – и упала,
Дунул господь на нее,

Дрогнуло сердце мое...
(778-82)

[Toward morning a golden star | From God's heaven | Suddenly
tore itself away - and fell, | The Lord blew on it, And my heart
trembled]

At any point even the most natural, quotidian scene can reflect the supernatural: a crow sits on a gilded cross, and Dar'ja's heart trembles - is it just a crow, or an omen (802)?

Without question the most significant and fully developed sentient personification of the natural world is the figure of "voevoda Moroz" "воевода Мороз" (Chieftain Frost) who appears in the final sections of the poem. As has been extensively investigated in scholarship on Nekrasov, this figure is drawn from folklore but - as so often in Nekrasov's verse - is repurposed in a more naturalistic setting here. Frost ultimately claims Dar'ja for himself, and the poem ends as she freezes to death, a smile of satisfaction and happiness on her face as she yields to her enchanting dream (1036-65).

Even as the natural world in Nekrasov's poem is given heightened significance, sentience, and agency, the people in the poem - Russian peasants - are shown to be fully enmeshed in that world, not insulated or isolated. The opening scene of the poem provides a perfect example of this. Prokl's mother is bringing home a coffin. She and the roan are stuck in the middle of a drift of snow, and she is ice-covered here (56) as is her husband later, while digging their son's grave (188-92). Both Prokl and Dar'ja die from exposure to the cold, ice, and snow. As Dar'ja freezes to death, we see her slowly covered in beautiful but deadly ice: "Пушисты и белы ресницы, | Морозные иголки в бровях" ([His] lashes are fluffy and white, | With needles of frost in [his] eyebrows, 952-3) and "В сверкающий иней одета, | Стоит, холодеет она" (Clothed in sparkling hoarfrost, | She stands freezing, 954-5).

The peasants of the poem are defined by their labour in the natural world, and that labour is repeatedly highlighted throughout the poem. We not only see footwear and garments made of natural products; we also see the processes that produce those objects. Bast shoes and a coffin-cover of bast matting show up in the opening lines of the poem, but later we see a young peasant harvesting bark in the forest (707) and see Prokl's father ineptly plaiting a bark shoe (336). Similarly, Dar'ja sews a linen shroud at the beginning (66-7); later, as she freezes, she dreams of weaving linen into fine cloth: "Много натку я полотен, | Тонких добротных новин" (I will weave much linen, | Fine, good new material, 682-3). Prokl, who labored on, in, and for the earth his whole life, is seen in death laid on a table of white fir and clad in linen and bast:

Уснул, потрудившийся в поте!
Уснул, поработав земле!
Лежит, непричастный заботе,
На белом сосновом столе,

Лежит неподвижный, суровый,
С горящей свечой в головах,
В широкой рубаше холщовой
И в липовых новых лаптях.
(264-71)

[Having labored in sweat, he fell asleep! | Fell asleep, having done his work for the earth! | He lies apart from the bustle, | On a white pine table, || Lying motionless, stern, | With a burning candle at the headboard, | In a broad linen shirt | And in new bast shoes of linden.]

Even the poem's imagery emphasises parallels with the natural world: sobs are like rain long preparing to fall (68-9), tears drop like ripened grain (176-9), and the wailing of Prokl's kinsfolk is like wind playing in the grass (285-8). When Dar'ja dreams of their son Griša, he is "a green bush running", wrapped in peas (981). In the folkloric mourning of his relatives, Prokl is a dove with blue wings that has flown away, while also a person defined by his labour in the field and by his kindness and love:

Голубчик ты наш сизокрылый!
Куда ты от нас улетел?
Пригожеством, ростом и силой
Ты ровни в селе не имел.

Родителям был ты советник,
Работничек в поле ты был,
Гостям хлебосол и приветник,
Жену и детей ты любил...
(288-95)

[You are our gray-winged little dove! | Whither did you fly, leaving us? | In beauty, stature, and strength | You had no equal in the village. || You were an adviser to your parents, | You were a worker in the field, | You welcomed guests with bread and salt, And you loved your wife and children]

An important feature of the poem's dynamics is that the intimate connection to the natural world exhibited by all its peasant characters is available only vicariously to the poem's non-peasant lyric

speaker and to his implied non-peasant addressees. Nekrasov suggests that that direct connection to nature is possible only for peasants and has been lost by his implied audience of the urban elite. The fact that both speaker and addressees are different from the peasants is clear from the way that the speaker confidently and somewhat condescendingly says, in reference to the robust ideal Slavic peasant woman, “И все мы согласны, что тип измельчал” (And we all agree that the type has declined, 80). People like the narrator must feel compassion or pity for such women’s suffering, but are inevitably distanced from it: “Тот сердца в груди не носил, | Кто слез над тобою не лил!” (He carried no heart in his breast, | Who has not shed tears over you, 90-1).

While throughout the poem Prokl, Dar’ja, and all the other peasants find purpose and meaning in their lives through labour, the narrator is idle – looking on as an observer. Writing again about the ideal peasant woman, the speaker says, “Я видывал, как она косит” (I often would watch her mow, 114). In this, he joins a long line of other Nekrasov lyric speakers, as well as figures such as the narrator of Turgenev’s *Zapiski oxotnika* (Notes of a Hunter, 1852), in showing himself to be an outsider fascinated by the peasant Other.

This has significant implications for an ecocritical reading of the poem, because Nekrasov is able to attribute to his peasant characters a life immersed in nature and in tune with natural processes – one unavailable to those of his ‘cultured’ background. In this, Nekrasov’s peasants have something in common with what anthropologist Shepard Krech III has termed the “Ecological Indian”:

The dominant image is of the Indian in nature who understands the systemic consequences of his actions, feels deep sympathy with all living forms, and takes steps to conserve so that earth’s harmonies are never imbalanced and resources never in doubt. (Krech 1999, 21)

Connection to the natural world is displaced onto an Other who preserves a harmony with nature that educated society has lost – people who are attuned to earth and creatures of the natural world, living in balance with the rest of nature. Furthermore, as part of a traditional culture, they ascribe consciousness and volition to natural forces and all animals thanks to a belief system with elements of animism in it (Garrard 2011, 129-37). The parallel is not perfect, of course, but it helps illuminate the particular kind of environment that Nekrasov creates in the poem, as well as the place of humans within that environment.

Nekrasov is often writing for an implied audience of the urban elite who are distanced from their connection to the natural world, and that is true in *Moroz, Krasnyj nos* as well. Within the poem, as

we have seen, he makes specific reference to his authorial role and authorial control of the narrative – clearly with an eye toward a sophisticated readership attuned to the expectations and conventions of written poetry. His frame of reference has a broad historical and cultural scope – features shared with that implied audience, and not with the peasants who populate the poem. Thus, even though in ways we can argue that Nekrasov's picture of folk life is unsentimental and relatively unvarnished, it is also a romanticised one. Drawing on Russian folklore, he portrays a sentient natural world that is intimately enmeshed with the human. And the narrative that he creates of peasant life, work, joys, suffering, and death is one showing that that life cycle takes place immersed in the natural world in a way that is no longer available to his speaker or implied audience.

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Crossing the Border A Comparative Study of the Forest in the Poems of Gennadij Ajgi and in the Actions of *Kollektivnye Dejstvija*

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Abstract In my article, I provide a comparative analysis of the forest in the production of the Russian poet Gennadij Ajgi (1934-2006) and in the performances of the artistic group Коллективные Действия *Kollektivnye Dejstvija* (Collective Actions, 1976-89). Relying on the principles of environmental ethics, I stress the creative value of marginality, related to both the neutral space of the forest in Soviet ideologized society and the selected authors' exclusion from the official culture. Besides, I focus on the deep transformation of the lyrical subject who, by crossing the forest border, establishes a creative dialogic exchange with nature.

Keywords Gennadij Ajgi. Kollektivnye Dejstvija. Soviet metanarrative. Border. Forest.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Forest as a Semiotic Border. – 3 The Postmodern Legacy of the Futurist 'Verbal Amulet' of the Forest. – 4 Translating the Forest. The Re-Definition of the Self in Gennadij Ajgi's Poetry. – 5 Emerging from the Wood. The Poetry of Nature Performed by *Kollektivnye Dejstvija*.



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1 Introduction

In Russia, the slight loosening of censorship following Iosif Stalin's death and the consequent beginning of the 'thaw' era brought about the gradual development of an unofficial cultural space. Inside it, the production of the Russian avantgardes (1910s-30s) was secretly re-discovered and assimilated, exerting a meaningful influence on the works of the underground authors. The unofficial culture is a very complex and heterogeneous phenomenon, which underwent a deep evolution from the end of 1950s to the beginning of perestroika.¹ Many groups and movements arose within it, often linked to some specific samizdat periodical editions. For many underground writers, the very 'aesthetics of the samizdat' proved to be functional to the development of abstract forms of poetry, usually aimed at revealing the insubstantiality of Soviet discourse. Indeed, in the post-Stalinist decades, and mainly during Brežnev 'stagnation' (1964-82), the ideological rhetoric of the State lost its strength and significance, becoming a mere shell, devoid of any content. According to the analysis of Octavian Esanu, after Stalin's death,

party language became increasingly uniform and predictable, relying on endless rewriting, rearrangement, and re-editing of the same content, evolving finally into the infamous *langue de bois* or 'wooden language' of the Soviet bureaucracy. [...] It became particularly obvious during the seventies that the ideological canon was maintained through a series of closely observed rituals. (2013, 67)

In connection with this, Dunja Popović underlines that the skepticism toward metanarratives characterizing postmodern culture in Russia

resulted from the realization in the late 1960s-70s that the Soviet utopian project had failed and that Marxist-Leninist ideology had no inherent claim to the status of truth. (2005, 628)

For this reason, the underground poets of the Brežnev period attempted to release Russian literary language from the influence of empty Soviet discourse invading every sphere of the citizens' life.

As shown in the article "Fuga dall'io nel bosco primordiale" (Sala 2019), in the verses written by some unofficial authors between the 1970s and the 1980s (Gennadij Ajgi, Anna Al'čuk, Ry Nikonova), the image of a primordial forest proves to be recurring. It represents a neutral literary *locus* on the fringes of Soviet society, where the lyri-

¹ For a detailed analysis of Russian unofficial culture cf. Caramitti 2010; Pieralli et al. 2019; Lipoveckij et al. 2021.

cal subject can escape the State's ideological metanarrative.² At the same time, this sylvan landscape mirrors the marginal condition of the underground culture, which, despite proving to be extremely vital and productive, is excluded from the context of official publications until perestroika. Finally, the focus on the ecosystem of the forest directs the readers' attention to natural environment, which, in Soviet Russia, proves to be absorbed within the State's oppressive rhetoric of domination, and, therefore, determined by its utilitarian approach, lacking effective protection policies. At the same time, the ecological question results marginal in Soviet public debate. Despite the growth, from the 1970s, of environmental awareness and ecological activism, information about the serious damages of pollution is often made inaccessible by Soviet censorship (Josephson et al. 2013).

2 The Forest as a Semiotic Border

Given these premises, in my essay I will demonstrate that the literary space of the forest in Russian unofficial culture not only provides the lyrical subject with an escape from Soviet metanarrative, but becomes also the starting point of a deep cultural evolution, based on the values of environmental ethics. In order to do so, I will compare some poems by the Russian writer Gennadij Ajgi (1934-2006) with the performances of the Moscow Conceptualist group *Kollektivnye Dejstvija*, focusing on the first years of its activity (1976-77). The choice of these authors is motivated by the meaningful connotation, in their production, of the forest as a marginal space of creative encounter with otherness.

In the introduction to her book *Ecologia letteraria. Una strategia di sopravvivenza*, Serenella Iovino (2016, 22) emphasizes the 'reconstructive' character of ethical-environmental thought, originating from a new attention to 'peripheral values' and an anti-hierarchical attitude toward the non-human. This reconstruction represents the possibility to shift the focus "from big ideological narrations to minor or peripheral 'local narratives'". Human domination over nature, according to social-ecological thought, is driven by the same mechanisms which justify the logic of oppression imposed by some groups on weaker social classes. In this connection, Iovino (2004, 104) mentions the theories of the socio-ecologist philosopher Murray Bookchin (1982) who, partially distancing himself from the absolutism of deep ecology, considers the abatement of hierarchies within society as the basis also for a renewed anti-dualistic attitude toward nature. This could allow for the

² As observed by Jane Costlow (2013, 14), "Stalin's regime provided ample reasons for someone to go into a wood and not look back, but Russia's forests have proved tempting for runaways from multiple regimes, both before and after 1917".

creative potential of marginal categories (both human and non-human ones) to emerge, giving rise to new meanings and values.

The conceptual category of marginality proves to be central in the works of the underground culture. Some writers, as stated above, associate its creative significance, inherent to the unofficial condition of their literature within Soviet society, with the image of non-anthropized forests. The poietic value of the wood, depicted as a boundary between Soviet ideologized space and the possibility to emancipate from it, becomes clearer if we consider the function of the border in semiotics. Quoting Puumeister, Kõvamees and Kull (2022, 113), “the border is where possibility emerges, thus the moment of meaning-making”. Actually, the semiotic school of Tartu, which the scholars belong to, considers the notion of border as fundamental:

According to Juri Lotman, the border is one of the basic features of the semiosphere; [...] the border is the site of and the reason for translation. [...] semiotic boundaries that separate forms are fuzzy and continuously negotiated. (113)

The border, therefore, represents the marginal space where the encounter with the other, and thus the constant re-definition of identity, is made possible; as Puumeister, Kõvamees and Kull demonstrate, this notion proves to be central in the semiotics of culture and in sociosemiotics, as well as in biosemiotics. The bio- and eco-semiotician Timo Maran (2020, 35), stressing the importance of the contact with otherness for the evolution of culture, identifies in nature an other-than-human ‘place of discovery’, concerning both nature itself and culture. Through the contact with the environment, culture can learn something also about itself, experiencing a change which contributes to its flourishing. Evolution, as explained by Wendy Wheeler (2006) relying on the evolutionary theory of symbiogenesis and on Hoffmeyer’s biosemiotics (1996), originates from

the encounter of identity with an otherness which is, nonetheless, sufficiently semiotically recognizable to allow of a productive encounter and negotiation, expanding a semiotic *Umwelt*, out of which new strata of complex life can emerge. (Wheeler 2006, 133)

Most importantly, this process occurs

in evolutionary development of the biological lives of our bodies, but is repeated in the lives of our minds and our cultures too. (133)

The translation of otherness is “a process of intersubjective world-changing and making” (134); responding to it with openness allows for a creative change of the self and, consequently, for evolution.

Within Soviet society of Brežnev 'stagnation', the possibility of a creative encounter with otherness is limited by the overwhelming empty rhetoric of the Party. In this connection, Timo Maran (2020, 51) refers to the linguistic "symbolic dominance" established by autocratic and extremist ideologies as the basis of "closed symbolic spaces", which tend to cancel the significance of indexical and iconic signs, interrupting the communication between humans and the ecosystem. As a result, culture is prevented from evolving and becomes a self-referential system. This is why, in the decades following Stalin's death, the need for a new kind of contact with the 'other-than-Soviet culture' is perceived as fundamental, at least in the unofficial circles, for a re-flourishing of literary discourse. The poetic image of a pristine forest represents a possible 'other-than culture', since it provides an opportunity of discovering and reshaping identity through the contact with a non-ideologized free space. At the same time, the encounter with the forest ecosystem proves to be flourishing thanks to the evolutionary experience of human ancestors and human body's historical connection with the environment, which render meaning-making immediate in nature (Maran 2019, 288).

3 **The Postmodern Legacy of the Futurist 'Verbal Amulet' of the Forest**

Considering the artistic production of the poet Gennadji Ajgi and of the group *Kollektivnye Dejstvija*, the connotation of the forest as a productive border of meaning-making proves to be a significant inheritance from Russian Futurism. Indeed, in his article "Тайное Знание Русских Футуристов" (*Tajnoe znanie russkich futuristov*, 'The Secret Knowledge of Russian Futurists'), the Russian unofficial poet Sergej Sigej (2001, 195) identifies in the forest the "место действия" (*mesto dejstvija*; 'place of action'), the "там" (*tam*, 'over there') where the experimental language of some Futurist poets originated, such as Aleksej Kručënych (who, according to Sigej, inspired Kazimir Malevič's 'transmental' verses) and Vasilisk Gnedov. In doing so, he refers to Vladimir Propp's model of Russian fairytales (cf. Propp 1986). First of all, Sigej shows the recurring presence, in some selected Futurist texts, of the elements characterizing the hero's journey across the wood. Besides, the author emphasizes the process of acquisition of knowledge which occurs within the sylvan landscape. According to Propp's analysis, in Russian folk stories the forest is described as a border between the domain of human civilization and an unknown dimension linked to the realm of the dead. After entering a "hut standing on chicken legs", placed at the edge of the wood, the hero undergoes an initiation rite. In the Futurist verses, this results in 'словесные амулеты' (*slovesnye amulety*, 'verbal amulets') (Sigej

2001, 202), which produce a significant change, as compared to the literary tradition, in their poetic language. As far as the unofficial culture is concerned, this transformation involves not only the lyrical subject's linguistic expression, but mainly his deep essence: by crossing the wood's boundary and lingering 'inside' the margin, he seems to experience a radical identity change, based on the denial of Soviet metanarrative. In this connection, reflecting upon the relevance of the forest in his poetic production, Gennadij Ajgi (2001, 164), just like Sigej, defines the profound essence of the trees as a vague *там* (*tam*, 'over there'), to which the humans are attracted, and where they tend to sink. Since "*u derev'ev net Slova*" (*у деревьев нет Слова*, 'the trees have no words'), that is to say, communication with them does not occur through linguistic symbolic signs) (Ajgi 2001, 164), by dissolving among the trees the lyrical subject experiences a pre-verbal sensation of emptiness, or rather a state of receptivity to otherness, allowing for the re-shaping of his subjectivity (Korčagin 2016, 115).

Actually, the relevance of emptiness, showing some mystical connotations, proves to be central in the whole production of Ajgi, influenced by his Chuvash origins and his ancestors' mythology. Even if the writer, after moving to Moscow in the 1950s and becoming part of the city's underground culture, started to write his verses mainly in Russian, his poetry is permeated by significant traces of Chuvash religion, based on the worship of the elements of nature. At the same time, the author's spirituality is affected also by Christian religion: in many of his texts the lyrical subject follows the signs of God, who seems to manifest himself only through his eloquent absence, perceived by the poet in the secluded space of silent landscapes. There, the feeling of emptiness is amplified by the recurring presence of snowy fields and woods permeated by the non-linguistic sound of the wind. The relevance of emptiness in Ajgi's verses is mirrored by the visual value of the pauses and the punctuation marks. In this, the meaningful influence of Malevič and of the Futurist poets appears evident. Actually, in Moscow the Chuvash author became familiar with the avantgarde production, especially thanks to his job at the Majakovskij Museum, and his friendship with Boris Pasternak and Aleksej Kručënych.³

Also in the artistic production of *Kollektivnye Dejstvija*, emptiness shows a central value, symbolizing openness to the exchange with otherness. In my analysis, I will consider the first volume of their book, *Poezdki za gorod* *Поездки за город* (Journeys Out of Town), published in 1998, where the accounts on the actions enacted between 1976 and 1980 are collected. The Conceptualist group was founded in Moscow in 1976 by Andrej Monastyrskij, Nikita Alekseev,

³ For the critical sources on Ajgi cf. Pagani-Cesa 1983; Janecek 1996; Sedakova 2006; Korčagin 2016; Postovalova 2016; Weststeijn 2016; Belozorovitch 2019; Stahl 2022.

Nikolaj Panitkov and Georgij Kizeval'ter, with the purpose to investigate the nature of art. To this end, some selected spectators were invited to join one-day trips in the outskirts of Moscow, usually to a field called *Kievogorskoe Pole* Киевогорское Поле, delimited by trees. The place was reached through a short journey on a local electric train, and then by walking in a small wood. After the expeditions, participants were asked to write a report about their experience and the emotional states it raised within them. Despite the performative value of the actions, some critics interpret them as mainly literary works. For instance, Esanu underlines the point of view of Ekaterina Bobrinskaja (1998), according to whom *Kollektivnye Dejstvija's* performances are rooted in poetry and music, and represent "the dissolution of literature and of the poetic text into action, into everyday life" (Esanu 2013, 36). Textual dissolution is echoed by the vagueness of the actions (the participants are not informed about what is going to happen) and the condition of marginality ('out-of-town-ness')⁴ associated with the non-ideologized space of *Kievogorskoe Pole*. By directing the spectators' attention from the centre to the border, the group offers them a new, disenchanted perspective on Soviet reality, which they are ready to assimilate thanks to the 'empty state' raised within them by the performances. The aesthetic relevance of emptiness in their works originates, like in Ajgi's production, from the influence of Russian avantgardes (especially Malevič and Kručënych). Besides, the void is connoted by mysticism, deriving from the metaphysical aesthetics of the modernists of the 1950s and the 1960s (Esanu 2013) and the influence of Zen Buddhism, learned through the works of Western artists such as John Cage.⁵

⁴ Quoting Esanu (2013, 96): "[Out-of-town-ness] (zagorodnost') is another specific KD aesthetic term that Monastyrsky defines as a particular space adjacent to many a big Soviet city. To be 'out of town' is to be within a well-defined border region between the 'city' and 'noncity'".

⁵ For the critical sources on *Kollektivnye Dejstvija's* production cf. Groys 1979, 2013; Monastyrskij 1998; Kabakov 1998; Esanu 2013.

4 **Translating the Forest. The Re-Definition of the Self in Gennadij Ajgi's Poetry**

As shown in the previous paragraph, the feeling of emptiness evoked by the marginal space of the forest proves to be central in the production of the selected authors, on both a conceptual and an aesthetic level. When the lyrical subject crosses the sylvan border, his/her identity dissolves only to be reshaped into an evolved self, provided with a higher degree of semiotic freedom. In the last paragraphs of my essay, I will focus on the analysis of the changes occurring in the artists' essence and language through the encounter with nature, showing that their dialogue with the non-human allows for a de-ideologization of the poetic word and a consequent crack in Soviet symbolic dominance.

In the poems of Gennadij Ajgi, the 'place of action' is often represented by a pristine and oneiric forest or by a field or clearing, usually covered with snow. The value of the wood as a border is stressed by Kirill Korčagin (2016), who describes Ajgi's field as delimited by some dark trees, standing also for the horizon line of his poetic world.⁶ Indeed, the Chuvash poet himself denotes the wood explicitly as a marginal space, for example, in the title of the poem *Mecto: v lesu: za ogradoj* Место: в лесу: за оградой (Place: In the Forest: Beyond the Fence) (1967). The 'fence' represents the border of society, through which the encounter with the 'other-than-human' border of the forest occurs. The first lines of the text confirm the possibility, for the lyrical subject, to experience a state of inner emptiness by lingering in the sylvan space:

МЕСТО: В ЛЕСУ: ЗА ОГРАДОЙ
и духом не словить! –
сказать – средь сна туманясь:
о свето-прорубь: т а м – в о д н о м орешнике! –

PLACE: IN THE FOREST: BEYOND THE FENCE
and not to catch all in a breath! –
to say – fogging up in sleep:
o light-frozen hole: t h e r e – i n a hazelnut tree! –
(Ajgi 1992a, 79, ll. 1-3)⁷

⁶ In his article, Korčagin focuses on the field, connoted as a boundary between the city and the wood. Anyway, since it delimitates the field and is often referred to as a primordial space on the fringe of society, in my analysis I will analyse Ajgi's wood as a border (or one of its possible reiterations).

⁷ Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the Author.

In particular, the verb ‘fogging up’ refers to the dissolution of the poet’s identity after entering the wood, while the presence of a ‘hole’ in a hazelnut tree symbolizes the materialization of nothingness, mirroring the lyrical subject’s openness to change through the dialogue with nature. Actually, the Russian word *prorub* прору́бь, indicates specifically a ‘hole in the ice’, which contributes to emphasize the oneiric character of the forest. The association of the ‘hole’ with the ‘light’, standing for the divine, marks the poet’s reconnection with a pre-existential spirituality as the basis for the definition of a new, free self. The transformation undergone by the lyrical subject results into a literary language shaped on the basis of the communication processes occurring in the forest ecosystem. There, as observed by Timo Maran (2020, 57) in his analysis of the forest as a semiotic model, “semiotic structures are motivated: content and form are related to each other, and arbitrariness is rare, occasional and constrained”. In Ajgi’s verses, the presence of indexical and iconic signs, reconnecting the text with the environment and interrupting Soviet discourse, is evident both on a phonetic and on a visual level. For instance, the syntactic structures of the Russian language are often replaced by a sequence of key words, whose logical connections are defined by their visual juxtaposition. At the same time, in *Mecto: v lesu: za ogradoj* the presence of the vowel ‘o’ at the beginning of the third line can be interpreted as an iconic reproduction of the emptiness evoked by the ‘frozen hole’.

In the poem *Snova: Mesta v lesu* Снова: Места в лесу (Again: Places in the Forest) (1969), the image of a clearing delimited by the wood echoes the ‘frozen hole’. By creating an empty space within his soul, the author is ready to assimilate the ‘songs’ of the trees.

Снова: места в лесу
опять поются! есть! опять они
звучащие – везде – одновременно! –
опять к тому же часу
к пробуждению:
светло
– поляною-страданием! –
(Ajgi 1991, 113, ll. 1-6)

Again: Places in the Forest
again *they are sung!* yes! again it is they
everywhere – sounding – at once! –
again at the same hour
at awakening:
bright
– as a clearing – suffering! –
(Ajgi 2000, 3, ll. 1-6, transl. by P. France)

But the plants, represented by the 'hawthorn', have no words, since, as seen before, they do not speak human language. So, the wood seems to be silent, and the lyrical subject's fusion with it, leading to the encounter with God, in this case is denied to the poet.

боярышник – при пении молчащий
как бог молчащий – за звучащим Словом:
молчащий – личностью неприкасаемой:
лишь тронь – и будет: Бога нет
(Ajgi 1991, 114, ll. 19-22)

hawthorn – silent in singing
like a silent god – behind the sounding word:
silent – in intangible self:
just touch – and it will be: *there is no god*
(Ajgi 2000, 3, 19-22, transl. by P. France)

In the later text *Šumjat berězy* Шумят берёзы ('The Birches Rustle', 1975), however, the fundamental poietic function of the encounter with nature seems clear to the poet: by surrendering to the dissolution of the self in the forest, he finds a non-verbal form of communication with the trees. On this ground, the writer is ready to define the borders of his new, evolved identity, whose essence is expressed by the abstract experimentalism of his poetic language.

ШУМЯТ БЕРЕЗЫ
и сам я – шуршащий:
«а может быть Бог...» –
шепот в березах:
«умер...» –
и мы
распад – продолжающийся? –
а почему бы
и нет? –
одинок и пусто развеется прах... –
(шепот берез...
все мы в мире шуршим...) –
и снова
Воскреснет?.. –
...даже не больно:
как навсегда... –
шум – как об этом!.. –
..... –
(словно покинутый – осень шум)

THE BIRCHES RUSTLE
And even I am - swishing:
«but maybe it's God...» -
A whisper in the birches:
«dead...» -
And we
Decay - continuous? -
but why
not? -
lonely and empty the ashes will scatter
(whisper of birches...
we all in the world swish...) -
and again
Will he resurrect?... -
...doesn't even hurt:
as if forever... -
noise - as if about this!.. -
..... -
(almost abandoned - autumn noise)
(Ajgi 1992b, 43)

As can be inferred in the first line, the poem represents a translation of the voice of the trees: "THE BIRCHES RUSTLE / And even I am - swishing". At the same time, the "whisper of birches" reminds of the spiritual connotation of the forest in Chuvash mythology, reconnecting Ajgi with the primordial past of humanity and with the idea of a pre-anthropized nature.⁸ Mysticism in the text is evoked also by some references to the Christian God and resurrection. As a consequence of this spiritual encounter with the forest, language partially loses its symbolic value: the punctuation marks become indexical signs, representing, on a visual level, the lyrical subject's dissolution in the wood. Besides, the onomatopoetic sounds 'š' and 'ž' in the title and in the first lines seem to be iconic reproductions of the forest's sounds.⁹ Lastly, in the second to last line, the complete absence of words mirrors the condition of emptiness experienced by the poet. Having freed his mind from the influence of Soviet metanarrative, he is ready to communicate with the forest through a shared pre-verbal language. In this connection, the semantic field of death ('dead', 'decay') emphasizes the creative value of the decay cycle which, quot-

⁸ According to Pagani-Cesa (1983) in Chuvash mythology the wood was seen as a sort of temple, where, through the sound of the wind moving the leaves, the pagan spirits and the souls of the dead could communicate with the living.

⁹ In the English translation, a similar effect has been obtained by choosing words containing sibilant phonemes.

ing Maran, in the forest ecosystem is “overwhelming” and contributes to transform “any agency and matter” within it, giving it new life (Maran 2019, 293).

5 Emerging from the Wood. The Poetry of Nature Performed by *Kollektivnye Dejstvija*

In the actions of *Kollektivnye Dejstvija*, the penetration into the forest-border and the dematerialization of the subject described by Ajgi occurs through a physical crossing of the wood, in order to reach the performative space of the field. In my analysis, I will focus mainly on the action *Komedija* Комедия (Comedy) (2 October 1977), whose description was published in the first volume of *Poezdki za gorod*, together with an account about it written by the Conceptualist artist Il’ja Kabakov. His reflection starts with a description of his sensation of extreme freedom at the beginning of the excursion. Not knowing what they are going to experience, the participants feel completely deprived of any personal intention. This creates within them a state of receptivity to the encounter with nature. The walk in the wood is described as follows:

Ты находишься в каком-то двойственном состоянии: с одной стороны ты просто идешь по лесу, по которому многие годы ходил, но ходил, вспоминаешь, всегда с какими-то определенными и ясными намерениями [...] а тут ты идешь явно с неизвестностью результата [...]. И вот лес приобретает совершенно новый и какой-то необычайный характер. Вроде это тот же лес, но он невероятно активизирован. Все эти ветки, травки и дорожки, по которым ты, казалось бы, много раз гулял - ничего подобного, ты трогаешь листья буквально впервые и траву топчешь первый раз. И это легкомысленно-веселое и в то же время страшно обостренное и напряженное состояние не проходит.

И вот, наконец, ты выплываешь из этого невероятного леса.

You experience a double feeling: from the one hand, you are just walking in a wood, where you have been walking many times before, but each time, you remember, you had a specific purpose [...], now you are just walking without knowing what is going to happen [...]. And so the wood seems completely new and exceptional, as if it was the same wood, but more intense. All these branches, grasses and these paths, where you, apparently, have been walking many times - look so different now: you touch the leaves literally for the first time, and step on the grass for the first time. And you feel cheerful and free, but also awfully tense, and this feeling doesn't leave you.

And then, finally, you emerge from this unreal wood.
(Kabakov 1998, 59)

The passage in the wood, as is clear from Kabakov's words, symbolizes a metaphorical exit from the ideologized space of Soviet reality. By walking 'inside' the semiotic border of the forest without a specific intention, the spectators are given the possibility to re-shape creatively their dialogue with the elements of nature, and thus to re-think their own identity, expanding their semiotic *Umwelt*. Besides, the choice of the adjective 'unreal' to define the wood appears extremely meaningful, since it underlines the primordial character of the landscape. In this neutral space, the spectators are allowed to establish a pre-verbal contact with the environment, based on their ancestral connections with nature. As a consequence, they realize that their essence is rooted in the non-human, since what happens in their mind parallels what is going on in the forest ecosystem. After 'emerging' from the wood into the field, they find themselves in an 'empty state', which is boosted by their condition of pre-waiting for the action to happen. The void inside their minds increases their initial openness to the encounter with otherness, and is echoed by the whiteness of the snowy field. Suddenly, two figures appear in the distance. One of them wears a long tunic, and, after a while, the other slips inside it. But when the former approaches the audience and lifts his tunic, it becomes clear that the latter is no longer there. So, the actor disappears, alone, into the wood on the border of the field.

According to Kabakov's interpretation, this impressive action reminds of a sort of inverted birth, of loss; at the same time the image of pregnancy shows a mystic connotation, linked to the birth of Jesus in Christian religion. The idea of a pre-life experience represents a metaphor for the pre-verbal language of the forest, which the actors translate on the field through their action. Actually, as stated above, the performances of *Kollektivnye Dejstvija* have been interpreted as poetry dissolving into action. After the encounter with the otherness of the forest, the symbolic value of language loses its effectiveness. It is replaced by the iconic and indexical signs produced by the very bodies of the actors moving in the field. By receiving and interpreting them, the spectators can finally emancipate from Soviet symbolic dominance, allowing for new forms of creativity to permeate them.

The reduction of language to indexical and iconic signs is clear considering all the actions included in the first volume. For instance, in the performance *Pojavlenie* Появление (Appearance) (13 March 1976), some cards are given to the audience as certificates of attendance. Their significance, anyway, is related more to their indexical presence (they take on the function of props, testifying that the action has happened and the spectators are actually on that field)

than to the words written on them. At the same time, the presence of two actors coming out of the wood to the field, in order to hand out the cards, is an indexical enactment of Monastyrskij's *Elementarnaja Poëzija* Элементарная Поэзия (Elementary Poetry).¹⁰ Also in the action *Lozung - 1977* Лозунг - 1977 (Slogan - 1977) (26 January 1977), in which a red length of cloth with a quotation from Monastyrskij's work *Ničego ne proischodit* Ничего не происходит (Nothing Happens) is hung among the trees, the symbolic value of the words is outshined by their iconic presence. Indeed, the white letters on the banner reflect the whiteness of the field, changing the configuration of the landscape through their physical presence. To confirm this, the sentence on the cloth stresses the empty value of conventional language and the need to communicate on a new, deeper level. The words, echoing ironically Soviet ideologized rhetoric, are not used to describe the world, but to deny it and build an artificial reality:

Я ни на что не жалуюсь и мне всё нравится, несмотря на то,
что я здесь никогда не был и не знаю ничего об этих местах.

I don't complain about anything and I like everything, even if I have
never been here and I don't know anything about these places.
(Monastyrskij 1998, 26)

Going back to *Komedija*, the final disappearance in the wood of the figure wearing a tunic represents a postmodern reiteration of the boundary crossing, previously enacted by the spectators. By reaching the forest, the actor stresses the primary value of marginality in *Kollektivnye Deistvija*'s works, confirming once more that meaning-making occurs on the border and evolution, both in nature and culture, is a perpetual process, deriving from the continuous negotiation of semiotic boundaries. After the performance, the participants go back to Moscow, thus to Soviet reality. In order to bring their experience to society, in their accounts they need to rely on the symbolic level of language, which, having been de-ideologized through the action, can now produce authentic meanings. With their words, they testify the profound pre-existential connection which was established between their psyche and the wood, realizing that "nature isn't just out there, but it is in us all" (Wheeler 2006, 156). This same denial of any dualism between human and non-human is shown, in Ajgi's lines, through the creation of language deeply rooted in the forest ecosystem, resulting in a translation of the landscape through

¹⁰ Between 1975 and 1977 Monastyrskij created the series of literary works *Elementarnaja Poëzija*. The works are based on the aesthetics of the avantgardes and anticipate the performances of *Kollektivnye Dejstvija*.

a visual poetic stream. In their works, both the Chuvash writer and the Conceptualist artists look for the primordial essence of a wordless poetry, which proves to be closely related to preverbal sounds and gestures. By establishing a profound contact with the forest, they stress the creative value of this ancestral form of literature, confirming William Rueckert's assumption, according to which

poems are green plants among us. [...] They help to create creativity and community, and when their energy is released and flows out into others, to again raise matter from lower to higher order. (Rueckert 1978, 76)

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Gennadij Ajgi's Poetic Mysticism of Trees: On the Motif of Willows

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Abstract Natural phenomena appear in almost every poem of Ajgi and develop a specific semiotics that evolves over the course of his career. Ajgi very often turns to trees. The trees are signatures of the speaker's mutually changing relationship with nature and God. The mystical path to the experience of God takes place in transformations that can be traced by the changes in the poetic representation of the trees. As the willow-poems demonstrates, the mystical path to the experience of God in Ajgi's work leads from the pantheistic and immanent to the Christian and transcendent.

Keywords Gennadij Ajgi. Nature Poetry. Mysticism. Trees. Willows.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Willows. – Mediator of the Experience of the Divine. – 3 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

The Chuvash poet Gennadij Ajgi (1934-2006) is one of the 'new classics' of Russian-language literature. He creates a poetic mysticism around the experience of a deeper dimension of being, often characterized as divinity.¹ The poetic representations of Ajgi's mystical views change over the course of his life, passing through four phases. In the first and second phases, mystical experience shone its brightest (cf. Stahl 2016):

1. The early period of the 1950s and 1960s is pantheistic.
2. At the end of the 1960s, there is a noticeable transition to a transcendental worldview, which shows a growing affinity with the Christian theology that he had previously rejected.
3. At the beginning of the 1980s, a break in the mystical path becomes apparent, and the mystical themes recede.
4. At the beginning of the 2000s, the memory of his earlier mystical work awakens. These echoes come alongside the foreboding of approaching death.

Nature plays a central role in Ajgi's poetic mysticism, not only reflecting his views but rather serving as a mediator that connects the human and the divinity.

Natural phenomena occur in almost every poem of Ajgi. Each natural phenomenon thereby develops a specific semiotics that evolves over the course of his career. Poems are often dedicated to flowers – first and foremost, to the rose or dog rose, or to phlox and jasmine. But, even more often, Ajgi turns to the forest, trees, and bushes. In an interview, Ajgi reported that field and forest are related to his homeland, a Chuvash village, making up “*весь мой мир*” (my whole world) and “*приобретали все более символический характер*” (gaining an increasingly symbolic character; Ajgi 2019, 314). Korčagin makes the worthy remark that the trees in Ajgi's poems often form a “boundary between field and sky” and “call the subject to unite with them”, but “this unification never takes place” (Korčagin 2016, 115). The latter assumption, however, as we shall see, cannot be agreed with in principle, for, in certain poems of the first and second phases, there is very certainly a mystical union with trees and through them with the divinity, but this is in fact no longer imagined as possible in later poems.

Ajgi projects his mystical insights onto the trees in a special way, whereby the forest and certain trees represent different mystical

All translations are by the Author. I would like to thank David Hock for his help with the linguistic improvement of the article, especially with the translation.

¹ Mysticism as experiencing the Divine is not unrelated to theological knowledge, cf. on this, for example, Haas 1996, 33.

aspects. In his poetry, there appear a wide variety of trees: the aspen or poplar, the rowan, the apple tree, the fir, the hawthorn bush, as well as the oak and maple. But the most common images are of the forest itself and of three species: birches, pines, and willows. The poems about one of these species can build up the logic of a series, insofar as the later poems refer to the earlier ones. Furthermore, there is an evolution to be observed in Ajgi's turn towards certain tree species as subject-matter at specific moments in his life and career.

The forest and trees only became central themes in the second phase of his work, concretely beginning from 1967. At first, the forest itself or also special 'places' (*mecma*) in the forest, such as clearings that were perhaps inhabited by a single bush (the hawthorn)² emerged as the main focus of his poems from 1967 to 1972. Increasingly, however, forests and clearings are represented as a place for the revelation of the Divine Trinity. From 1972 to about 1977, more and more poems focus on the birch tree, the perhaps most Russian tree. It stands for the soul, which has become pure, chaste, and simple, and is connected to heaven through its light branches and fine leaves. Then, from 1977 to 1979, the pine comes to the fore. Despite Russian tradition, in which the pine is linguistically feminine, it is a male tree in Ajgi's poems. For Ajgi, the pine bears the signature of God the Father, the Creator. In his poems on the pine tree, Ajgi transitions to the third phase of his development with the experience of God's abandonment and absence. In the final poems of this period, in which an upheaval in mystical experience occurs, the willow is representative. It, in turn, is the mother-tree.

Although the willow is chronologically the first of the three species to make an appearance in Ajgi, beginning in 1964 (cf. 1: 140),³ it is also the last to play a major role in his poetry. Thus, in considering its various representations across these years, the development of Ajgi's tree mysticism as a whole may be charted *in nuce*. This development progresses from the experience of God in nature to the transcendence of God and then to the loss of the experience of God, before hope finally arises for its recuperation. Therefore, I have chosen the transformation of the willow motif in Ajgi's poems for a close reading.

² Schmitt (2022, 432) points out that Ajgi picks up on the view of Chuvash folk belief that "a solitary tree standing in the field was often regarded as the abode of the Kiremet, a deity of ambivalent character".

³ In the following, the work of Ajgi 2009 (7 vols) is cited only by volume and page number.

2 Willows – Mediator of the Experience of the Divine

Ajgi uses three different names for the silver willow (*Salix alba*) throughout his poetic work: beginning with *ветла*⁴ (1964), then *верба* (from 1975 to 1979), and, finally, *ува* (from 1979 to 1982). Both the poems about *верба* and the poems about *ува* can be read as a coherent series. These poems have in common that the willow conveys contact with the Divine. Furthermore, it is consistently linked to the motif of the mother as well as directly or indirectly to the memory of childhood. But the concept of the willow is evolving, reflecting a transformation in Ajgi's poetic mysticism. Let us now examine these phases.

2.1 ветла – Mystical Union

The poem in which the willow – here called *ветла* – first plays a key role does not bear the name of the tree in its title: *константин леонтьев: утро в Оптиной пустыни* (*konstantin leont'ev: utro v optinoj pustyni*, 'morning in the optina pustyn'; 1: 140-1). In this poem, Ajgi brings to mind the religious philosopher Konstantin Leont'ev, who becomes the *alter ego* of the speaker. The poem was probably triggered by Ajgi's visit to the site of Optina Pustyn'. This is an Orthodox monastery of the Elders or старцы, which Dostoevsky also visited and to which he pays tribute in his novel *Brothers Karamazov*. The archetype for the character Zosima in that novel is a famous elder of this monastery, Amvrosij. Leont'ev was in close contact with Amvrosij and criticized his portrayal in the figure of Zosima (cf. Leont'ev 2003, 816). Leont'ev himself emphasizes what most impressed him about Amvrosij: the "*прежде всего Церковн<ая> мистика*" (first of all ecclesiastical mysticism – Leont'ev 2021, 106; italics in the original), that connected him to the tradition of Hesychasm and the prayer of the heart.⁵ And this connection is the basis of Ajgi's poem.

Ajgi may have in mind Leont'ev's autobiographical essay (cf. Leont'ev 2003, 791-804), in which Leont'ev describes the importance of his mother for the development of his understanding of religious mysticism. Thus, the poem begins with a memory of childhood and the mother. This memory facilitates a Hesychastic act of union with the Divine: the repeated utterance of the Russian verb *есть* – meaning either the third person singular '[it] is', or the infinite verb 'to be' – is associated with 'being' as such and is here situated in the image of an action that is nonsensical and, accordingly, can only be approximated:

⁴ Ajgi uses punctuation and capitalization according to his own poetic purpose and not to grammar.

⁵ On the tradition of the prayer of the heart, cf. my explanations in Stahl 2019b, 125-40.

"есть" – повторяешь – как будто в себя помещаешь | светящее место: || – о есть! – (1: 140; italics in the original)

"it is" – you are repeating – as if you were making room in yourself | for a luminous place: || – o it is! –

In the Hesychastic prayer of the heart, it is the name of Jesus that is transferred from the head to the heart by repeated praying. This form of spiritual communion with Jesus Christ can be connected in the Hesychastic tradition with appearances of light: this 'place', the 'is' or 'being', shine through in the poem.

And here the willow comes into play. The willow stands for the culmination of the mystical experience: on the one hand, this experience leads out of time ("*и – не накапливая | что-нибудь – возраст творящее*", 'and – without compiling | something – that is creating age', 1: 141) and, on the other hand, out of a closed space ("*за окном*", 'behind the window' – 1: 141). The motif of the window, behind which the willow appears, indicates the transition from normal consciousness to another state.⁶ The speaker imagines moving out of the window into the willow itself. The ambivalent grammatical construction allows the markedly capitalized verbal adverb 'Shaking' to refer simultaneously to the willow, the place of light, and the speaker. In this way, inside and outside, man and nature merge: "*вместе с верхушками ветел себя Сотрясая*" (along with the topmost parts of the willows Shaking – 1: 141). The capitalization emphasizes the sacred nature of the mystical union. Here, we have also a special experience of light, which is compared with a 'child's Christmas tree', 'Scattering both light and dust' ("*Сыплет и светом и пылью | как детская ель! –*"; 1: 141) – i.e. the fruit dust of the willow catkins, which is golden yellow.

The mystical experience is thus represented at once as the speaker's union with the willow and as the birth of the Lord within the speaker's mind. This unity is an experience of the immanence of transcendence. The experience of deeper being is portrayed as at once spiritual and sensual in the ambiguity of the predicate: it is 'self-explanatory – *what i s*' (the sensual or concrete) and '*that it i s*' (the spiritual or being itself), unified in a single Russian verb form, *е с т ь* ("*самообъяснимо – что есть*"; 1: 141; italics added).

Let us now look at the poems on willow as *верба*.

⁶ Schmitt (2022, 444) points out that Ajgi's use of the window motif ties in with the Chuvash folk belief that "the window symbolized the threshold between this world and the hereafter".

2.2 верба – The Golden Soul

The willow under the rather vernacular name *верба*, which often appears in folklore, is used in four poems written between 1975 and 1979. In the first poem *поле: куст вербы* (*pole: kust verby*, 'field: willow-bush' – 2: 98), dated 11 May 1975, the willow is linked to 'Glow of the World's Golden Hour:' ("и в Сияньи Золотого Часа Мира:", *i v Sijan'i Zolotogo Časa Mira* – 2: 98).

The 'golden hour' usually refers to sunrise or sunset. The willow bush unites with the golden light or the golden time via the hyphen word *Куст-как-час* (Bush-as-hour), while the combination of 'glow' and 'knowledge' (*сиянье-ведение*, or 'glow-knowing') identifies spirit and nature with each other. This knowledge appears as the objective presence of spirit ('glow-knowing') – the echo of the capitalized 'Glow' – and it presents itself at once as the intellectual activity of people ("ведают иль нет?", 'do they know or not?'), with the implication that speaker himself certainly does. Moving from the sun's 'Glow' to the '1-Bush' (*Куст-1*), to the field and from that bush into the field itself, the speaker's gaze draws a standing cross with the '1-Bush' at its center.⁷ When the gaze turns from the bush back to the height of the horizon ("из края Поля – вширь"), (from the edge of the Field – into the wideness); parentheses in the original), the speaker has shifted his position; now he is located within the bush, i.e. he merges with it, as we have already seen in the previous poem.

Thus, this poem also shows a mystical union with the willow, which is at the same time a union with Christ, inasmuch as the bush represents, as it did for Moses, a mediator of theophany – here not with God but with Christ. While the cross, drawn by the speaker's gaze, stands for death, Christ's resurrection is indicated by the 'Glow'. It is perhaps not coincidental that the date of the poem's composition was a Sunday in 1975. The Sunday after Easter, on which the poem is dated, is St. Thomas Sunday, because on that day, Christ appeared to the unbelieving Thomas, for which it is also named *Антимасха* (Anti-Easter), or *Красная горка* (Red Hill). The negative connotation associated with 'Anti-Easter' is further unfolded in the poem. The loneliness of the bush emphasizes its separation. In medicine, the 'golden hour' also describes the short period in which resuscitation or life-saving treatment from a critical trauma is possible.

This ambivalence of death and its overcoming by resurrection and revelation corresponds to the poem's pause structure. Most lines end

⁷ The centred printed form (which includes title as well as dating) with alternating short and long verses, between each of which a blank space is placed, gives the poem a visually distinct character, which is also underlined by the spelling for 'one' as the number '1'. Various associations are possible, including the willow bush itself, but also the suggestion of an orthodox cross, which has three bars.

with a colon that connects the lines but at the same time underscores their interruption, which is also emphasized by the blank lines that set each verse separately, just as the bush stands alone. The contrast of connection and separation is repeated with the two sentences in parentheses, shifting attention from the phenomenon to the speaker, who does not name himself with personal pronouns. A kind of pendulum movement arises: on the one hand, the speaker is in the phenomenon, i.e. outside of himself; on the other hand, the parentheses signal his self-reflection, his being within himself. Thus, the mystical union with nature already begins to display signs of alienation.

In the subsequent poem, *ветка вербы в окне* (*vetka verby v okne*, 'willow branch in the window' – 3: 126-9), written in 1976, this break comes to the fore. Of the whole willow bush, only one branch remains, which was possibly cut off and hung in the window. The focus is thus no longer directed by natural phenomena themselves but by their effects on the soul: the soul 'shines golden', merging with the willow branch 'in the window's square!' ("душа золотится | в квадрате окна!" – 3: 126). As in other poems, the soul is not assigned to the speaker, even though the connection is obvious. However, Ajgi thereby suggests that the soul is more than a psychic inwardness bound to a particular body; it is at the same time beyond the person.⁸ Here, the soul forms the interface and transition between inside and outside in uniting with the willow branch. This union no longer occurs beyond the window – i.e. beyond the 'house' of the body – but on the border of inside and outside: 'in the window', which is to say, in the act of perception. Accordingly, it is during this period in Ajgi's work that the birch, consistently a metaphor for the human soul, becomes increasingly important. And, as a result of this internalization, death – and, with it, contemporary history – suddenly break into natural-mystical experience: in this case, with the news of the passing of the poet Konstantin Bogatyrev, who presumably died shortly following a beating by the KGB.⁹ It is from this death that the poem proceeds; and, from now on, a rupture is more or less clearly inscribed in the willow poems.

A year later, in 1977, Ajgi wrote a poem for his son Konstantin, a toddler at the time, titled *дом за городом [сыну константину]* (*dom za gorodom [synu konstantinu]*, 'house outside the city [for my son]; 3: 149). This poem quotes a line from the previous poem, *ветка вербы в окне* (*vetka verby v okne*), adding a line break after 'soul' and replacing the final exclamation mark with a colon: 'the soul | shines golden | in the window square:' ("душа |

⁸ Cf. Korčagin 2016, 122, who also observes in other poems the division of the speaker into 'subject' and 'soul', the latter of which, unlike the former, can be located outside the body.

⁹ Vojnovič 1993, 111-15. Ajgi touches on his death in several poems.

з о л о т и т с я | в квадрате окна:"). The soul, which is highlighted in the blocked print, 'shines golden' 'but from the Homeland-of-Life | other | hidden' ("а из Родины-Жизни | иной | затаенной"), that is, the prenatal otherworld. And this "golden shine" is at the same time the blossom of the willow catkin, which in turn has an echo in the babbling of the baby. Through this synesthetic correspondence, the willow acquires an acoustic quality for the first time.

The 'secret meeting' ("тайная встреча") of the flowering willow and the baby's babbling takes place 'in that - immaculate - Homeland' ("в той - незапятнанной - Родине"), that is, in the spiritual dimension. This encounter, however, is reflected in the golden glow that connects inside and outside, this world and the other: for the soul 'appears golden' again 'in the window', not behind or beyond. Thus, the union of soul and the golden glow of the catkins forms the boundary or threshold between inside and outside, but it is a boundary that is transparent and that connects. As it connects inside and outside, the 'soul' unites child, the willow in sunlight, and also the speaker, who experiences this mystical union in his perception of the willow.

In this poem, no catastrophe breaks in, and the willow is thematized again as a whole, not just as a branch. But the poem nevertheless suggests that, in contrast, to the immaculateness of the 'hidden' 'Homeland-of-Life', the spiritual or prenatal, the real world is precisely not immaculate - i.e. not without sin. And, in contrast to life, which is assigned to the otherworldly homeland, death is suggested to be the master of the world on this side. Already, the title of the poem *дом за городом* (*dom za gorodom*; 'house outside the city') shows a contrasting emphasis on being 'outside'. Symbolically, the city stands for normal life, and the house in the countryside for the *Родины-Жизни* (Homeland-of-Life), or the beyond. This poem, too, is thus sublimely inscribed with the rupture that had become explicit in the previously mentioned work.

The last poem on the willow as *верба*, from 9 March 1979 and dedicated to Antoine Vitez, entitled *и: верба цветом* (*i: verba cvetet*; 'and: the willow blossoms' - 2: 114) also shows traces of this break. For the first time, it explicitly focuses on the femininity of the tree: the *Матери-Древе* ('Mother-Tree') is equivalent to the *мама-синица* ('mother-tit'), the species of bird that flies around in it - and, with its yellow belly plumage, it appears like the yellow-haired catkins of the willows themselves. But the 'we' of the poem, the writers, are described with *отклонение* (deviation) and *ветр* (wind), the image of the spirit. The speaker remains inside of the house and in front of the window. He no longer transposes himself through the window to the willow, nor does he unite with the willow 'in the square of the window', as did the 'soul' in the poems discussed earlier. Of the former unity of the 'golden soul' with the willow, only a possible remainder survives as 'flying warmth' that the wind 'may' possess ("ветр [...] (с неким быть может летучим теплом)").

However, the speaker can now synesthetically hear the 'silk whisper' of the willow buds ("комочки [...] - шепот шелковый"). Instead of being united with nature, he appears now as its interpreter. The acoustic perception of the willow, its rustling in the wind, which was first indicated in the previous poem, is taken up and intensified. The speaker understands that the willows whisper from the primordial mother, the 'Mother-Tree' ("о Матери-Древе"). In Russian, the word for virgin, *дева*, also resounds hidden within the Church Slavonic form of the word 'tree' or *дерево*, and the willow is sublimely associated with the Mother of God, behind whom the pagan goddess Natura herself may loom in Christian tradition. Thus, in this poem, the mystical unity with the willow, as observed in the earlier poems, is replaced by a distance, which is bridged only by the translation and reflection of the speaker.

The association of the *верба* with the mother and the Virgin Mary will return in the poems on the willow in which it is referred to as *ива* and which follow below. Here, the gap between the subject and nature or the Divinity - and the task of transcending this gap - becomes the central theme, further developing the idea of translating from nature through poetic meditation.

2.3 ИВЫ – Transcending to the Spirit

Ajgi wrote four poems in which the willow as *ива* is the titular and central figure of the poem. The first poem *ивы* (ivy; willows - 5: 52) was written in 1979 and focuses on the question of overcoming the gap between subject and object, or speaker and nature, in the act of poetic imagination. The meditative character of the poem is emphasized by its processuality, which is formally expressed in the use of present tense, the absence of blank lines or spatial indications of pause, long line structures, and strong enjambments. Furthermore, the introduction of the poem is repeated in the middle of the poem and in the middle of the line, so it is not announced by a formal break (cf. Stahl 2021; 2022).

The poem begins with a change of consciousness, an imagined sleep that transports the speaker to the willows: "ивы такие: уснуть!" (willows are like that: fall asleep!). The transition to the willows is described as spatially spherical: "окружиться | живым будто вздох серебром" (surround yourself | with living silver, like a breath). The formation of spheres takes place through the breath (*вздох*), the medium of the word, which, when exhaled, appears as a silver cloud of hoarfrost. The silver of the breath is at the same time the color of the willows, while the breath is in turn associated with the wind that moves their leaves. The word 'вздох' also denotes both a sigh of sorrow and of joyful liberation. These contrary emotions unfold over the course of the poem.

First, however, the speaker and the tree merge for the word *взддох* ('breath', 'sigh'), which is connected with the speaker and is phonetically transformed into the word for 'shudder': *взддрогнуть*. The infinitive *взддрогнуть* grammatically refers to the speaker, but, semantically, it can also be related to the movement of the willow leaves:

взддрогнуть и листья узнать словно шепот в блистании линий
(вновь – воскрешаемый солнцем) (5: 52)

shudder and recognize the leaves like a whisper in the glittering
of lines (again – resurrectable by the sun)

The speaker wants to read in these leaves – which in Russian share an etymology with the word for a sheet of paper. The leaves (*листья*) are transformed phonetically into a 'glittering' (*блистание*). The shining of the leaves, created by sunlight, is at the same time an image of understanding. The glittering (*блистание*) passes phonetically into the lines (*линей*) – i.e. writing. Thus, the glittering, accompanied by the whispering or rustling of the leaves, represent at once a natural phenomenon and the intellectual act of understanding and writing.

The content of the willows' whisper forms the center of the poem. Here, the ambivalence of the 'sigh' (*взддох*) unfolds: it is

о мягком тумане-призрень – слезами в миру серебрящегося
| детства бесстрастного!

about soft fog-care – like tears in the world | of dispassionate childhood
ensilvering itself!

The speaker learns about his childhood in the whispering of the willow. This process of remembering is characterized by both peace of mind and care. Thus, the sigh turns from an exhalation, which had transposed the speaker into the willow, into an inhalation – i.e. into memory. However, this memory appears wistful, even sad. As the sphere of connection disperses, it becomes tears. The willow awakens the memory of the deceased mother but without the speaker consciously recognizing this memory.¹⁰ The association of the willow with the mother will come to the speaker's consciousness explicitly only in a willow poem written a year later:

¹⁰ Ajgi (2019, 324) said that "страдание-как-тема, страдание-как-образ очень сильно связано у меня с памятью о матери" (suffering-as-theme, suffering-as-image is very much connected with the memory of my mother for me).

вдруг | понимаю что душу твою вспоминаю | в тумане вдали
наблюдая | подъёмы теперь острова перепады вершин
серебристых | ивовой рощи (5: 56)

suddenly | I understand that I remember your soul | when I in the
mist in the distance | observe the lifting now of the island the fall-
ing of the silver treetops | of the willow grove¹¹

The tears in the poem of 1979, however, are not merely sorrowful, for they shine silver, like dewdrops on the willow leaves. And the mist is not cold either – it is (still) caring and soft.

The poem is bisected when, in the middle of the line, the initial phrase is repeated: “– ивы такие: уснуть!” (willows are like that: fall asleep! – 5: 52). A new cycle of exhalation and inhalation follows. The second half of the poem further unfolds a sense of emotional ambivalence, sharpening it into a polarity at the end, as I will now show.

Thus, silver turns gray, and tears change into tiny droplets of mist or dew, likened to droplets of mercury: “серым рассеяться в ртутном по верху” (disperse yourself across the surface like gray quicksilver). Again, inside and outside, speaker and natural phenomenon, are one in this image. The pervasive sense of melancholy is amplified into grief. But, in the same line, there occurs yet another turn of mood: like the tear-dew droplets that roll over the leaves, the speaker wants to ‘roll out tenderness:’ (“и нежность прокатывать:”). The word *нежность* (tenderness) refers to the *призрение* (care) mentioned before, and both point to the mother. The willow becomes a place of remembrance for the deceased mother. In the 1980 poem already cited, the willow grove possesses “чем-то | ‘потусторонней” (something | ‘otherworldly’ – 5: 56), and, in a willow poem from 1982, Ajgi explicitly speaks of the willow as a “место мамá-обожания” (place of mother-deification – 5: 99).

At the end of the 1979 poem, the duality between inhalation, associated with memory and melancholy, and exhalation, associated with light and union with nature, comes apart. The two sides of the breath, which stand for union with and separation from nature, are distributed separately over two lines and set against each other: “нежность [...] : ту что не знали | что Духом расписывают | смертью туманят” (the tenderness [...] : that they did not know | which they paint with Spirit | which they fog with death – 5: 52).

With the separation of art and Spirit, on the one hand, and death and the natural phenomenon of fog, on the other, the speaker has ended his

¹¹ Since Ajgi's lower and upper case is not based on grammar but on personal choice in order to distribute semantic weight, the personal pronoun ‘I’ should be lower case in the English translation.

mystical union with the willow – and also the poem. But the poem also contains a hidden theological level that transcends this separation.

First, we find allusions to the Trinity dispersed throughout the poem. Thus, the invisible 'point' of the sphere, which is not mentioned at the beginning, corresponds to the Father. The explicitly named 'line' is the theological terminology for the Son (Lat. *aequalitas*) (cf. Schwaetzer 2000). To the latter, traditionally, the sun is also assigned. Furthermore, the miracle of Lazarus rising from the dead is referred to by the epithet *воскрешаемый* (resurrectable). Finally, capitalization marks the 'Spirit' as 'Holy'. One 'paints' (*расписывают*) with the Spirit – this is a verb that in Russian connotes the sacred painting of the domes and walls of a church. The Holy Spirit is traditionally responsible for revelation. In the middle of the poem, there is also a key term of Orthodox asceticism: *бесстрастно* (dispassionate) refers to *apatheia* (Gr. ἀπάθεια), a state without suffering and passions, which is assigned to Paradise – and the motif of childhood corresponds to it.

The poem unfolds the Christ theme: the silver sphere, mentioned at the beginning of the poem, decomposes into mercury-like balls and finally becomes a veil of fog that covers the plain like a shroud because the fog is formed by death ("смертью туманят"). The last word is *туманят*, or 'to fog', and its ending contains the letter that in Russian is identical with the personal pronoun 'I': 'я'. The next and last letter is 'т', or the cross. This might be seen as an overinterpretation – but, in the tradition of the avant-garde, Ajgi time and again plays with the visual form of letters and also the semantic charging of individual letters.

Mercury, however, is the alchemical substance of transformation, which releases gold or the philosopher's stone after passing through destruction. Mercury is, therefore, also an image of the death and resurrection of Christ. The Christian meaning of the Trinity supports such a reading. Finally, the (Holy) 'Spirit' stands graphically *above* death in the poem. The image of the willow offers a basis for this: in the willow catkins, the tree unites silver (moon and mother), mercury, and gold (or the sun, Christ). That is to say, even though death is victorious in nature, redemption is inscribed in nature in a spiritual way.

However, this theological layer of meaning is only hinted at in the poem. Meaningfully manifest and thus linguistically explicit is death. The new spiritual life lies beyond the world of sense and, therefore, cannot be manifested directly in language: for Ajgi, in this phase of his work, spiritual life is necessarily transcendent and apophatically eludes verbalization.

In each of the following three years, another poem is written on the willow as *уба*. At first, the poems expand upon aspects of death, separation, and grief. In the process, the speaker's 'I' now emerges explicitly. In the first poem on *убы* ('ivy', 1979), the subject is only indirectly present in the act of speaking and has not made itself visible

through personal pronouns. A year later, in 1980, the first person singular (понимаю, помню, удерживаю; 'I understand', 'I remember', 'I hold on') and the dative personal pronoun нам ('to us', 'for us') occur (5: 56). But only a faint memory of the poet's first mystical experience with the willow remains: "это одно лишь мельканье 'чего-то' из памяти" (just one 'something' from memory flashes up – 5: 56). Nonetheless, this is where there is 'the 'eternal' – like orphanhood | (invisible – awaiting us)' ("где 'вечное' – будто сиротство | (незримое – нас дожидаясь)" – 5: 57). In 1981, the speaker then laments how he has lost the ability to mystically transcend at all:

"Боже" не скажешь – о Боже с душою | что-то случилось:
рыдания | ровного нет! [...] тускло туманюсь (5: 72)

don't say "God" – with the soul, o God | something transpired: a
howl | without equal! [...] I feebly enfog myself

And, in 1982, the

облако давнее | словно с движениями думанья [...] место мамá-
обожания [...] | мне закрывает (5: 99)

cloud of old | as it were with movements of thought [...] the place
of mother-deification [...] it covers it from me

In other words, it covers the willow mentioned in the title.¹² But, at the end of the poem, a weak reflection of the mystical experience emerges 'ensilvering itself straight through' ("насквозь серебрится" – 5: 99), which can be related both to the cloud and to the willow. Nonetheless, the speaker is not part of this luminousness; he remains separated.¹³

¹² Schmitt (2022, 448) describes the life circumstances responsible for the pessimistic turn in Ajgi's poetry in the early 1980s: "In the early 1980s, the family's happiness gradually dimmed, and the marriage ended shortly after the birth of daughter Veronika in 1983. In addition came the death or emigration of a large number of Ajgi's friends".

¹³ Three years later, in 1985, Ajgi describes that, with trees, he experienced a kind of dialogical relationship, in which he lost himself as in 'colorless darkness' ("в безцветную тьму"), and the 'absence' ("отсутствие"; italics in the original) of the 'Word' ("Слова"), but from which something 'blows towards us' ("довеивает до нас"; italics in the original), 'to which, in us, 'clearly and in words', something – suddenly – answers' ("в нас, явно и 'словесно', что-то – вдруг – отвечает этому"; Ajgi 2019, 327). I have described this dialogic relationship elsewhere with Benjamin as an aura experience (Stahl 2019a, 140).

3 Conclusion

Trees are most often the subject of the poems in the second phase of Ajgi's work, and these trees often function as a site for the experience of the Divine. This is especially true of the willows. Ajgi's shift between the three names for the willow – *ветла*, *верба*, *ива* – corresponds with a transformation of his poetic mysticism.

The first poem, in which a willow under the name of *ветла* plays a central role (1964, 1: 140), combines mystical union with the willow tops and with Christ. From the mid-1970s on, in the poems about the willow as *верба*, the focus is shifted to the experience of natural phenomena in the soul. The strengthening of the subject is immediately followed by a break with mystical experience – which is presented, on the one hand, as the violence of the outer world, or of memory and history, and, on the other hand, as the clouding of consciousness. Overcoming this break and purifying the imagination is the topic of the 1979 poem about the willow as 'ивы', which shows how the subject-object split can be overcome again. However, using the image of breath movement, the poem displays a pendulum process that alternates between a mystical transference to nature and a return to the soul. The processuality of transcending nature and self comes to the fore. In the later poems about *ивы*, this equilibrium is abandoned. The mystical euphoria regresses to depression at its loss. In the fourth and last *ива*-poem, there emerges a weak echo of the previous experiences of illumination. In the last phase of Ajgi's work, when trees no longer play a role, Ajgi's speaker once again approaches the experience of being and truth – but only through the image of the field (*поле*), which presents an apophatic relationship with transcendence.¹⁴

The trees in Ajgi's poetry are signatures of man's mutually evolving relationship with nature and with God. Ajgi's speaker struggles in the poems again and again to experience the Divine in or through nature. The mystical path to the experience of God takes place in transformations – from the pantheistic and immanent to the Christian and transcendent.

¹⁴ Cf. on the complex semiotics of 'field' in Ajgi most recently, Schmitt 2022.

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The Motherland of the Giant Hogweed How Giant Hogweed Became a Botanical Symbol of Contemporary Russia

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Abstract Human intervention in ecosystems has led to the accelerated dissemination of species deemed 'invasive', often accompanied by a perception of inherent malevolence. In Russia, the rampant spread of the giant hogweed has emerged as one of the most debated ecological issues in recent decades. The giant hogweed (*Heracleum*), a herbaceous monocarpic plant first discovered in the Caucasus in 1944, now proliferates throughout the country, from Sochi to Yamal and from the Arctic to downtown Moscow. It is estimated that the giant hogweed occupies over 10% of continental Europe within Russia, with projections suggesting an increase to nearly 100% within the next 30 years. Frequently, the plant is likened to a botanical emblem of Russia or a symbol of Putin's regime, reflecting the social tensions that oscillate between apathy and antipathy toward the hogweed in media and activism spheres.

Keywords Ecocriticism. Post-Soviet landscapes. Invasive species. Russia. Giant hogweed. Political ecology. Ecological imperialism. Decolonial aesthetics.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Conquering Nature: History of the Giant Hogweed Invasion. – 3 Externalising the Enemy. – 4 Transformative Narratives. – 5 Decolonial Aesthetics. – 6 From Post-Soviet Legacy to Botanical Symbol of Russia. – 7 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

The role of humans in facilitating the uncontrollable spread of invasive species is considered one of the signs of the Anthropocene, an epoch in which humans have emerged as the primary geological and biological force driving planetary change (Simon 2016). In the Anthropocene, invasive species serve as a tangible manifestation of human-induced ecological disruptions and transformations, highlighting the significant role of human activities in altering global biodiversity and ecosystems.

Invasive plant management and campaigns raise thought-provoking questions about various dualisms, such as the dichotomy between nature and culture, native and alien species, the concepts of good and evil, with power relations and political discourse influencing these relationships. In the post-Soviet context, the giant hogweed stands out as a notable example, as it has rapidly expanded over underdeveloped and abandoned lands in former Soviet territories over the past 30 years, illustrating the profound ecological impacts of its invasion.

The giant hogweed, scientifically known as *Heracleum*, is a herbaceous monocarpic plant that reaches heights of 3 to 6 metres. Its stout stem can grow up to 12 centimetres in diameter, while its massive green leaves and large umbels bear tiny white flowers. With its remarkable fertility, the hogweed releases approximately 20,000 seeds annually, each capable of germinating for up to four years. Exposure to sunlight, in combination with contact with the plant's sap, can lead to photosensitivity and severe burns. The hogweed's immense size often gives rise to comparisons with alien landscapes. It is estimated that more than 15% of the European part of Russia has been overtaken by the giant hogweed (Mironova 2022).

The impact of the giant hogweed extends beyond physical landscapes; it has permeated the cultural and media fabric of Russia. The plant has become a subject of internet memes, folklore, and even mainstream culture, finding its place in the “no-brow culture” of the Russian establishment. It has been featured in prime time television news segments, shared on social media through maps documenting its expansion, and even incorporated as a decorative element in high-end art fairs and fashionable attire.¹ These multifaceted representations of the hogweed, while potentially contributing to the

¹ This could possibly lead to the creation of what Natasha Myers has referred to as the “Planthropocene”, an episteme in which people learn to collaborate with plants in order to create livable worlds. In Natasha Myers’ article “From the anthropocene to the planthropocene: Designing gardens for plant/people involution”, she argues that “to cultivate the Planthropocene is to cultivate a deep attentiveness to the ways in which plants and people co-constitute one another, to the ways in which we are always-already entangled in multispecies assemblages and relationships of care, to the

stigmatisation of the plant, are still relatively new within the Russian cultural and environmental milieu. The significance attributed to the hogweed in contemporary Russian culture underscores the intricate and evolving relationship between humans and non-human entities. Nonetheless, its emergence within the Russian landscape is a recent phenomenon.

2 Conquering Nature: History of the Giant Hogweed Invasion

Introduction and cultivation of the giant hogweed should be read as part of a broader cultural and political agenda of the Soviet Union, in particular, the Stalin era (1927-53), which was characterised by a strong discourse of ‘conquering nature’. This discourse reflected the Soviet Union’s ambition to transform its vast and diverse territory into a unified and modern socialist state, as well as its aspiration to challenge the capitalist world order. In this context, nature was seen as a resource to be exploited, a barrier to be overcome, or an enemy to be defeated by the power of science and technology. According to Josephson (1995), the Soviet Union pursued several large-scale projects that aimed to transform nature and society, but often had disastrous effects on both. Stalin’s Great Plan for the Transformation of Nature, proposed in the Soviet Union in the late 1940s, aimed to improve agriculture through land development, agricultural practices, and water projects. It included the construction of irrigation canals in the southern Soviet Union and Central Asia, as well as the planting of extensive shelterbelts to combat drying winds and prevent drought.

One such example of ‘conquering nature’ narrative was the construction of the Volga-Don Canal (1947-52), the mega project aimed to connect the Caspian Sea with the Black Sea and shorten the distance between Leningrad and Astrakhan by connecting the River Volga with the River Don. This led to the displacement of more than 170.000 people, creation of huge lakes and wetlands, and altering the ecosystems along the canal route.

These projects were often done without regard for the unique ecological conditions of the affected areas and had detrimental effects on the environment and local communities. Additionally, the Soviet Union had a centralised system where Moscow made all the decisions, disregarding the knowledge and concerns of local communities.

One of the scientific fields that emerged and flourished in the Soviet Union during the Stalin era was epigenetics, which explored the

ways in which we are always-already located within particular ecological and geological contexts” (Myers 2017).

ways in which environmental factors could influence the development and traits of organisms (Roll-Hansen 2005). Epigenetics challenged the dominant genetic determinism of Western biology and offered a more dynamic and flexible view of life. Epigenetics also resonated with the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the Soviet Union, which emphasised the role of historical and material conditions in shaping human society and culture. Epigenetics provided a scientific basis for the belief that nature could be reshaped according to human needs and desires, and that humans could adapt to any environment. The rise of Lysenkoism and the triumph of Trofim Lysenko in the Soviet Union in 1948 can be understood in the context of a complex interplay between scientific, ideological, and political factors. Lysenko's rejection of classical genetics and his emphasis on a dialectical understanding of heredity aligned with the materialist ideology of the Soviet regime and resonated with philosophical themes of flux and development. Lysenko's ascendancy was aided by political support, including from influential figures like Georgii Malenkov, and culminated in Stalin's endorsement, which solidified Lysenko's position and led to the suppression of classical genetics. The specific circumstances of the Soviet Union during that time contributed to the unique dynamics of the Lysenko affair, sparking debates on the relationship between science and politics in authoritarian regimes.

However, this belief in the power of science to reshape nature was severely tested by the aftermath of World War II, which left the Soviet Union with a collapsed economy and widespread agricultural devastation. The war also exposed the environmental consequences of industrialisation, militarisation, and urbanisation, such as pollution, deforestation, soil erosion, and biodiversity loss. In response to these challenges, the Soviet Union intensified its efforts to use scientific innovation to improve agricultural productivity and address environmental problems.

The giant hogweed was one of the plants that was imported and cultivated as a potential solution for fodder shortages, reflecting the Soviet Union's faith in the ability of scientific innovation to overcome the limitations imposed by nature. The plant was first discovered by Ida Mandeveva in 1944 in the Caucasus and was named by Soviet botanist and Caucasus explorer Dmitrii Sosnowsky.

The hogweed, with its enormous, green leaves, was anticipated to become an excellent source of food for domesticated animals like cows and sheep. Almost immediately after the plant's discovery, it was transported from the Caucasus to Apatity, where agrobiologists from Polar Botanic Garden altered it and developed two new varieties of *H. Sosnowskyi*: *Victory* and *Northerner*. These new strains of *H. Sosnowskyi* have superior results in terms of fertility and resistance to frost (Heywood 2011).

The cultivation of giant hogweed as a potential fodder crop became a subject of research for specialists from several institutes in the Soviet Union with very different climate and soil conditions, such as the Botanical Institute of the Academy of Sciences (Leningrad – nowadays Saint Petersburg), the Institute of Biology of the Komi Science Centre (Syktyvkar), the Northwest Research Institute of Agriculture (Pushkin), the Institute of Fodder (Moscow Region), and the Leningrad Pedagogical Institute. A group for studying and introducing new and non-traditional fodder plants was also organised under the All-Union Academy of Agricultural Sciences (now the Russian Academy of Agricultural Sciences). The study of this introduced plant, conducted in Yerevan, Zhytomyr, Kyiv, Minsk, Naryan-Mar, Petrozavodsk, Leningrad (Saint Petersburg), Moscow and Syktyvkar, showed that the Non-Black Earth and Black Earth zones of the country were the best for growing this high-productive and resilient culture.

Hogweed was distributed to collective farms across the Soviet Union in the 1950s along with the instruction to mass-plant it so that it could be used as a feed for cattle. In the minds of governors in the Soviet administration, and notably Nikita Khrushchev, hogweed was a panacea for the problems of post-war poverty, famine, and degradation, as well as a weapon against food insecurity during the time of the Cold War (Krivosheina, Ozerova 2018).

In the Leningrad Region, as well as in many regions of Russia, hogweed has been cultivated since the 1960s as a promising fodder crop on an area of more than 1,000 hectares (Luneva 2013). In the second half of the last century, this species appeared on the territory of the Baltic republics as a fodder, ornamental, honey-bearing plant, and as a source of feed for birds (in the form of seeds) (Nielsen et al. 2005). Despite these high hopes, the Soviet experiment did not yield the expected results. As soon as cows started being given hogweed, there were reports that the milk produced by those cows was sour and potentially toxic. Farmers have observed that humans who come into contact with sap suffer from phytophotodermatitis and burns, which can be fatal. The root structure of the hogweed was wide and deep, and it completely displaced the local vegetation.

Public service announcements advocating hogweed for use as animal feed were shown on Soviet official television over opposition from local farmers. An example of this may be seen in a broadcast that was made in the year 1982 and was created by the prestigious and modern-day Moscow Timiryazev Agricultural Academy (Krivosheina, Ozerova 2019). However, there is no mention made of the burns, the infernal fertility, or the complete devastation of nature in the area around hogweed. Until 1984, the scientists maintained the optimism that they could create a new variety of hogweed that would not result in burns. However, in that year, it became clear that their endeavours, as well as the widespread use of hogweed in agricultural

settings, were ineffective. Despite this, the hogweed had already been seeded across the entirety of the Soviet Union and had begun its spread into the natural environment.

The collapse of the Soviet Union played a pivotal role in the rapid proliferation of the giant hogweed. While the precise factors triggering its aggressive spread remain unclear, the disintegration of numerous agricultural enterprises that cultivated the plant contributed to its uncontrolled expansion. As these enterprises dissolved, fields of hogweed were left unattended and unmanaged, leading to seed contamination in neighbouring areas. It is worth noting that hogweed was cultivated not only for animal fodder but also for seed production and the extraction of essential oils used in the perfume and cosmetics industries.

The conditions for the plant's spread had always existed: its exceptional fertility, coupled with seed dispersal by wind, birds, animals, humans, and vehicles, persisted throughout its 40-year cultivation. Nevertheless, hogweed remained confined to the cultivated fields where it was grown. It is possible that the favourable conditions provided within these agricultural settings did not stimulate the plant to invade new territories. However, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the disruption in agricultural management inadvertently created an environment conducive to the rapid proliferation of giant hogweed across Russia. As Bogdanov, Nikolaev and Shmeleva (2010) state, "In the early stages of its expansion, the giant hogweed was found exclusively in disturbed habitats: it typically grew along roadsides, power line corridors, on wastelands, dumps, and abandoned agricultural lands. In recent years, it has surrounded villages, penetrated large cities, parks, and even nature reserves".

The term 'colonisation' has frequently been employed in both Russian and foreign literature to describe this expansion (e.g. Catterall et al. 2012). The spread of hogweed may have been constrained through land cultivation, ecosystem restoration, and active agriculture practices. Nonetheless, the plant extends its coverage by an additional ten percent each year and has autonomously occupied an area as large as 100.000 hectares (Mironova 2022).

Therefore, another analytical approach to understanding the giant hogweed involves situating it within the broader framework of colonial expansion. This perspective argues that European settlers achieved hegemonic control over other regions through the inadvertent or deliberate introduction of animals, plants, and diseases, resulting in significant ecological transformations and population declines among indigenous peoples (Crosby 1986). Applying this lens to the ecological impacts of Russian expansion and settlement in Siberia and Central Asia, the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union introduced various species of crops, livestock, and pests, leading to profound changes in natural landscapes and disrupting the

livelihoods of indigenous populations (Moon 2013). In the case of the giant hogweed, it exemplifies a reverse manifestation of ecological imperialism. Originating from the Caucasus region, the plant was introduced to the European territory of the Soviet Union by Soviet botanists, where it became an invasive and detrimental species, posing threats to local flora, fauna, as well as human health and safety (Pyšek, Prach 1993).

3 Externalising the Enemy

The ‘battle’ against giant hogweed has become ingrained in both everyday life and politics over the course of the post-soviet period, being reinforced by language and narratives of warfare in the official discourse. In May 2022, scientists from the Skolkovo Institute of Science and Technology used Artificial Intelligence to predict that by 2040, there may be no areas left in the European part of Russia that are not overrun by hogweed (Koldasbayeva et al. 2022). While the language of the original report was rather neutral, the media was mostly using verbs like ‘conquered’, ‘colonised’, ‘invaded’.

The phenomenon commonly referred to as the ‘hogweed invasion’ has assumed a significant role within the realm of political life, characterised by the widespread adoption of military-related metaphors. A notable example of this can be observed during the 2018 elections, where Andrei Vorobyov, the governor of the Moscow Region, orchestrated an anti-hogweed campaign as part of his political platform, with an estimated expenditure of 300 million rubles. In order to critically examine these eradication efforts, James Scott’s concept of “Seeing Like a State” offers a valuable analytical framework. In his influential work, Scott argues that the state tends to oversimplify and reduce complex social and ecological systems into easily manageable and comprehensible forms, often at the cost of neglecting a more nuanced understanding of the underlying issues (Scott 2008). The approach taken towards the giant hogweed exemplifies this reductionist tendency, as the plant is frequently categorised simply as a “noxious weed” (Flessner, Metzgar 2018, 1) and subjected to targeted elimination, without adequately considering the broader contextual factors that have facilitated its proliferation.

In the *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species*, Ursula Heise contends that “biodiversity, endangered species, and extinction are primarily cultural issues, questions of what we value and what stories we tell, and only secondary issues of science” (Heise 2019, 5). This perspective aligns with the historical context of the anti-hogweed campaigns. In the 2000s, the initial campaigns against hogweed contributed to the perception of the plant as an ‘alien’ entity, while advocating for its complete eradication

through the use of pesticides that also posed risks to other forms of life. Notably, the Russian anti-hogweed campaign, known as *Bor-shevictory* (translated as ‘The Victory over the Giant Hogweed’), even developed a board game portraying hogweed as a disturbed research experiment gone wrong, seeking vengeance.

This narrative sheds light on the origins of the giant hogweed in the world. Originally deriving from Georgia, hogweed underwent modifications in an agrobiological laboratory, blurring the boundaries between what is considered ‘natural’ and ‘cultural’ or *artificial*. Ekaterina Nikitina, a posthumanist researcher and philosopher, further explored this narrative in her article titled “Hogweed vs. Sunroot: Zoemachy of Soviet Postanthropocentrism”. Drawing comparisons to Frankenstein, she depicted the plant as a “monster directed against Nature” with a capital “N” (Nikitina 2019), emphasising its transformative and disruptive nature within ecological frameworks.

4 Transformative Narratives

In the 2010s, the giant hogweed has come to represent the perceived authentic Russia beyond the glitz and glamour of Moscow within a significant segment of the contemporary art community in Russia. Two of the sixteen pieces that were considered for the short list for the Kandinsky Prize, which is a prize for contemporary art, investigated hogweed as a new cultural layer that was taking over abandoned post-soviet terrain. Another illustration of this may be seen in the artwork that was presented in 2019 by Alexandra Lerman (Lerman 2019). She displayed dried hogweed beside a plush dog and a massive glass anatomical model of a man. She also recorded a hogweed vengeance manifesto with a dark techno noise, which went as follows: “*The toxic miasm will reach your towns. / You are already late! / We have won and are invulnerable. / We are not scared of your herbicides*”.

The depiction of the hogweed as a menacing invader has faced criticism for oversimplifying the issue and perpetuating the “othering” of the plant. By portraying the hogweed as a villain, this narrative reinforced a militaristic approach of eradicating it at any cost, leading to the widespread use of harmful herbicides and mechanical mowing practices. Unfortunately, these efforts resulted in the destruction of surrounding ecosystems and the unintended consequence of the hogweed transitioning from an annual to a perennial plant.

In response to these negative outcomes, some activists and local communities have started exploring alternative narratives that seek to “de-alienate” the hogweed and find sustainable ways to co-exist with it. These efforts involve repurposing the plant for various beneficial uses. For example, the Research Institute of Mechanization and Electrification of Agriculture in Komi has proposed using

hogweed-derived sugar for bioethanol production, and students at Altai State University have discovered how to utilize hogweed extract for treating skin diseases (Mironova 2022).

These alternative narratives can be understood through the framework of Anna Tsing's concept of the "economy of appearances". According to Tsing, this economy is a speculative form of capitalism in which the imagination of profit precedes its extraction. In this context, images, expectations, and fantasies play a significant role in generating value and attracting investment. Furthermore, Tsing argues that the economy of appearances is influenced not only by economic interests but also by cultural beliefs, scientific knowledge, and political agendas. It thus reveals the intricate and context-dependent ways in which certain species are valued and perceived.

Examining the giant hogweed through the lens of the economy of appearances highlights the diverse roles and perceptions it has assumed over time and in different contexts. Whether as a fodder crop, an ornamental plant, a honey-bearing plant, a source of bird feed, an invasive species, a toxic weed, or a symbol of ecological imperialism, the giant hogweed has been valued and perceived differently.

In light of these discussions, it is worth revisiting Mark Davis's claim in his book *Invasion Biology* that species should be evaluated based on their impact on biodiversity, human health, ecological services, and economies rather than solely on their geographic origin. This perspective may resonate with a broad range of academics and observers, even if it encounters opposition (Davis 2009). However, it is important to acknowledge and address the concerns raised by Crystal Fortwangler, who questions whether it is necessary to evaluate plants solely within a utilitarian or functional framework and challenges our ability to truly see creatures in their entirety (Fortwangler 2013). These issues warrant further exploration and discussion.

Anna Martynenko's "Hogweed Museum" (2019) project served as an excellent example of engaging with the concepts of "*entangled worlds of contingency and uncertainty*". The project exemplified the idea of "entangled worlds" and the importance of taking a holistic approach to understanding the connections between humans and other beings. In the "Hogweed Museum" on the Okhta River, the stories and history of the hogweed plant were told from the perspective of its relationships with other species:

The museum was founded in August 2019 by activists of the Waterfront/Water Line project, dedicated to the development of the coastal areas of small rivers in St. Petersburg. The Okhta River is one of the oldest rivers in St. Petersburg, but its banks are overgrown with a poisonous plant – Hogweed. It was this plant that became the main hero of our museum. We trace its history from ancient times to the present day in a number of museum artefacts.

Most of these artefacts are the result of the study of the territory and archaeological excavations made in the area. It is these finds associated with the giant hogweed that make up the exposition museum". (Martynenko 2019)

Ilya Dolgov, another artist who has vastly used hogweed in his works, has called for a shift away from the trend of "urban jungle" Instagram aesthetics towards a focus on growing native, potentially challenging plants at home, such as hogweed and burdock (Sobaka 2021). Dolgov suggests that this type of immersion in ecosystems would allow for the cultivation of new relationships and accountabilities.²

Instead of seeing the hogweed as a harmful invader or as a commodity to be exploited, this perspective emphasised the importance of "attentive interactions with diverse lifeways" (Van Dooren, Kirksey, Münster 2016) in order to better understand and care for the ecosystems in which we are all entangled. One way to approach this is through the use of grassing techniques, such as seeding white clover, bluegrass, and *bromus inermis*, which have been shown to suppress hogweed growth and promote coexistence with the plant (Catford 2019). This approach involves a sense of passionate immersion and a willingness to learn and be affected by the diverse lifeways of multiple species (Van Dooren, Kirksey, Münster 2016).

5 Decolonial Aesthetics

The spread of giant hogweed in Russia has often been described as an instance of 'colonisation'. However, it is important to recognise that the plant's presence in the country can also be seen as a result of Russian colonialism and as a manifestation of Haraway's concept of the "plantationocene", which refers to the ways in which colonial and capitalist systems have shaped the global distribution and management of plants. As Haraway (2015, 162) writes,

Moving material semiotic generativity around the world for capital accumulation and profit – the rapid displacement and reformulation of germ plasm, genomes, cuttings, and all other names and forms of part organisms and of deracinated plants, animals, and people – is one defining operation of the Plantationocene, Capitalocene, and Anthropocene taken together.

² In that same year, I attended a concert by Alliance, a Soviet rock group that reached the height of its fame in the late 1980s. The concert took place in a former industrial neighbourhood of Moscow, amidst the remnants of abandoned factories. The venue was adorned with rusty Soviet cars, and towering dry hogweeds, reaching heights of 2-3 metres, added a very certain aesthetic of ruins and obsolescence to the setting.

Therefore, the introduction of giant hogweed to Russia as a potential commodity crop can be seen as an example of the efforts of the Soviet Union to exploit and control natural resources for a short-term economic gain, leading to the proliferation of monoculture and the displacement of indigenous knowledge systems.

The Komi region, infamous for ongoing ecological crises and the biggest oil spills in Russia in particular, has suffered greatly from the spread of giant hogweed, which has displaced native vegetation and disrupted local ecosystems (Chadin 2017). As Donna Haraway (2015) writes, colonization is a structure, not an event, and imperial structures do not go away just because the empires that deployed them have (at least temporarily) withdrawn.

Local Komi artist Varya Listopad began to use the long stems of the hogweed to create rain sticks, or *zer pu*, as they are called in the Komi language, turning the “deadly plant” into an artistic tool, as it was introduced in Posner’s (2020) article: “Looking at the lush, poisonous hogweed, I was inspired by the idea of creating a musical instrument from it with the thought that, although it is just a small step, I could help the environment of my village”. In 2019, the Darwin Museum hosted an exhibition “Hogweed Factory” with folk craft objects made from a dry plant and talks by scientists and activists representing alternative perspectives on the plant. The curators tried to enable other forms of existence and resistance that challenge the coloniality of power and knowledge, while considering how the giant hogweed itself is an agent and a victim of colonialism, as it was introduced, exploited, and demonised by different actors for different purposes.

6 From Post-Soviet Legacy to Botanical Symbol of Russia

The giant hogweed has been dubbed a “symbol of the Putin era stagnation” by the Dozhd’ (‘Rain’) TV Channel (2018), which used to be one of the most prominent news outlets affiliated with the Russian liberal opposition. The description of the video points to the plant as a ‘national symbol’: “As is well known, there are two deeply rooted evils in Russia – corruption and hogweed. And there is absolutely no hope of eradicating either of them, because corruption is not an obstacle, but the basis of the economy, and hogweed is no longer a weed, but a national symbol”.

The giant hogweed is a post-Soviet legacy, and its rapid spread throughout Russia can be seen as a reflection of the nation’s turbulent past and present:

In the case of the post-Soviet subject, the aspiration to surmount the ego’s spatio-temporal limitations, to see the continuation of oneself and one’s desires in all contexts, has its own distinctive

condition. The post-Soviet subject experiences a traumatic split with an the older Soviet symbolic universe; the ruination of a coherent historical narrative; the destruction of the familiar object world and its social context (from the practices of everyday life to industrial labour and now-destroyed factory buildings in which people clocked in and out every day); a discursive deficit associated with the insufficiency of the new languages required for depicting the new reality; the melancholic fixation upon the lost object of desire; the nostalgic attachment to what has gone that then engenders an excess of the past which the consciousness of society is unable to digest. (Kalinin 2019)

In 2019, three years before the war between Russia and Ukraine, the Voznesensky Center in Moscow, a multifunctional cultural institution named by a Soviet poet Voznesensky, featured an exhibition-installation dedicated to “I am Twenty”, the film of a Soviet filmmaker Marlen Khutsiev (a landmark of the soviet cinematograph of the 1960s) and the play “V.E.R.A.” (“F.A.I.T.H.”) by Andrey Rodionov and Ekaterina Troepolskaya (Tsentr Voznesenskogo 2019).

If we adopt an ecocritical approach, focusing on the giant hogweed as a motif in the exhibition, interestingly, we will discover the installation, although emulating scenes from the film, bears a striking resemblance to a modern-day hipster dwelling. This parallel highlights the importance of the giant hogweed’s presence, originally cultivated as fodder during the Khrushchev era, and its eventual ecological destruction and the “traumatic split” of the Post-Soviet era and the Cold War aftermath.

The performance primarily revolved around the heated exchanges between Khrushchev and Voznesensky, separated by a wall of giant hogweed. The play’s climax reenacts their famous confrontation with the creative intelligentsia, ultimately ending inconclusively. Despite the animosity between the characters, the poets’ youthfulness prevails, emphasising their resilience and strength. The narrative explores the legacy of the 1960s, touching upon themes of disillusionment, loss of purpose, and the role of poetry in uniting people.

However, as the performance reveals the devastating ecological impact of the giant hogweed, the tone shifts. Khrushchev, caught amidst the monstrous weeds, listens to discussions on nuclear warheads and the Cuban Missile Crisis, illustrating the juxtaposition of utopian dreams and the looming threat of atomic warfare. The play ultimately suggests that the 1960s cannot teach us resistance, protest, or any valuable lessons, except to never trust ourselves, the authorities, or our times. As foundations of faith inevitably crumble, the pain of disillusionment becomes ever more poignant, and the

population is left on the ruins of empire and its hopes.³

On the other hand, the notion of an existential threat, championed by German philosopher Carl Schmitt whose ideas influenced Vladimir Putin and Russian Neo-Authoritarianism, serves to unite society in the face of adversity in the post-Soviet era, signifying a continuation of Cold War paranoia and a post-apocalyptic vision of Russia's future (Kurylo 2016). In this context, the giant hogweed has become an unmistakable cultural artefact of contemporary Russia, symbolising both the resilience and despair that characterise its environmental and cultural landscapes.

In March 2023, a week before the deadline for submission of the essay, the neural network Midjourney drew a "Soviet" version of the popular TV series "The Last of Us" (*Tinkoff Journal* 2023). The author, Dasha Leizarenko, generated frames from the recent popular series about an epidemic of cordyceps fungus that engulfed humanity. In her version, the action takes place in the USSR in times of "epidemic of hogweed".

With its dystopian setting and epidemic of hogweed, the AI-generated "Soviet" version of "The Last of Us" encapsulates the relationship between state ideology and environmental degradation. The visual representation of a post-apocalyptic USSR overgrown with hogweed speaks to the lasting impact of imperialist policies on both the physical environment and the human psyche. The haunting images of decaying Soviet infrastructure, coupled with the relentless spread of the giant hogweed, serve as a stark reminder of the consequences of unchecked expansionism and militarism or as a bitter aftermath of the Cold war.⁴

7 Conclusion

Media and artistic projects about giant hogweed have focused on documenting the alienation, societal, and ecological issues surrounding the plant. These projects have provided a critical study of past and present nature-culture relations and the political discourse shaping these relations. As a result, public attention to the presence of giant hogweed has increased over time, especially with the development of

³ For more reflections on fetishization of the ruins of Soviet infrastructure, see Bennett 2020.

⁴ In the 2010s, artist Alexei Buldakov employed dried hogweed as an embellishment for VIP art fair dinners. These mutual exchanges, initially aimed at destigmatizing the hogweed, have now found their way to the entrance of an upscale café named "Friends" in the esteemed vicinity of Kutuzovsky Lane. The Russian luxury clothing brand Walk of Shame has unveiled its latest 2021 collection, featuring white dresses adorned with delicate *Heracleum* prints.

large artistic projects and exhibitions in state museums, making it an inseparable component of both the environmental and cultural landscapes of Russia, strongly associated as a country's botanical symbol.

Drawing on the framework provided, this analysis emphasises the need for a critical examination of state ideologies and their potential for destruction, both environmentally and sociopolitically, as we strive to better understand and address the complex interactions between human actions and the natural world. In the context of the giant hogweed, we can view its invasion and spread as a physical manifestation of the Soviet Union's imperial ambitions, expansionist policies, and subsequent decline. The environmental damage caused by the giant hogweed parallels the human and societal cost of imperial projects and military aggression. The invasive plant serves as a potent symbol of the Soviet empire's overreach in the political and cultural landscape of contemporary Russia, its destruction of native ecosystems, and the subsequent destabilisation of local environments, much like the military invasions and colonisation efforts throughout history.

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Phenomenology of Oil in Soviet and Post-Soviet Literature

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Abstract The essay explores the cultural meaning and social significance of oil in Soviet and post-Soviet Russian culture through the analysis of three literary case studies. The analysis shows that, from the anthropocentric optimism of the Soviet era to the awareness of our times about oil as an uncontrollable 'object', oil is a hybrid of nature and culture that holds a significant place in Russian literature. The first story is Boris Pilnyak's *Gorod ветров* (City of Winds, 1928), the second is Isaac Babel's *Neft'* (Petroleum, 1934), and the third is authored by Dmitry Bykov and was published in 2017 with the same title: *Neft'* (Oil).

Keywords Petrofiction. Energy Humanities. Contemporary Russian literature. Boris Pilnyak. Isaac Babel. Dmitry Bykov.

Summary 1 Oil, the Miracle Product of Our Time. – 2 Petroleum as a Cultural Driver: Three Case Studies. – 3 From Living Oil to Loving Oil.



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1 **Oil, the Miracle Product of Our Time**

Oil is the object connected with the ecological and geo-political crisis of our time that, more than any other, shows how 'nature' is not a spontaneous thing for human beings to experience, but something that is built, produced, exploited, and which therefore depends on politics in the broadest sense of the word (Latour 2004, 25-32). It means that we are no longer dealing with simple natural objects, defined and closed in within themselves, 'bald' objects – as the French philosopher and anthropologist Bruno Latour names them – without risk, to which we have been used in accordance to the order based on the separation between nature and society, between subjects and objects. Nowadays, we are increasingly dealing with 'hairy' and 'ruffle' objects, i.e. 'quasi-objects', which can no longer be relegated to the natural world only. They are made up of multiple connections, never completely closed, able to produce unexpected effects, even in the long term, and therefore so much unpredictable and uncontrollable (cf. Latour 1988). Oil can be considered one of these Latourian 'quasi-objects', a kind of 'miracle product' that can turn out to have nefarious consequences (Latour 2004, 25). At the heart of this awareness of the importance of oil for the social world is the recognition that over the course of the current century humanity will need to overcome dependence on oil and make the transition to new energy sources and new ways of living (Wilson, Szeman, Carlson 2017, 3). The looming threat of its disappearance means that it will transform our social world, from people who are at home and comfortable in the 'petrocultures' they have devised for themselves, to people who will have to reshape themselves to fit contexts and landscapes barely imaginable today. This is why the topic of oil continues to gain attention in the arts, humanities and sciences, even if they belong to structures that benefit from the financial profits and political power that come from oil. Within the framework of this petro-conscience, literary fiction, in its various modes, genres, and histories, offers a significant repository for the energy aware scholar to demonstrate how, through successive epochs, this particularly embedded kind of energy creates a predominant culture of being and imagining in the world, organizing and enabling a prevalent mode of living, thinking, moving, dwelling and working.

Since 1929 in his essay "On Form and Subject Matter", Bertolt Brecht identified petroleum's multifaceted effects on social, economic, and political life as an aesthetic and educational challenge: "Petroleum resists the five-act form; today's catastrophes do not progress in a straight line but in cyclical crises" (Brecht 1964, 30). Brecht's observations reflect the importance of understanding the catastrophic effects of modernity in a dialectical, non-linear way, and the difficulty of presenting the industrial oil reality within the framework of traditional aesthetic forms. In literary studies, a seminal statement

on the formal challenge of representing the twentieth century oil experience in cultural production is Amitav Ghosh's article "Petrofictions: The Oil Encounter and the Novel" (1992). In recent years, many scholars, reflecting a new environmental awareness based on the effects of carbon emissions and the possible planet-wide depletion of fossil fuels, have started to consider Ghosh's text as the beginning of a new field of interdisciplinary studies called 'Energy Humanities' (cf., i. e., Friedman 2010, 158; Boyer, Szeman 2014). They call to know oil differently, by turning it into a substance that can absorb and reflect the major crisis conditions of our time (Mathur 2019, 21).

In Russia, the issue of energy resources, in particular oil, has always been a central cultural element, with different values and interpretations depending on the historical period, and the political and social situation. At the beginning of the Soviet era, the matter of energy and its agent was considered an essential topic about the construction of socialism, starting from the State plan for the electrification of Russia, recalling Vladimir Lenin's famous slogan "Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country" (Lenin 1964, 514). In the Stalinist era the largest share of investment in the energy sector went to oil, gas, and coal promoting policies that contributed to a significant environmental degradation (cf. Josephson et al. 2013, 130-1). In the 2000's Russia there are different political discourses that describe the socio-economic reality, and they all refer to Russia's dependence on natural resources. The nationalist and conservative argument laments resource dependence as reducing national economy to oil money and financial speculation, and mourns the more diversified industrial production of the USSR, seen as a lost arcadia (cf. Penzin 2017, 305). The liberal and neo-liberal opinion also laments the dependence on oil affecting all social spheres, but locates the alternative to this situation in a coveted society of knowledge and high development of 'human capital'. The left-wing intellectuals' position questions Russia's peripheral or semi-peripheral capitalism and its historical significance as a country providing natural resources to the world economic system (cf. Bressler 2009, 11-14).¹

Above these positions stands the impact of the shock caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, which changed dramatically the global energy landscape. The resulting rising tensions will extend beyond the short-term and beyond balances and prices. The recent energy crisis will have long-term consequences for the Russian governments' energy policy. Despite different views, the discourse about Russia that emerges in cultural and socio-political con-

¹ The concept of 'periphery', employed by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of culture*, provides an appropriate framework within which to place the post-Soviet problem of periphery. Cf. Bhabha 1994.

text shows that oil plays an important role in the narrative of historical change, including social and cultural shifts and transitions. After the end of the Soviet Union, in particular since the beginning of the 2000s, and up to the start of the 2010's a number of literary texts have appeared in Russia with a common feature: the subject of oil and its role in contemporary Russia.² These texts are the basis for a specifically Russian 'poetics of oil', a corpus of writings, oriented by different artistic traditions and devoted to different literary genres, describing the depths of the earth and the mineral resources as an organic source of literature. In such texts oil is not only regarded as the main energy source of the modern world, but also as the driving force of history and the most important resource for implementing a national political programme. Historian of Russian culture and literary critic Ilya Kalinin in "Petropoetics" (2015), shapes the peculiar 'oil text' in post-Soviet Russian literature beyond the purely economic dimension.³ As also stated by cultural scientist Alexander Etkind in the essay "Petromacho, ili mekhanizmy demodernizacii v resursnom gosudarstve" (Petromacho, or Mechanisms of De-Modernization in a Resource State, 2013) and in the book *Priroda sla. Syr'ë i gosudarstvo* (Nature's Evil: A Cultural History of Natural Resources, 2020), the oil extraction industry in contemporary Russia is not only one of the few sources of income, but has also been turned into an important aspect of the national idea that sees natural wealth as the symbol of a national heritage bequeathed to the present generation by the previous ones (cf. Etkind 2013; Kalinin 2014).

Kalinin's analysis shows that oil is the universal substance of modernity, not only the main source of energy, but also the engine of history itself. He analyses the cultural motive of oil considering contemporary literary products: two novels, Pelevin's *Empire V* (2006) and Ilichevsky's *Pers* (*The Persian*, 2009), and Parshchikov's long poem *Neft'* (*Oil*, 1998). The choice is motivated by the fact that oil in these texts acts as a peculiar synecdoche of the resource as such, result-

2 Among the numerous texts that deal with the theme of oil and its role in contemporary Russia are the novels by Alexander Ilichevsky *Neft'* (*Oil*, 1998), *Soliara* (1998), *Mister Neft'*, *drug* (*Mister Oil, a Friend*, 2008) and *Pers* (*The Persian*, 2009); also, Marina Yudenich's *Neft'* (*Oil*, 2007); Serhiy Zhadan's *Lukoil* (2007); Boris Akunin's *Chernyj gorod* (*The Black City*, 2012); the novels by Viktor Pelevin *Generation P* (1999), *Makedonskaja kritika francuskoj mysli* (*Macedonian Criticism of French Thought*, 2003), *Svjashchennaja kniga oborotnja* (*The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, 2003) and *Empire V* (2006); the Alexey Parshchikov's poem *Neft'* (*Oil*, 1998); the novels by Vladimir Sorokin *Den' oprichnika* (*Day of the Oprichnik*, 2006), *Sakharnyj Kreml'* (*Sugar Kremlin*, 2008) and *Tellurija* (*Telluria*, 2013); Andrei Ostalsky's *Neft': chudovishche i sokrovishche* (*Oil: Monster and Treasure*, 2009); Dmitry Bykov's *ZhD* (2006); Valery Khazin's *Truba* (*Pipe*, 2007); Vasily Golovanov's *Kaspijskja kniga* (*The Caspian Book*, 2014), and others.

3 At the time my contribution goes to press, Palgrave Macmillan publishes an essay by Ilya Kalinin about oil as an object of cultural reflection for Russian national and world history (Kalinin 2023).

ing simultaneously as both the main source of energy employed in the contemporary economy and as its conceptual allegory (Kalinin 2015, 123). Actually, this insight has more remote roots. A Soviet literary tradition can be discerned in which the theme of natural resources is addressed. It can be found, for example, already in Konstantin Paustovsky's novel *Kara-Bugaz* (1932). Written on the basis of the author's personal impressions from his participation in a geological expedition to the eastern coast of the Caspian Sea, the novel features the experience of encountering the mineral wealth of the earth's depths with a young geologist's reflections. One of the protagonist's monologues is significant:

I am a geologist. I came to the conclusion that geological strata concentrate not only monstrous energy of material nature, but also the psychic energy of those savage eras when those strata were created. [...] We have found ways to unleash material energy – oil, coal, shale, ore. It's all very simple. But we had no way to unleash the psychic energy compressed in these strata. (Paustovsky 1981, 429; Author's translation)

The passage sets the origin of this ambivalent mythologem of the depths at the origins of Soviet modernisation. In fact, in the monologue of the young geologist, the obsession to find new energy sources transcends the strict technocratic interest by discovering in the minerals an immense psychic energy. The question of energy and of the extraction technology deals with the transition to a different order, not only political and economic, but also social and anthropological. In the 1930s, when Paustovsky's novel was published, the problem of energy resources had already been technologically tackled as a key problem of the industrialization and of the five-year planning. Also in 1932, the State Scientific Technical Oil Publishing House published a book by the academician Ivan Gubkin, the initiator of the Soviet oil geology, with a title that reminds of a medieval treatise on alchemy: *Uchenie o nefti* (*The Doctrine of Petroleum*). The book not only deals with the Second Five-Year Plan implementation, but is also a kind of utopian anthropological programme, especially when reading in parallel Gubkin's essay and Paustovsky's novel, published in the same year. Oil not only is seen as an energy source valid for political economy, but it also symbolizes the materialisation of fundamental notions about the ontological source of existence (cf. Kalinin 2015, 123).

Given the significance of oil in both Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, the central question for literary studies is how different kinds of texts interpret and represent the phenomenology of oil (Wenzel 2014, 157). Taking into account the three historical epochs mentioned above, there are the three key words summarizing the different attitude. They are, respectively, development, for the beginning of So-

viet era, investment for the Stalinist years, and dependence for the 2000s Russia, after the collapse of the USSR. I will consider, as key examples, three short stories each of which can be related to one of these historical eras: first, Boris Pilnyak's *Gorod vetrov* (The City of Winds, 1928); second, Isaac Babel's *Neft'* (Petroleum, 1934); and, finally, the story authored by Dmitry Bykov and published in 2017 with the same title: *Neft'* (Oil).

2 Petroleum as a Cultural Driver: Three Case Studies

Pilnyak's story *Gorod vetrov* from 1928 is set in Baku, on the shores of the Caspian Sea, particularly in the Chernyj Gorod ('Black City') district, where the Nobel brothers' oil industries had already been established in nineteenth century and, by the century's end, represented more than half of the world's supply (cf. Black 2004, 99). This was the main location for Azerbaijan's oil industry, and the area's name derives from the black smoke and soot of the factories and refineries. The fumes of Baku attracted a young Turkish traveller ever since 1890: when he arrived in the refinery district, he beheld a stark oil scape he called hideous. He wrote in his journal:

Everything is black, the walls, the earth, the air, and the sky. One feels the oil and breathes the vapors, the acid smell seizes you by the throat. You walk among clouds of smoke that obscure the atmosphere. (Black 2004, 100)

Having been declared a Soviet Republic in 1920, Azerbaijan was seen as a development land. Beginning in 1928, Stalin embarked upon a program of hyperindustrialism via the First Five-Year Plan, which in short order transformed the Soviet Union into an industrial superpower (cf. Brain 2012, 228). In the Baku area enormous industrial combines were built, vast new mining operations established, resulting in highly-developed industrial production after only a few years, to the extent that Azerbaijan became the third Republic in the Soviet Union by its capital investment size. Local people and engineers had to deal with a 'burning sea', i.e. oil-drenched waters that were aflame. Pilnyak presents this landscape in *Gorod vetrov*, which is displayed against the background of a city beset by winds and fire, and describes the search of a young Russian man, Pavel Markov, who was brought up in Germany and returns to Baku to trace his roots. Here he finds a wasteland: "Liquid fire, hot water, and oil are pouring out of the ground, and all the surrounding mountains, deserts and water are soaked and stinking" (Pilnyak 1928, 21; Author's translation). I would like to suggest the notion of an 'industrial desert' to describe the Chernyj Gorod region as an area where intense

and unregulated industrial activities poisoned waters, fields and cities.⁴ Pavel notices features of the landscape that recall the ecological effects of oil drilling – a viscous, stagnant, iridescent river; wounded trees; unknown yellow, stiff grass; foul-smelling smoke that irritates his eyes and skin; and thick slimes of oil that coat everything. The landscape is a palimpsest of decades of resource-extraction, where indigenous persons, whose lives and cultures are coterminous with the land, are pressured, squeezed, and displaced in the name of economic growth. Scholar Rob Nixon calls this process ‘slow violence’, one “that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, a violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (Nixon 2011, 2). The connection between environmental issues and resource allocation is direct and explicit: Soviet power did not want to expend valuable resources on expensive programs that would benefit individuals rather than the State, and this misanthropy precluded the financing of programs that would have protected the environment (cf. Brain 2012, 230). Though Pavel makes an enormous but unsuccessful effort to find his father, Pilnyak shows this failure as unimportant: the human being is merely the vehicle and never becomes the purpose for the realization of the superior goals of economic development and the State’s mission of forging a path toward the perfect human society. Important is that Pavel has discovered the city of the wind and fire, elements that are partly tamed by the industrialization made possible by the Soviet system. *Gorod vetrov* offers an example of the Soviet ‘production of nature’ and its violence. Geographer Neil Smith uses the concept of ‘production of nature’ to describe how capitalist commodity relations reconstruct nature for the purposes of accumulation and development (Smith 1984, 56). While the ‘production of nature’ under Soviet State capitalism was governed by a different political ideology than in the Western capitalist world, the USSR was locked into the accumulation regime of global capitalism, subject to competition with North American and Western European States. Like the capitalist world, Soviet development relied on the appropriation of the raw materials of its peripheries, creating imperial tactics continuous with those of the tsarist period (cf. Tlostanova 2014, 2).

Development program demands for large investments, as exemplified by Babel’s *Neft’*, one of the first stories about the socialist construction, bright and idealistic. It describes a country with “fresh blood in its veins”, a country whose “map [...] pinpoints new deposits and pipelines for crude and refined oil” (Babel 2002, 689). The story is told in the form of a letter by Claudia, an exemplary model of a new generation Soviet woman. She works in a geological research

⁴ For the meaning of ‘industrial desert’ cf. Josephson 2007, 1.

centre, planning the trials and the targets to exceed the forecasts in the Five-Year Plan and place the Soviet Union in second position after the United States in the production of oil. She draws up grandiose projects: she increases the geophysical prospecting work of the centre and organises an expedition to Sakhalin Island in search of new oilfields. The story brims over with Claudia's enthusiasm for the sheer vastness of the task to be undertaken, and, at the same time, with her excitement for the birth of the son of Zinaida, a friend and colleague of hers. The baby will have a new outlook on life, an unknown freedom of mobility and speed enabled by the oil-powered automobile: there will be "enough fuel for him, he'll be able to go on drives with young ladies to Yalta, to Batumi, while we've had to make do with the Vorobyovy Hills" (Babel 2002, 692).⁵ The young woman, who grew up in the 1920s, does not care about the fact that "more than a third [of the oil is] from unprospected regions" and that the new plan "from three oil refineries functioning [...] expects to have a hundred and twenty up", despite the not yet mastered complex refinery system (689). The conflict between old scepticism and young fervour plays a key role in conveying the spirit of approaching the issue of resources at the time. Claudia stigmatises Viktor Andreyevich, the senior researcher trained during the Tsarist Empire, who refused to sign up to the unrealistic investment programme of the Five-Year Plan. The enthusiasm of the conquerors of the new world, where Five-Year Plans were real assaults to the 'untrammelled wildernesses', will prevail. Maksim Gorky himself had declared that once the class struggle was won, Soviet humankind would at last be free to engage its final enemy: nature (Westerman 2011, 168). Stalin's "Plan for the Transformation of Nature" imagined that the whole of nature could be transformed into a well-functioning machine. When nature failed to yield to economic plans for growth, it was often portrayed as an 'enemy of the people', just as scientists who dared to criticize ecological degradation were termed 'wreckers' (cf. Josephson et al. 2013, 132). Scientists, planners and officials alike believed they would conquer any obstacle standing in the way of increased production in a modern, rational socialist industry. This confidence, or hubris, contributed to the underestimation of the human and environmental costs of industrial growth.

The third story, *Neft'* by Dmitry Bykov, dark and with a claustrophobic setting, features as main character a young woman whose name is Petroleum (the word *neft'* in Russian is feminine), attesting that energy has supplanted personhood, the social 'face' of the individual human body. The protagonist, Andrei, meets her at the club The

⁵ Vorobyovy Hills is a territory situated in the south-west part of Moscow, a large green space rich in history not far from the city centre.

Periodic Table, referring to Dmitri Mendeleev's periodic table of the chemical elements. It is she who approaches him: ugly, "pathologically lean", with "swampy" green eyes, and thin raven hair. She seems hungry, devouring her fish voraciously, but this is 1998, a tough year for everyone, shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Empire. Equal parts disorienting and thrilling, the early post-Soviet period is one of the most tumultuous times in modern Russian history, defined by the failures of central planning and the political upheavals that gripped the Soviet Union, and also marked by uncertainty and difficulties in people's daily life. The emerging reality was more akin to the Wild West than to anything resembling the democratic transformation that Russian reformers had hoped for. The emergence of a new oligarchic class (the 'new Russians') that successfully gained control over vast industries with little to no benefit to the general population became perhaps the most distinctive feature of post-Soviet Russia.

Andrei is the representative of an abandoned generation bereft of everything among the ruins of a Soviet Union that no longer exists. What amazes him is that when Petroleum looks at him, he "feels something very ancient, deep, earthly", like an obscure and feral natural force dragging him into the depths of history and the earth, in contact with the abyss. Two years later, Petroleum and Andrei get married. Soon he will no longer be Andrei, but Andrei Ivanovich. He quits his job as a computer programmer and moves from his suburban neighbourhood to an exclusive village where the city elite lives. Thanks to Petroleum, he has turned into a 'new Russian', recalling Ryszard Kapuscinski's much cited statement in his *Shah of Shahs* (1980) about the "illusion of a completely changed life" that the "anaesthetizing effect of oil" offers (Kapuscinski 1985, 35). Meanwhile, Petroleum starts an independent life, joins exclusive social circles, even performing in a film. After the age of thirty, she begins to gain weight. Petroleum 'grows', to a hundred kilos and more. Andrei is more and more fascinated by the ancestors' call coming from her: "Myriads of ancient creatures, giant ferns and microscopic insects, dinosaurs and termites, butterflies and human beings, all dead so that, in an ephemeral way, oil could be generated" (Bykov 2017; Author's translation). In this claustrophobic confrontation between a human and a sort of non-human creature, Bykov highlights the implications of the dependency, as much metaphysical as material, on a slippery substance that connects technological future with pre-historical past in ways difficult to conceptualize. But, Kapuscinski writes, "oil is a fairy tale, and, like every fairy tale, is a bit of a lie" (Kapuscinski 1985, 35). Andrei realises that Petroleum "is death". She is getting old, everyone is now avoiding her because of the unpleasant smell of propane, and strange rumours about her 'obsolescence' circulate. The attitude of Andrei himself about Petroleum becomes ambivalent, or rather, multifaceted. After the ineluctable separation,

although deprived of two-thirds of his wealth, Andrei feels happy, at last free from his own dependence on Petroleum. The era of easy oil seems to be over forever. Bykov's story wryly parodies the absurdity of desiring a limited, destructive resource, but doesn't explain how or where to go without it. Something, however, pushes Andrei to return to The Periodic Table, the last legacy of those far-away 1990s in a totally reshaped city. He orders a tequila and waits, like someone at a crossroads who doesn't yet know which path to choose. He has started a new life, but at the same time he is struggling to conform to it and to leave his expensive habits behind. A young woman with metallic-blond hair approaches him from the back of the lounge: "Hello, – she tells him sitting by his side – I am Nickel" (Bykov 2017).

The novel ends on this meeting, but we guess that for Andrei a new story will begin, perhaps a new addiction. Andrei's experience shows the tension between the structure of the individual life, with its aims and its foreboding of death, and the latourian 'quasi-objects' that invade human life, changing its shape.

3 From Living Oil to Loving Oil

Oil is a universal element that flows from one story to another through the ages, representing oil's development and its transformation of space, place and life-style. In all three narrations, characters are fascinated when they come in contact with it: in the first two, for its potential to promote national pride and ambitions of social improvement, in the last one, for its ability to generate wealth and power.

Babel and Pilnyak write at a time, when industrialisation was the main objective of the Soviet system, which considered both natural and social environments as resources. Boris Pilnyak's story is characterised by a combination of the 'social' and the 'natural'. As Marxist literary critic Aleksandr Voronsky remarked, in Pilnyak "man's power over nature is measured by the progressive movement of the human spirit" (Voronsky 1922). The idea that socialism would provide access to unlimited energy sources, seen as a compelling force to reconfigure the socio-political order, is a key subject for the story, not only in the economic sphere, but also in the cultural and moral ones. In Isaac Babel's story oil is the 'miracle product', controllable and relegated to the natural world, fuelling a naive confidence in the future. Claudia's tension arises from the fact that the human, considered as an ontological category, with its expressions, such as friendship and motherhood, is constrained within the infrastructure of the power 'system', which colonizes the 'lifeworld' with its bureaucracy and its economic structure (cf. Habermas 1981, 214).

Dmitri Bykov places his story at end of the Soviet Union to show that energy is replacing personality: Petroleum and Nickel also by

name are associated with the natural resources, revealing that humans like Andrei mingle and are perhaps invaded by other 'agents' (Latour 2004, 24). His dependence on these agents, turned into the humiliating desire of human subjects for non-human subjects, emerges as a dominant theme in the story. The human ends up identifying with the resource, resigned to the fact that environmental destruction is part of the exploitation of raw materials.

The three case studies give particular relevance to the 'oil imaginary' in defining the individual's view, and in shaping broader social and political institutions, such as the State or the nation. The stories highlight that every aspect of 'modern life' assumes access to a large amount of energy, as easy and cheap as possible, but, in fact, "it is not just energy that constitutes a limit but also our present understanding of its social role and significance" (Yaeger et al. 2011, 324). Petroleum, whose extraction Claudia aims to increase, and that Andrei marries in order to achieve wealth without work, is not only an unpleasant addiction or a necessity for the daily life, but also has a link to pleasure and desire. In *Living Oil*, the scholar Stephanie LeMenager approaches the contradictory emotions about the petroleum culture, highlighting how petroleum derived objects mediate the relationship among humans, and with non-human life and things (LeMenager 2014, 6). 'Living oil' is the key definition for this dynamic: a close affection not for the product itself, but rather for all the things that oil makes possible. The shift from resource to source of emotion, from 'living oil' to 'loving oil', is short. The three stories refer to the values of freedom, identity, success, and to the idea that major ideals and social ambitions of humans are mediated and enabled by energy from fossil fuels.

In Pilnyak's Baku, despite the city being one of the largest oil producers and exporters, citizens don't perceive oil as a driver of inequality; they are superfluous and live in resignation and backwardness under the State's control, since oil industry requires relatively few individuals for the oil field, and exploits natural resources almost without the contribution of the population (cf. Etkind 2013, 162). In Bykov's contemporary Russia, marked by disruptive money flows or aspirations for rapid modernisation, oil is the basis of an industrial and financial elite "influencing, rivalling, or even taking over agencies of the Federal State" (Rogers 2015, XIII). Both stories testify to the different deceptions of oil in its transition from a 'miracle-product', sustained by anthropocentric optimism and enthusiasm for human progress, to the awareness of being concerned with the proliferation of an uncertain object, a hybrid of nature and culture. In the contemporary Russia, as in the Soviet era, oil resources are the basis of a geopolitical plan to build an energy superpower, the difference being that in the twenty-first century Russia no longer exports a universal idea such as communism, but rather a commodity, which, having a market price, brings profits that support the economy and

the statement of an apparent stability over social contradictions and conflicts. However, high inflation, imposition of Western sanctions, and supply chain disruption, resulting from the Russia-Ukraine conflict and compounded by the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, also shine a light on the risk of over-reliance on highly concentrated manufacturing and critical mineral resources.

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Economic Rationality and Socio-Technological Fantasy Soviet Oil and its Geochronological Formation (A. Konchalovsky's *The Siberiade*, 1978)

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Abstract The contradictions in the development of the late Soviet oil industrial complex can be described as a gap between the energy concentrated in this natural resource and the entropy generated by it in the context of the planned socialist economy of the 1970s and 1980s. The tension that arose from the gap between the modernisation potential of oil and the conservative economic and socio-political trends – that arose in connection with the growing dependence on resources – produced unexpected effects in the space of Soviet culture. As a result of the discrepancy between the officially recognized significance of oil for the Soviet economy and its real value for the economic mechanisms of the reproduction of Soviet society, the products of cultural processing of oil broke the artistic and ideological norms of Soviet culture and concentrated various metaphysical and mystical, utopian and historiosophical motifs. As one of the most powerful symptoms of these phenomena, we analyse the film by Andron Konchalovsky, *The Siberiade* (1978).

Keywords Oil. Late USSR. Cultural mythology. Socialist epos. Konchalovsky. The Siberiade.

Summary 1 Political Refining of Oil: Between Modernization and Conservation. – 2 Oil: Between Economic Rationality and Symbolic Fetishisation. – 3 *The Siberiade*: the mythology of the 'black goo'. – 4 Socialist Epos: *Chronotope* and *Geochronological Formation*. – 5 Socialist Epos: Poetics of Composition and Dialectic of Myth. – 6 Socialist Epos: the Birth of Oil and the Resurrection of the Dead (In Place of a Conclusion).



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1 Political Refining of Oil: Between Modernization and Conservation

The relationship that links the history of Soviet oil to Soviet history in general is much more than the simple relationship between part and whole. The two are tied by more complex connections that may rather be compared to the link between a machine and the energy that sets it in motion, that ensures its functioning, yet is also capable of destroying it from within. Oil – that from the very beginning of Soviet history assumed the role of one of the most important energy resources for socialist modernisation –, ended up being one of the main factors contributing to economic and social deceleration and stagnation. Furthermore, the crux of the matter is not only and not predominantly a reflection of the shortcomings of Soviet planning or the fundamental inferiority of the planned economy as such. The immediate cause of this negative dialectic, which rotated the link between oil and modernisation by 180 degrees, was the inclusion of oil in a network of political and ideological relations that rendered it hostage to conceptual dogmas concerning the industrial foundations of the socialist economy, which demanded dominance of the production of the means of production (the industries of group A) over the production of end-products, or objects of consumption by the population (the industries of group B).¹

The discovery of extraordinarily rich oil fields in Western Siberia at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s and the subsequent political decision to fundamentally increase the share of exported oil (and gas) made it possible during the 1970s to conceal and camouflage the actual and growing imbalance between these two types of production (Karpov, Gavrilova 2002; Slavkina 2002, 131-75). Oil became more than a simple energy resource. Rather, it was transformed into the fluid matter that made it possible not only for the socialist economy, but also for late Soviet society as a whole to stay afloat – a society that was slowly adapting to modern levels and standards of consumption, even as it was admittedly lagging behind the advanced developed

¹ At issue here is the so-called 'economic law of preferential growth in the production of the means of production'. An attempt at structural transition to grow faster in the manufacturing of products of group B, proposed by the State Planning Commission under the leadership of Nikolai Baibakov (1911-2008) in the process of working out the program for the ninth five-year plan (1971-75), was ultimately rejected by the Politburo, led by L. Brezhnev. This decision led to accelerated development of the Soviet oil complex and, at the same time, to an increasing stagnation of the economy as a whole. In this regard, see Baibakov 1993, 116-38. Baibakov was a key figure both in the history of the Soviet oil industry (its leader from the end of the 1930s to the mid-1950s) and in the history of economic planning (the leader of the State Planning Commission [*Gosplan*] from the mid-1950s to the mid-1980s). Concerning the intensifying complexity of the politics of the Soviet economy from 1965 to 1989, see Mitrokhin 2023.

economies and experiencing conditions of scarcity, and despite the fact that local production of the consumer goods in question was falling further and further behind contemporary standards. While the economies of the First World were making a qualitative technological leap forward, based primarily on the production of consumer goods and services (investment of fixed assets in the creation of new technologies, including information technologies, as well as in human capital),² the socialist economy continued to focus on the parameters of modernisation from the era of the formation of large-scale heavy industry. Paradoxically, it was oil, extracted from the distant depths of geological time, that made it artificially possible to fill the gap between the diverging tectonic plates of, on the one hand, industrial modernity of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and, on the other hand, the high-tech post-industrial form of modernity that took shape at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s.

Powerful flows of late-Soviet oil were used by the Soviet leadership as a means for the abundant lubrication of the increasingly decrepit and cumbersome political and economic machine of late socialism. The presence of hydrocarbon reserves, generated across the far reaches of geological time, made it possible to postpone all structural socio-economic reforms, compensating for technological backwardness, low labour productivity, commodity shortages, inefficient expenditure of funds, and poor coordination of the work of the Soviet economy's administrative apparatus at the expense of wealth accumulated by nature.³ The transformation of the macroeconomic functionality of oil in the Soviet economy can be described as follows. Until the 1960s, Soviet oil produced the energy that fuelled the development of the socialist industrial economy, which was forging ahead in consonance with global economic trends. However, from the late 1960s onwards, the situation was changing at an increasingly rapid pace. Within the framework of these changing coordinates, the structural significance of oil in the Soviet economic system began to change as well. At the level of official economic discourse and the language of political propaganda, oil continued to be an element of the progressive energy dispersive of *modernisation*, accelerated the growth and breakthrough to the communist future. However, at the level of the economic and

² The main elements of this structural transition to post-industrial society have been described in classical works including Bell 1973 and Toffler 1980.

³ The same fundamental issues of socialist economy and management were reflected in the development of the West Siberian oil and gas complex itself, the creation of which allowed the economy to turn a blind eye to these issues for many years. In 1966, a Tyumen journalist and writer Konstantin Lagunov (who in the 1970s would write several novels about the search, discovery, and development of oil) dedicated the majority of an extended essay in an authoritative Soviet periodical, addressing questions of Siberian oil for a readership of many millions, to criticism of the organization of its production (1966, 199-218).

managerial practices of real socialism, it gradually lost its role as an energy resource for modernisation, turning more and more into a 'conservation' lubricant that made it possible for an aging system to continue functioning without recourse to renovation or renewal.

During this period, the cultural logic of late capitalism learnt to refine the materiality of oil – moving within the network of capitalist market relations and (neo)liberal practices and values – into a dynamic abstraction of finance capital,⁴ actualizing its properties such as fluidity and chemical metamorphism, endowing them with magical linkages to wealth and the borderless nature of the globalizing world (Wilson, Carlson, Szeman 2017; Szeman 2019; Coronil 1997). At the same time, in the USSR, extraction of socialist oil continued to be associated with heavy industry, standing on a par with the indicators for quantities of coal mined or steel and iron smelted, taking the shape more of a metonymy for labour than a metaphor for capital. Just as the Soviet petrochemical industry experienced difficulties in complex oil processing (both in relation to the production of light fractions and artificial materials; Slavkina 156-7), requiring imported technologies in this connection, the cultural logic of late socialism saw in oil primarily its physical, material essence, measured in millions of tons,⁵ rather than as mobile streams of split molecules and virtual dollars, entering into multiple socio-technical and chemical-political assemblages and transactions. It was only that portion of Soviet oil that was sold on external capitalist markets that worked to introduce surrogate forms of post-industrial capitalist modernity into industrial socialist everyday life, allowing Soviet consumers to become acquainted with samples of its commercial outputs.

So the peak of socialist oil extraction (in 1975 the USSR ranked first in the world in oil production) was mirrored in the failure of Soviet economic and social development: deep fields of oil, heroically stormed by Soviet oilmen, ensured production growth, making it possible to compensate for the consequences of the USSR's technological lag behind the leading world economies and low level of production of consumer goods (including foodstuffs), which was unable

⁴ See, for instance, Mitchell 2011.

⁵ The only context in which one may speak of a socialist 'dematerialization' of oil relates to progress reports in oil production, in which indications of growth rates functioned in a mode reminiscent of Kant's mathematical sublime. Consider, for instance: "It took Baku a hundred years to reach the level of production of 30 million tons of oil per year. Western Siberia has reached such a level in just the first six years of exploitation of its deposits! It took Tataria fifteen years to bring annual oil production to 100 million tons. Tyumen exceeded the one-hundred-million milestone in just four years of the ninth five-year plan" (Pravda 1975); or: "Azerbaijani oilmen produced their first billion tons over the course of a hundred years, yet it took the oilmen of Tataria only a quarter of a century to do the same. The people of Tyumen have reached such a milestone in just over thirteen years." (Baibakov 1984, 330).

to satisfy domestic demand. The mere possibility for such a compensation (export of resources – import of goods and technologies) led to even greater backwardness, requiring ever greater assaults on ‘the yawning depths’ and on even more inaccessible fields, holding ever richer oil reserves – and so on in a spiral.

2 Oil: Between Economic Rationality and Symbolic Fetishisation

The triumph and tragedy of the oil and gas sector were not only mechanically interconnected, as successive links in a chain in which the accelerated development of extraordinary fields in the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s, along with a decrease in the rate of drilling of new wells with a lower flow rate, led to the premature depletion of the richest areas and a sharp slowdown in production growth by the mid-1980s. The triumph of the oil and gas sector turned out to be a dialectical double of the socialist economy fiasco, not only the object of its conscious pride, but also its unconscious core, making the fulfilment of desires possible (geopolitical influence, military power, growth in everyday consumption), while hiding from the system itself the rather unmentionable and ‘obscene’ – for a project that was modernist in origin – source of their implementation: the exchange of domestic natural resources for products produced by modern foreign industry, including modernized agriculture.

The Soviet leadership constructed its relationship with oil by means of mechanisms strikingly similar to those described by Sigmund Freud in his article “Fetishism” (1927), where he designates them via the concept of ‘disavowal’ (Verleugnung; Freud 1924-50, 198-204). The work of this psychological mechanism, according to Freud, boils down to the following: “I know very well that something is the case, but I perceive the situation and act as though it is not so.” In this sense, the oil and gas *complex* of the Soviet economy may be taken as such not only in the industrial, but also in the psychoanalytic sense – in other words, this was a conglomeration of interconnected, affectively coloured, partly conscious, partly unconscious elements (imperatives, ideas, concepts, fantasies), which determined the general vector of the late Soviet economy’s work. Oil became both a conscious external goal towards which the Communist Party oriented the industry in question,⁶ and an internal condition of the functioning of

⁶ Consider for instance: “The directives of the XXIII Congress of the CPSU [the Congress of 1966 in which it was decided to create a large national economic complex on the territory of Western Siberia on the basis of newly discovered oil and gas fields] are being embodied in a new five-year plan – strictly thought-out, scientifically substanti-

the collective 'psyche' of the entire late Soviet economy.⁷ However, the Party could not officially recognize the structural (almost constitutive for the late Soviet economy) role of oil, which permeated an ever larger sphere of economic and social relations, subjecting this fact to denial (in the Freudian sense of *Verleugnung*) and forcing it into the 'economic unconscious', in which the imaginary removal of contradictions occurred, unsolvable in the framework of actually existing economic practices.⁸

The Party leadership was well aware that the country's economic condition was becoming more and more fundamentally dependent on the volume of oil produced, and demanded more and more millions of tons of this substance from oil workers, which could be exchanged for consumer goods and food that Soviet industry and agriculture could not produce. At the same time, the leadership acted on the basis of a conviction that the socio-economic model that had been created in the USSR was the most progressive and advanced in the world. Soviet society continued to strike out on the path into outer space, denying the fact that its very existence was increasingly dependent on stores of oil hidden deep underground. The ideological 'grammar of the language' spoken by this society was still focused on a 'bright future', while denying that its everyday life (the praxis of its *social 'speech'*) was provided for by reserves derived from the 'dark past', concentrated in hydrocarbon resources.

The greater the dependence of the socialist economy on oil produced in the Soviet geological depths, the more effort was required to deny this fact at the level of the officially articulated economic and political agenda (official recognition would mean the recognition of the existing economic model failure).⁹ The more effort to repress this recognition, the greater the volume of accumulated repressed energy

ated, precisely taking into account the economic potential and the real possibilities of the country and the vital needs of the people" (Lagunov 1966, 197).

⁷ "In Surgut [an old Russian city that since the early 1960s had become one of the centres for the creation of the West Siberian oil and gas complex], everyone talks about oil everywhere: at a wedding feast, at a commemoration, in a club, at school and on the bus" (Lagunov 1966, 202).

⁸ I introduce this notion based on two analytic horizons, one of which is broader and the other narrower. The first is mediated by the concept of 'political unconscious', with the help of which F. Jameson (1981) described a flexible and unstable system of ideological contradictions seeking resolution within a particular text or a specific discourse. The second is related to a more practical perspective of research on the role of the unconscious in economic behaviour and decision-making (Wolozin, Wolozin 2007, 856-64).

⁹ In fact, this dependence of the economy on the extraction of hydrocarbon resources is not something unique and characteristic only for the late Soviet Union. This dependence, its mechanisms and consequences have been well described and metaphorically called "the oil curse" (Ross 2012). My reference to the psychoanalytic scheme *Verleugnung* is intended only to add one more factor to the description of this addiction, related to its denial (more precisely, disavowal), which was particularly characteristic of

in the unconscious of late Soviet culture, breaking out in individual instances as symptoms of this repression. The tension that arose between the exceptional importance attached to oil production in the USSR and the actual role played in the late-Soviet period (the role of an energy resource, leading not to socialist economy modernisation but rather to its stagnation and growing crisis) which the political leadership of the country refused to acknowledge, spilled into the space of culture along with flows of oil. As a consequence of the enormous pressure that drove ideas and conceptions regarding oil out of official political and economic discourse and into the social imaginary, the products of their cultural processing exploded the artistic and ideological norms of official Soviet culture, concentrating various forms of utopian and mystical, historiosophical and metaphysical meanings.

The reaction to these defensive mechanisms of denial was a practically inevitable symbolic fetishisation and poetic mythologization of oil that can be observed not only in post-Soviet (Kalinin 2015, 120-44; 2019, 219-54), but in late Soviet culture as well (Kalinin 2023, 225-47; Litovskaia 2010, 268-78; Snezhko 2022, 50-66). Already in the cultural life of the 1970s and in the first half of the 1980s, one may detect the latent overflow of oil beyond the boundaries assigned to it by material and economic rationality of socialism and the poetics of socialist realism. A shifting core of oil, around which were built the narrative and tropological chains of novels and stories, documentaries and feature films telling of the 'everyday life of Soviet oilmen' became the generator of motifs, transforming and rethinking normative conceptions of industrial socialist transformations and the duel of Soviet society with the natural world that stood in its way. Quite unexpectedly, the oil fields turned out to be a meeting point and site of mutual diffusion between socialist-realist ideological and artistic archetypes (Clark 1981) and traditionalist historical reflection, ecological and ethno-cultural (proto-postcolonial) sensibilities and avant-garde techno-utopianism.

Examples of such a petrocultural synthesis may be found in the following novels: *The Wandering Rose* (*Kochuiushchaia roza*, 1976) and *Scene of Action* (*Mesto deistviia*, 1980) by Alexander Prokhanov; Konstantin Lagunov's *Ordalia* (1970), *The Possessed* (*Oderzhimye*, 1973), *The Bank Is Mighty Steep* (*Bol'no bereg krut*, 1978); Georgy Markov's *Siberia* (1972); Yeremei Aipin's *Waiting for the First Snow* (*V ozhidanii pervogo snega*, 1980), *Khanty, or The Star of Dawn* (*Khanty, ili Zvezda utrennei zari*, 1990); Vladimir Kolykhalov's *Kudrinsky Chronicle* (*Kudrinskaia khronika*, 1982), as well as films: Aleksandr Proshkin's three-part film *Risk Strategy* (*Strategiia riksa*, 1978) and one based on Prokhanov's novel *Scene of Action* by Anatoly Granik (*Mesto deistviia*, 1983).

the late Soviet official discourse and declaratively conducted economic policy, in principle, unable to recognize this dependence on ideological grounds.

This is a far from complete list of comparable examples, yet in the below I will not focus on the books and films just mentioned, but rather on a single case of cultural oil refining: Andron Konchalovsky's film epic *The Siberiade* ('*Sibiriada*', 1978), and the film-novel bearing the same name, authored by Konchalovsky and Valentin Yezhov, published two years earlier (Ezhov, Mikhalkov-Konchalovsky 1976).

3 *The Siberiade: the Mythology of the 'Black Goo'*

The history of this film's creation fits perfectly within the ideological pragmatics of Soviet art. Its point of origin was a direct order for propaganda issued by the Soviet leadership. The director begins the chapter of his memoirs in which he recounts the filming of *The Siberiade* with this episode:

In the summer of 1974, Yermash¹⁰ summoned me and proposed the creation of a film for the upcoming Party congress: about the oil workers of Siberia. (Konchalovsky 1999, 143)

In the director's account, at that moment he was already engaged in preparations for a film adaptation of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, with Gina Lollobrigida in the title role, but decided instead to accept the proposal of the film authorities. The attractions of recent history concerning the discovery of Siberian oil and the pathos of socialist construction outweighed those of Chekhov's melancholic story of early Russian capitalism. This choice also had its own resource pragmatics: the shooting of a film of this kind required both large-scale funding and access to technical capabilities rare for Soviet directors (Kodak film was specially purchased for the project), and most importantly, as the director himself implies in his memories, as a reward for successful completion of the task, he was promised permission to leave for the USA to work in Hollywood (this promise was fulfilled: in 1979 the film received the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival; in 1980 Konchalovsky left for the USA).

Starting with the study of documentary material, connected to recent industrial history, the authors of the 'film-novel' gradually expanded their chronological boundaries and delved deep into historical and natural-philosophical reflection that transformed the search for oil into an occasion to look for something deeper.

¹⁰ Filipp Yermash (1923-2002) was head of the State Committee on Cinema of the Council of Ministers of the USSR (1972-78) and a head of the USSR State Committee on Cinema (1978-86).

In the process of work on the script, and then on the film, we reached a different layer of reflection: concerning the individual and the environment that gave birth to him. Oil, like everything else towards which productive efforts are directed, is not an end in itself. It is only a means to make life on earth better. (Konchalovsky 1999, 143)

In the director's thought on the meaning of oil for human civilization, one can also find the key to the role it plays in the film itself. Oil (its search and discovery) is not so much a theme of the plot or a goal of the film production, as it is a dynamic principle of plot construction, an assembly point for various constellations of motifs, an internal rhyme that organizes the rhythm of the narrative, an energy of narration.

A scene of burning oil escaping from a well appears not only at the end of the five-hour film, but also at its beginning – at a moment when its appearance is as yet completely unmotivated by the plot. In the published version of the literary script ('film-novel'), this compositional rhythmic function of the oil motif is expressed even more clearly through montage insertions of documentary factography in the narrative fabric of the artistic story. Opening and closing each of the six novelettes that organize the plot development of the text, these regular interventions of documentary into fiction establish a system of historical coordinates, thanks to which the history of several generations of inhabitants of a remote Siberian village is synchronized with a chronicle presenting the history of the twentieth century as a history of the struggle for oil – a history rooted in the technologies for oil's discovery, extraction, and processing.¹¹

Reflecting on the difficulty of organizing such voluminous historical and biographical material, demanding movement from one narrative scale to another, the director resorts to the metaphor of a long bridge, speaking of the "calculation of loads" and the "rise and fall of dynamics" (145). However, in this metaphor one can also recognize the material features of energy flow: the movement of oil, either slowly accumulating in underground oil fields, or surging in a fountain to the sky, passing from one state to another, connecting nature and civilization, man and time, past and present, memory and progress. Furthermore, Konchalovsky's film is dedicated to understanding these various connections, whose poetics and significance in fact turned out to be alien to "socialist realist... official ideology" (146). At the same time, the initial order imposed by the state (that is, to make a film

11 In the film itself, this montage, which rhymes the biographical rhythms of characters with the pulse of grand historical time, is organized in more complex fashion, focusing less on oil as a direct object of representation, and rather dissolving it via various rhetorical devices into the tragic experiences of the era and its most recognizable images: mass social movements of the early twentieth century, World War I, the Russian Revolution, Civil War, post-war devastation, industrialization, World War II, and victory over Nazism.

about Siberian oil and oil workers) was not only fulfilled, but overfulfilled – although not in a way that the Soviet leadership could consider as conforming to its wishes. In Konchalovsky's film about Soviet oil, the director transformed the most important energy resource of the socialist economy into a natural-philosophical motif, into a symbolic substance that mediates the relationship between humanity and the cosmos – into an operator and mediator of the above connections.

I must add here that in the 1990s – that is, at the time he wrote his memoirs – Konchalovsky would come to look in retrospect on this film in a manner that sharpened its internal tensions: "It was a story about how technical civilization kills culture, nature and man" (145). Yet such a position not only contradicts other statements about this film found in the director's memoirs, but most importantly, reduces the multi-layered poetic picture of the world created in the film to a schematic political position – one that was embedded in the post-Soviet context of the 1990s (the time when he was writing his memoirs) – and reproducing the anti-Soviet pathos and environmental sensitivity that was characteristic of liberal intellectuals of the time (attitudes that had been acquired following the collapse of the USSR and the preceding Chernobyl accident). The historical irony lies in the fact that a belated attempt to ward off accusations of past ideological conformism and readiness to work to the order of the state led Konchalovsky in the 1990s to reproduction of the ideological mainstream (though already the mainstream of a new liberal-democratic era). In the 1970s, in contrast, he managed to create a film that, although initiated at the order of the Party, was also absolutely transgressive in relation to the ideological and artistic imperatives behind this order. Having answered the task of making a film for the Party congress, faced with the refusal of some of his colleagues who did not want to make an industrial socialist realist film about "black goo" (148), Konchalovsky composed an epic about a metaphysical craving for the transcendent, the horizon of which he discovered not only in heaven, but also underground.

In the quote from Konchalovsky's memoirs ("In the process of work on the script, and then on the film, we reached a different layer of reflection"; 143) an important word occurs: 'layer'. It is indeed possible to identify complex poetic structures in his film epic that organize separate narrative and reflexive layers and intertwine them with each other, just as in consequence of catastrophic natural or man-made events (earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, major accidents or the unforeseen aftermaths of human impacts on the environment), tectonic plates belonging to different geological formations are set in motion and collide with each other. In the narrative and tropological moves that organize the representation of twentieth-century history in Konchalovsky's film, one can find analogues of the various shifts, faults, breaks and cracks in the earth's crust that are studied by geologists. Yet a fundamental difference in this regard is that,

in contrast to the irreversibly linear nature of a catastrophe (ancient Greek καταστροφή – ‘coup, overthrow, death’), which cannot be transcended by any act of mediation (we may only talk about the slow fading of consequences), the natural-philosophical model presented in the film suggests the possibility of reconciliation of opposing principles, removal of oppositions, negation of mutual negation. Oil becomes the main protagonist of this mythological drama, which brings into conflict yet also reconciles nature and civilization. Oil turns out to be the alpha and omega of this socialist Siberian epic, composed by Konchalovsky and Yezhov, the cause of discord and the guiding star leading to a socio-historical and metaphysical harmonization of the world, Helen of Troy and Penelope in one person (more precisely, in one barrel).

4 **Socialist Epos: Chronotope and Geochronological Formation**

The relations of space and time, landscape and history that arise in *The Siberiade* are clearly diffuse in nature – in fact, objectifying at the plot level the continuum that M. Bakhtin designated through the concept of *chronotope*.

We will give the name chronotope [...] to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature [...] In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. (Bakhtin 1981, 85)

However, in contrast to Bakhtin’s concept, according to which the *chronotope* is the basic genre specifier that distinguishes the epic from the novel, and the detective novel from the novel of education, in the case of *The Sibiriade* we have a complex space-time form constituted by a stratification of several chronotopic layers.

In this film, the localization of time and space is both stratified into separate layers and crystallized as a whole, thanks to the operations of a system of compositional rhymes/ideological leitmotifs that stitch together separate chronotopic unities. The plot horizon of *The Siberiade* contains many distinct spatio-temporal continuums: the biographical story of two families (the Solomins and Ustiuzhanins) colliding and intertwining with one other in the cramped place of a distant Siberian village; a historical narrative about the key events of the twentieth century, in which, often falling on different sides of conflicts, representatives of these Siberian clans take part; a production novel about the search for West Siberian oil, in a struggle

with the administrative resistance of Moscow officials and the natural and climatic barriers of the Russian North; a historiosophical reflection on the contradictions of the Russian national character, unfolding against the backdrop of the boundless Siberian land that personifies it;¹² cultural conflict between fidelity and tradition, memory of ancestors and commitment to revolutionary changes, which, however, is also rooted in tradition (not conservative, but revolutionary tradition); ecological collision between organic coexistence with nature and various strategies for its technological transformation; mythological cosmogony, the participants of which are the four original natural elements; the existential drama of the human striving for the beyond; and the utopian mystery of resurrection from the dead. At the same time, the storylines listed above and the *chronotopes* that support them are organized not according to the principle of a nesting doll or a layer cake, but rather according to the dynamic principle of the interaction of various geological formations that I have already mentioned, which can either peacefully build on each other, collide and mix with each other, or mutually metamorphose under the influence of external and internal impulses.

If the interaction of geological formations is regulated by the energy of natural processes, then the interaction of the chronotopic strata I list here is provided by the rhetorical-semantic energy of internal rhymes that set the rhythmic counterpoint of this techno-natural symphony¹³ (both at the formal compositional and at the semantic level). The thesaurus of these rhymes form the following motifs: the *house/village* (in which the characters live from century to century, from which they run away, to which they return in order to transform it); the unfinished *road* through the *taiga* (which is built by one of the characters at the beginning of the film epic and which will subsequently act as the only man-made and at the same time metaphysical vector that directs the microcosm of the *house* to the *outside world*); the *star* that serves as a geodetic (more precisely 'astrodetic') landmark of this *road*; the *river*, thanks to which the real communication of the *village* with the

12 Although in the first episode of the film, which tells about pre-revolutionary events, there are several representatives of the indigenous Siberian people (Khanty) and the theme of colonial oppression is outlined in minimal form, it completely disappears in the course of the subsequent narrative, giving no basis for any conflict between ethnic Russians and local indigenous peoples. The poetics and ideology of socialist realism produced a special type of novel: the Siberian novel, in which Siberia was placed at the core of the Russian/Soviet national character, the universality of which dissolved all ethnic differences. On this, see Slezkine 1994. Konchalovsky's *The Siberiade* reproduces the same attitudes, the roots of which go back to the Russian national Siberian narrative of the nineteenth century.

13 Description of the role of the soundtrack - written for this film by the composer Eduard Artemiev (1937-2022) - in organizing the interaction of these strata, would necessitate a distinct research project.

outside world takes place, it is thanks to the *river* that the biological rhythm of village life enters into dramatic resonances with the social rhythms of history. Of course, all of these cross-cutting motifs, which establish the spatio-temporal coordinate system and create a paradigmatic connection between various plot and *genre layers*, one way or another (metonymically or metaphorically) lead to oil.

The specificity of poetic structures, in which the geological organization of the bowels of the earth turns out to be not only a plot theme or narrative context, but also a compositional principle, a rhetorical mechanism that provides syntagmatic and semantic coherence, allows us to propose the concept of *geochronological formation* (or *geochronoform*), allowing us to focus Bakhtin's concept of a *chronotope* on such texts. Similarly, by combining time and space as a single continuum, this concept specifies it in relation to such geopoetic constellations. Firstly, it considers space not only in the horizontal perspective of planimetry, but also in a three-dimensional geometric perspective, sensitive not only to the surface, but also to the depth (the geological structure of the place/topos). Secondly (and more importantly) this concept describes not a unique combination of two internally unified elements (a certain type of space and a certain type of time), but rather a compound complex that includes various types of space and various types of time. That is – it refers precisely to what is called *formations* in geology – associations of various rocks, that is, heteronomous compositions consisting of many different elements, relating to many different epochs and geotemporal processes.

In the case of *The Sibiade*, we have a *geochronoform* that organizes several fundamentally different types of space (both natural – taiga, swamp, river, road, sky, the bowels of the earth, outer space; and social – a remote village, the capital of the country, the global world of the twentieth century, presented in documentary footage) and several fundamentally different types of time (the geological time of oil formation, the organic cycles of nature, the biological rhythms of generations, the political history of Russia/USSR, the social history of nation-building, the industrial history of the transformation of natural landscapes and the search for West Siberian oil, the existential history of the search for the meaning of human existence, and a techno-magical project to overcome history as such).

5 Socialist Epos: Poetics of Composition and Dialectic of Myth

So how is the network of tectonic faults that permeate the geopoetic structure of *The Siberiade* organized, and how does this structure generate energy that can re-solder the edges of these faults into a single whole? Further, what is the function of oil in the *geochronoform* that can be reconstructed in this geopoetic structure?

Conflict is consistently reproduced at all levels of narrative, as listed in § 4, being a form of production of potential energy necessary to set the plot in motion. However, as we will see, conflict is just as consistently removed when the kinetic energy that arises as a result of the plot movement forms unities that fuse opposing principles into a new whole of a higher dialectical order.

The basic plot formula of the *geochronoform* crystallized in *The Siberiade* is represented by the opposition of two families living in the Siberian village for centuries, professing opposite ethical values for centuries, personifying tradition and rebellion against the existing order of things, the status quo and the principle of movement, rootedness in the native land and longing for the beyond: some try never to leave home, while others build a road oriented to the light of a distant star. At the same time, for centuries, these two families have been joined in a relationship of marital exchange. The biographical trajectories of the heroes of the four parts that make up the epic corpus of *The Siberiade* are mediated by romantic conflicts between the representatives of these two families, forming between them relations of kinship, love and hate, duty and guilt, murder and forgiveness. The mechanism of this ancestral biographical spiral, which has absorbed the lives of several generations, is powered by the energy of an ongoing exchange that simultaneously establishes contrasting social positions and ensures the unity of the social fabric.¹⁴ Oil gradually enters into these relations, complicating their socio-psychological basis with socio-political, economic and technological motivations for the search for oil fields, involving representatives of several generations of these families.

The plot outline of the grander story is constituted by a juxtaposition between two media forms used in the film: documentary footage and the artistic cinematic narrative. The first sets the visual range, referring to a series of dramatic events of the twentieth century; the second is structured through the synchronization of personal collisions with historical events. An additional conflict arises at the level of the texture

¹⁴ This mechanism is well described in the tradition of social theory that reaches from M. Mauss to C. Lévi-Strauss. For one of the most accurate and intelligible descriptions of this tradition, see Collins 1994, 224-34.

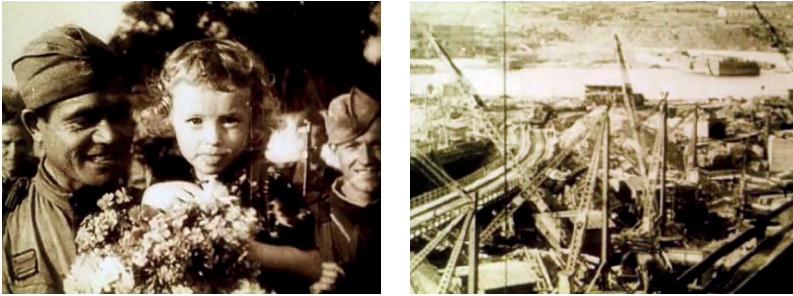


Figure 1a-b All images are frames by Andrei Konchalovsky's *The Siberiade*. 1979. Colour, 275"

of events in the historical drama of the last century: world wars, revolutions, large-scale destruction and victims. However, the initial medial conflict between document and fiction created by the poetic composition of the film is resolved in the course of action through a complex symphonic contrapuntal unity, formed as a result of rhythmic montage that connects the history of the century and the fate of individuals and organizes a film narrative that spans about 60 years. As for the dramatic conflicts of history itself, their resolution, presented in the film, is ensured by the triumph of good over evil, creation over destruction, the inevitable end of the war, the coming of peace, the return of soldiers home [figs 1a-b]. At the same time, the motif of oil works as a pulsating refrain, uniting the fictional base and the documentary frame (framing the beginning and end of each film novel).

In a sense, oil not only thematically combines the two visual streams, but also bonds together two traditionally opposed forms of media: fiction and documentary. As the primary object of the processes of exploration that constitute the fictional base of the film, it acquires a symbolic meaning within the documentary video sequence, appearing in it as the main energy substance of the twentieth century, feeding its destructive and creative impulses. Both the fictional and the documentary lines end with jubilant embraces between people [figs 2a-d].

In the first case, this jubilation follows the discovery of oil and the victory over death, in the second (in the scenario version of the 'film novel') the world-changing energy of oil is articulated in the form of a generalizing political formula that traces oil from its places of underground storage into outer space:

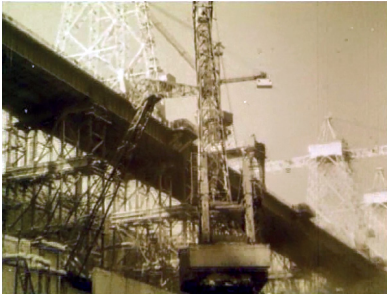
The road to oil is not only the road to death, it is also the road to peace. Fortunately, it all depends on who progresses along this road. And now Soviet and American cosmonauts are already in space. The Apollo-Soyuz space flight. The historical handshake in space. (Ezhov, Mikhalkov-Konchalovsky 1976, 125)



Figures 2a-d

In the film version, scenes of human embraces alternate with scenes of post-war reconstruction and gigantic construction projects of the 1960s and 1970s [figs 3a-c].

The generic conventions of the production novel reproduce its archetypal conflicts: those of the duel of human with nature (the impassable taiga, endless swamps, harsh climate, lack of lines of communication) as well as the clashes of enthusiasts directly involved in industrial praxis (in this case, oil exploration and production) with metropolitan bureaucrats (Clark 1981). The former characters are rooted in the local landscape: their own fate, as well as the fate of the search for oil, which is also 'rooted' in this landscape, depends on interaction with its individual elements (a swamp that hides oil reserves; the taiga through which one needs to build a road; the village on whose territory it was decided to put a drilling rig; the cemetery under which an oil reservoir is found; the river, which is the only channel for the delivery of equipment necessary for drilling). The latter are alienated from this living landscape, either observing it from a helicopter and perceiving it as an empty and neutral space devoid of internal differentiation (and hence meaning), or viewing it from their Moscow offices through the rational optics of geographical maps and economic plans, engineering calculations and resolutions of party congresses (Bolotova 2004, 104-23).



Figures 3a-c

However, although launching a typical socialist-realist conflict characteristic of a production novel (human/nature, enthusiast/bureaucrat), the epic energy of *The Siberiade* produces effects that are transgressive in relation to methods of resolution typical for socialist realism. Conflict is resolved not through the mechanical negation of one term of an opposition (the victory over inert nature and over an equally inert bureaucracy), but through their dialectical mediation. The enthusiasts not only triumph over the bureaucrats, but rather these two social poles of socialist realism coincide in a single figure – the native of the village who heads the regional committee of the Communist Party and manages to reconcile the economic interests of the metropolis and the environmental interests of his native land. Paradoxically, the crux for resolution of these local environmental interests is the discovery of rich oil fields. Otherwise, the future of Western Siberia could be connected with the flooding of vast territories as a result of the construction of a cascade of powerful hydroelectric power plants on the Ob’ river and its tributaries.

The conflict between human and nature is resolved in a similarly atypical manner for socialist realism. Instead of demonstrating the triumph of the human spirit over the inert matter of nature, the energy machine of *The Siberiade*, propelled by hydrocarbons, chooses a third way, defining oil in terms of natural philosophy: as a fruit of the



Figures 4a-b

marriage of human technology and soil organics.¹⁵ Two scenes in the film occupy positions of mutual visual and symbolic symmetry. In the first case, we have a scene of drilling in which the intrusion of the phallic drill into the womb of the earth is eloquently represented as sexual penetration and fertilization. In the second scene, we see the moment of the first ejection of an oil fountain from the bowels of the earth, which is born as a result of previous fertilization and visually rhymes with the phallic vertical of the drill, only this movement is directed not from top to bottom, but from bottom to top [figs 4a-b].

Moreover, the mirror symmetry of these scenes removes the traditional gender hegemony of the masculine over the feminine. Whereas in the case of drilling we observe a brigade of men operating with the brutal rotation of a steel drill entering the damp, passive and formless matter of the earth, in the case of the oil gusher we see matter that has taken shape – the no less brutal subjectivity of the earth itself, expressed in dynamic action, which the oilmen observe in frozen fascination [figs 5a-b].

Thus, this socialist realist industrial tale about the labor exploits of Soviet oil workers flows into a natural-philosophical story about oil as a substance possessed of erotic energy that can fuse into a single mythological whole categories that remained separate in the philosophical apparatus of classical antiquity: form/matter, subject/object, active/passive, male/female.

¹⁵ In part, the role of technology, as it is presented in Konchalovsky's film, may be compared with the philosophy of technology formulated in the late works of Martin Heidegger: "Technology is a mode of revealing. Technology comes to presence [West] in the realm where revealing and unconcealment take place, where ἀλήθεια, truth, happens". Heidegger describes the trajectory of the bifurcation of this concept (technology) that arose in connection with crafts, the arts, and poetry, but gradually deflected in the direction of exploitation of nature with the aid of machines ("extraction of natural energy") forgetting the original aims of technology – "the revelation of the hidden" (Heidegger 1982, 8; transl. by Hertz). For more on this issue, see Kalinin 2022, 233-47.



Figures 5a-b

The transition to a higher level of narrative scale is ensured by the genre definition that Konchalovsky provided for his film. Whereas the literary script published in the journal *New World (Novy Mir)* was designated by its authors as a 'film novel', the director defined the film based upon it as a 'poem' [fig. 6].

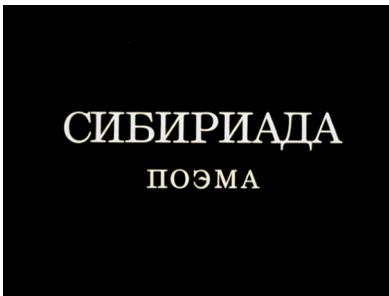


Figure 6

In the Russian literary tradition, such a redefinition of novelistic narrative inevitably must be read as a reference to Nikolai Gogol's authorial gesture in naming his novel *Dead Souls* as a 'poem', thereby emphasizing the translation of everyday material into the language of epic narrative about the national character. But Gogol's creative ambitions extended even farther: behind the everyday details of provincial Russian life, his gaze recognized the mythological horizon separating the profane from the sacred, at the inner border of which he positioned his religious meditation regarding the relationship between God and human. Calling his five-hour film, divided into four parts and six stories, *The Siberiade: A Poem*, Konchalovsky, without a doubt, was guided by precisely this precedent.

The heroes of his 'poem' include not only the inhabitants of the Siberian village, placed in the context of twentieth century history and the history of discovery of West Siberian oil. Its deeper active forces are the elements of ancient cosmogony: Fire, Earth, Air, Water. In addition to the fact that these elements turn out to be signs accompanying individual characters, their properties, which are various combinations of heat and cold, humidity and dryness (which Aristotle singled out as states of the original single primary matter), establish the mythological matrix that determines the space in which categories and layers intertwine with each other: family history, the history of the country and the world, the most important episode in the history of the Soviet oil industry (that is, the discovery of West Siberian oil), the history of the formation of the national character. For Konchalovsky, not only does Aristotelian 'primordial matter' become a dynamic combination of natural elements, but so too does the 'maternal principle', the 'motherland', the image of which is Siberia (presented in this context not so much as a metonymy, but as a metaphor for Russia),¹⁶ and the plot of her 'incarnation' – *The Siberiade*. This new national socialist epic immerses the history of the formation of the *Volksgeist* in this 'black goo', which turns out to be nothing but the primordial matter of ancient natural philosophy itself.

According to Andrey Rogachevsky's precise observation:

The mythologized substance of oil becomes a synthetic derivative of all the elements, simultaneously flowing like water, lying in the depths of the earth, constituting a material emanation of fire, and accompanied by associated gasses. (Rogachevsky 2012, 328)

More precisely, one can even say that oil is not so much a product of the synthesis of all the elements, but rather a kind of magical operator that carries out their mutual transitions, a principle that sets nature in motion. The first symptoms of the manifestation of oil in the space of *The Siberiade* are linked with natural emissions of associated gasses occurring in the swamp, which has long been a sacred place of taboo according to the local knowledge of the autochthonous population (Khanty). One sign of its sacred, anomalous character is precisely the fact that in this place there are no normative natural boundaries separating one element/state from another:

Water itself burns! And the swamp, you know what! Without end, without limit, and with no bottom either! And everything is on fire! At night, there are even flashes in the sky! (Ezhov, Mikhalkov-Konchalovsky 1976, 20; transl. by the Author)

16 About Siberia as an 'other Russia' or the 'Other of Russia' see Diment, Slezkine 1993.

Fire and Water penetrate one other, while flashes in the Air (in the sky) reflect processes whose source lies deep in the bowels of the Earth. At the same time, oil is located in the center of these horizontal and vertical movements of matter, constituting their initiating internal force.

The socialist cosmogony staged by Konchalovsky, who placed the substance of oil at its centre, turns out to be a story about the love and enmity (*philia* and *phobia*, as in the theory of the four elements of Empedocles) of various natural and historical principles. Being attracted to each other and colliding with each other, they produce the very energy that sets matter in motion – both natural and social. Objectified in the image of oil, this energy rhythmically (as in a cycle of the heart working) compresses and decompresses this matter, either throwing the heroes of the ‘poem’ out of their homes, or returning them to their origins, either plunging this matter into the convulsions of revolutions and wars, or smoothing it out in efforts of peaceful labor, either destroying it, or multiplying it (so the representatives of the warring families/elements either kill one another or produce offspring, entering into relationships of interdependence). This work is also carried out by the narrative technique, which creates a *geochronoform* in which the faults between individual *chronotopic layers* and the structures of conflict within them are overcome through various mechanisms of removal, diffusion, and metamorphosis. By the same logic of reconciliation of conflict, the film also presents the technology of the oil industry, that turns out to be a form of salvation, rather than one of the exploitation of nature. The discovery of underground oil reservoirs saves the Siberian land itself from being hidden under the surface of the water – from being flooded as a result of the construction of hydroelectric power plants and the emergence of reservoirs. Being a synthesis of various elements, power derived from oil, within the framework of this socialist version of cosmogony, turns out to be more ‘environmentally friendly’ than hydro power.¹⁷

¹⁷ Of course, purely economic arguments (including the ability to sell oil on foreign markets) influenced the decision in favor of oil, rather than the hydropower vector of development of Western Siberia, but it is interesting that representatives of the oil industry actively appealed to the prospect of the environmental damage to the region that would be caused by construction of power plants using water energy. For information on how the supporters of the ‘hydrocarbon’ strategy for the development of Western Siberia argued with their opponents, who defended the interests of hydropower, resorting to environmentalist arguments, see Baibakov 1984, 254-6. On the course of the struggle against the flooding of the Siberian territories, see: Weiner 1999, 402-529.

6 **Socialist Epos: the Birth of Oil and the Resurrection of the Dead (In Place of a Conclusion)**

In the end, the place of birth, the resting place (cemetery) of all the main characters of this epic narrative and the oil field are located in the same topos. The ancestral source coincides with the natural resource. Oil mediates birth and death, up and down, heaven and subsoil, bringing together the key motifs of *The Siberiade*: a star, a road and the search for something beyond, something that is initially absent in the organic microcosm, forcing representatives of one of the families to leave their native home. The star to which the father of the main protagonist leads the way, as it becomes clear later, points towards the oil field, while the oil derrick, from which a stream of burning oil escapes, looks like a space rocket launching.¹⁸

The road the characters build in order to leave eventually leads them back to the place where the source of the substance they are looking for is found. The destination of the path is found at its starting point. The end returns to the beginning. Oil lies in the very place where generations of ancestors of those who seek it have lived for centuries. The oil field is located directly below the village where they lived. Moreover, one of the places where the release of ignited oil can occur is the cemetery, which has concentrated the organic matter of deceased ancestors and the memory of descendants. Actually, oil turns out to be the substance that is the final link in chemical and symbolic transformations, the movement of which involves both the organic matter of the past and the collective memory of it. Thus, within the *geochronoform* (*geochronological formation*) of *The Siberiade* the biographical time of individual characters and the historical time that links a series of generations and socio-political events are included in the horizon of geological time necessary to complete the processes of oil formation. The genesis of oil, the genesis of the nation, and the genesis of the new socialist society are intertwined in a single genetic chain.

The apotheosis of oil is the compositional transition of the epic story of the birth of a nation to the level of the mystery of the resurrection of the dead. Together with the burning oil, which engulfs the wooden crosses over the graves of the ancestors of those who found and awakened the energy sleeping in the depths, the ancestors themselves rise from these depths [figs 7a-f].

¹⁸ On the connection between oil and space imaginary in Soviet culture see Klöse, Steininger 2020, 142-9.



Figure 7a-f

Given Konchalovsky's screening of such a mythological and religious story, one would expect that this image should be correlated with a disguised critique of the Soviet modernist project. According to this approach, the resurrection of the dead shown in the finale of the film should be read as a reference to the Last Judgment and the end of the world, while the moment of the 'birth of oil' should coincide with the moment of the eschatological end of the world. However, such a reading of this scene also contradicts Christian dogmas, according to which the meaning of the Last Judgment is to separate the sinners from the righteous (whereas in the film we observe the joyful unity of all those who throughout the film were in a state of

mutual antagonism). In contrast, the artistic logic of the entire film, in the course of its deployment, is to purposefully and consistently problematize the mechanical opposition of the conservative adherence to tradition and environmental sensitivity vs. the avant-garde pathos of technological transformation. Russian intellectual history knows only one example of such a utopian synthesis – the *Philosophy of the Common Task* by Nikolai Fedorov (1829-1903),¹⁹ which formed the basis of the teachings of Russian cosmism, despite its absence in the official Soviet cultural canon, and which was important both for the post-revolutionary culture of 1910-1920s and for the late Soviet culture of the 1960-1970s.²⁰

Initiated as an ordinary propaganda story about the exploits of Soviet oilmen, the mythological cosmogony of *The Siberiade* ends with a final synthesis of biography and history, individual and collective, nature and technology, the organic and the social, past and future. The potential of this radical salvific synthesis was condensed in the very energy resource on which the economy of late socialism and the reproduction of late Soviet society increasingly depended.

¹⁹ About N. Fedorov, his teachings and his influence on Russian culture, see Hagemester 1989.

²⁰ For a detailed analysis of this ending, substantiating its connection with the ideas of N. Fedorov and his followers, see Kalinin 2023, 240-7.

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The Gulf of Finland as an Unknown Waterscape that Needs to Be Tamed Perceptions, Imaginaries and Knowledge in Imperial St. Petersburg

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Abstract The paper summarizes the study of St. Petersburg as a centre of multifaceted control and management of the adjacent lagoonscape through the perspective of knowledge as a social construct. We argue that the dwellers of the Russian capital knew their surrounding environment in a variety of ways. We can distinguish knowledge based on perception, imagination, and observation, and these three societal mechanisms of dealing with the nature of the Neva inlet, the most eastern part of the Gulf of Finland, shaped the ways of development of St. Petersburg as the centre of complicated network interactions that eventually created the St. Petersburg maritime empire.

Keywords St. Petersburg. The Baltic Sea. Neva Bay. Environmental knowledge. Littoral society.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Perception, Imagination, and Observation: Knowing the Unknown. – 3 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

St. Petersburg appeared as a floating or amphibious city to a large extent shaped by water. The short but powerful Neva bringing fresh water from the great Lake Ladoga to the most eastern part of the Baltic Sea, was maybe the most powerful non-human actor in its history. The Gulf of Finland performed an important role, too. Being 420 km long, 70-130 km wide, only 39 m deep on average – up to a maximum of 121 m – and with mostly plain shores, the Gulf of Finland is definitely not the most pleasant marine waterscape in the world. Numerous islands and shoals have always made navigation very dangerous in this long and narrow body of water. However, the control over this water body was crucially important for the development of St. Petersburg as the metropolitan centre of the European power.

Yet, the discourse of a ‘maritime empire’ as a dynamic zone of network interactions, linked to a certain marine or oceanic area and conducted from the dominating port city, which differs from territorial states and can be overlapped by other empires, opens the way for an active reconsideration of the history of maritime projects undertaken by early modern and modern powers of Central and Eastern Europe, that are not part of global maritime history (Strootman 2019). In addition to ‘maritime empires’ on a global scale, the notion of maritime regional-scale networked spaces could be productive for historical analysis. We fully solidarised with the statement that water history is always world history (Tvedt, Jakobsson 2006). In the case of St. Petersburg, which was founded as a fortified port in 1703 during the Great Northern War with Sweden, and became a dominant centre of the Eastern Baltic between the eighteenth and the nineteenth century, such an approach might serve as an efficient instrument to introduce the marine environment as a powerful non-human actor, and therefore leaving aside for a while the more traditional political, military and transportation perspectives of Russian maritime history.

Alexander Pushkin, the most known poet of the Imperial period, provided an influential image of the creation of St. Petersburg on the Neva River as a fulfilment of “what Nature did command” (Lednicki 1955, 4). In a previous paper, we argue that nature in this statement meant landscape and geopolitical location, not ‘environment’ (Kraikovski, Lajus 2010). Therefore, the urban environment is a result of technological transformation of nature in order to create a city of this swampy river banks and adapt it to terrible floods, making eventually socio-economic everyday life safe and comfortable (Kraikovski, Lajus 2017). These numerous links between human and non-human worlds quite predictably involve the natural objects of the sea, which becomes a partner for human society. Some aspects between human and non-human interactions in the history of St. Petersburg are relatively well-studied, this is true predominantly for the infra-

structural and technological control of the Neva River and harvesting of the fish population of the Gulf of Finland (Lajus, Kraikovski, Lajus 2013; Lajus et al. 2015). We base our approach on the understanding of knowledge as an instrument of multifaceted control over certain geographic areas. In our understanding of human-nature relations we are following the strong statement by Sverker Sörlin and Paul Warde who discern between nature and environment, emphasizing that:

Nature needs no human, but there is an environment only where humans live and where humans have entered into a self-conscious relationship with their surroundings. (Sörlin, Warde 2009, 2-3)

The environment is always produced by the combination of economic, technological, and cognitive practices, and this process is defined as “environing” (Wormbs, Sörlin 2018).

We consider the problem of knowledge as a key instrument of environing of the surrounding waterscapes (Maughan, Kraikovski, Lajus 2018). We understand here knowledge as a social construct, shaped by complicated collective imaginaries and governed by influential groups of actors. From this perspective, it is a result of the interaction of three societal mechanisms. At first, it is what we may label as perception, which is a result of the direct contact with the lagoon-scape of the Neva inlet in everyday life. This aspect of knowledge is defined by how the people of St. Petersburg as well as the visitors of the city and its vicinities saw, heard, and felt the lagoon. The second aspect of knowledge is imagination, based on how people imagined and described the lagoon. Finally, the third one is the observation that with time could get the features of scientific or engineering research.

These three societal mechanisms shaped both tangible and intangible aspects of dealing with Neva Bay throughout the entire history of St. Petersburg. Environing the Gulf started with fortifying the town of Kronstadt, newly built in a highly strategic position on the island of Kotlin, at the exit of the Neva inlet. The authorities took care of the construction of naval forts, placing lighthouses on the highest points of the coast and nearby islands (Kraikovski, Lajus 2019, 5). Kronstadt was the centre of this waterscape, in the second half of the eighteenth century it was even more often named the Gulf of Kronstadt. Construction of fortifications in Neva Bay initiated the bottom surveys which can be considered one of the first marine geotechnical works in Russia (Ryabchuk et al. 2017, 194). By the middle of the nineteenth century, a large amount of geotechnical data concerning the Neva Bay bottom had been compiled. In addition to the construction of forts and the building of St. Petersburg port, the most intensive transformation of the bottom of the bay was related to the excavation of a ship channel. As St. Petersburg harbour is located in the easternmost part of the Bay, which has very shallow wa-

ters, the dredging of ship channels has been crucially important for navigation. The Marine Channel was finally constructed as the main fairway to St. Petersburg in 1885. All these arrangements shaped the societal experience of dealing with the gulf at all levels.

2 Perception, Imagination, and Observation: Knowing the Unknown

The dwellers of St. Petersburg knew and understood the sea in many ways. They interacted with this water area quite actively through all sorts of water mobility, which was central to the transportation connectivity and logistics of the Baltic metropolis in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Because of the specific waterscape, formed by the large river delta, and the morphology of the city, that from the very beginning, developed on all sides of the river and its tributaries, the dwellers experienced water travellers even if they were not professionally linked to navigation (Kraikovski 2018; 2022a). It is well-known that the dwellers of St. Petersburg perceived the Neva River and the Gulf as the central space of the city, opened for active interaction all year round, and perhaps as ice surface was not less important than as a water stream (Kraikovski 2022b). However, the deep inclusion of Neva Bay into the routine life of the local dwellers made them not very good informers about the specificity of this water area, they probably did not perceive it as a separate part of nature deserving some special consideration. Therefore, we know from the observations of the newcomers how the 'lagoonscape' was perceived from the outside, especially foreigners who visited St. Petersburg and perceived it as an important part of their experience.

The Neva Bay with its absolutely fresh water was often considered as a continuation of the river, not a real sea. For instance, the diary of Elisabeth Justice, an observant English woman, who lived in the Russian capital in the 1730s, provided a detailed account of entrance into the Neva mouth from the sea in the early August of 1734. Being locked in Kronstadt with the strong east wind, she and her travel mates tried to reach St. Petersburg on the roaring boat. Yet, she reported:

Before we got a League, our Sailors all said, it was impossible for them to get her up; and the Captain himself thought the same: So we return'd to the Ship, and took the Lady, who sailed, into the Boat, for she had no Courage enough to attempt going to Petersburg in it: But we were now only to cross the River to a Place called Peterhoff. (Justice 1746, 11-12)

Noticeably, Justice described the area to the East of Kronstadt as a river, apparently excluding this part of the Gulf of Finland from the marine basin. This water area was not a place for the big ship, and the travellers had to use a small vessel with rowers. She highlighted the power of the Neva, which completely dominated the area, and described the experience of dealing with this part of the Gulf from the perspective of the force of the stream. The same perception often had the fishers who used here the same fishing gear as on large rivers and lakes. The most known were seasonal fishers who came from the inner Russian lake area in the upper Volga region with gigantic nets that they stretched across many small tributaries at the mouth of the Neva River taking an enormous amount of migrating fish, including valuable salmon. For instance, in 1889 observers described extremely large nets up to 600-800 m in length that belonged to seasonal fishermen (Zotov 1889).

Popular nineteenth-century French writers Alexandre Dumas père and Théophile Gautier provided more details in their descriptions of St. Petersburg. Both of them have visited the Russian capital in 1858 and published very detailed and informative descriptions of their trips. To a great extent, those books can be considered as a sort of competition, one of the most known in the history of literature related to Russia. These observations are quite untypical for foreign observers, who normally overlook the Gulf in their memoirs about the trips to St. Petersburg. These two travellers, on the opposite, carefully fixed the signs of approaching the city, and therefore, through these texts, we can see the influence of St. Petersburg on the waterscape of the Gulf of Finland.

Both authors came to St. Petersburg from Germany utilizing similar transportation and infrastructure. Alexandre Dumas reported in his book that in late June, i.e. in the season of the white nights on the Baltic Sea, he went on board the steamship *Vladimir*, “the best vessel available on the line between Stettin [nowadays Szczecin in Poland] and St. Petersburg” (Dumas 1993, 147). Théophile Gautier departed in early October from Lübeck onboard the steamship *Neva* that left the pier “precisely on time” (Gautier 1988, 17).

Both writers had some experience in travelling, but this was their first visit to Russia. Therefore, they observed the Baltic Sea eagerly and attentively looking for signs of approaching St. Petersburg. Their observations include the descriptions of heterogeneous elements of infrastructures that were constructed in different historical periods but eventually became basic for the unified vision of the Gulf. Alexandre Dumas provided a relatively detailed description of the entrance into the Gulf of Finland in the evening, about 9 pm, leaving Sweden by the left and passing the island of Ösel (nowadays Saaremaa, Estonia), which he considered to be “already Russia” (Dumas 1993, 162). Later that night he observed Reval (the old name of the city of Tallinn) and

noted that here there was the end of sea as such, and moreover, he argued, the observer could feel the influence of the Neva River throughout the entire Gulf of Finland. Finally very early the next morning, at 5 am, the writer observed the Russian Navy under the command of the Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolaevich (Dumas 1993, 162-8). It is worth noting here, that the name of this member of Romanov dynasty looks quite symbolic in the context of the development of the imperial infrastructure on the banks of the Gulf of Finland. Being the General Admiral of the Russian Navy in the middle of the nineteenth century, the Grand Duke invested a lot of effort into the reconstruction of the existing military premises as well as the construction of the new ones (Kipp 1970). For Théophile Gautier the approach to the Russian capital looked less pleasant. The stormy sea in October was not very friendly, and the writer only could recognize the entrance into the Gulf by the lighthouses he could see in the distance. The coasts and islands seemed to be uninhabited. However, the author was still able to recognize the approach of St. Petersburg by looking the steamship that passed by moving “westwards from Kronstadt” (Gautier 1988, 20-1).

Therefore, both observers, being very different and even antagonistic in their literary styles and worldviews, described the Gulf of Finland as a waterscape shaped by the coastal infrastructure and vessels with the same point of origin, namely St. Petersburg. One could feel the presence of this enormous centre even from afar, more or less immediately after entering the Gulf, if one was thoughtful enough to see the things beyond the water and wind. For both observers, Kronstadt served as the final point of their trip through the Baltic. For them this was actually part of St. Petersburg.

Yet, noticeably, both authors provided almost no details of perception of the further journey from Kronstadt to St. Petersburg, a short but crucially important water route, which shaped the entire life of the St. Petersburg lagoonscape. Instead, they tried to incorporate it into certain images of St. Petersburg as a powerful metropolis, and this observation demonstrates the relevance of imagination as a mechanism of knowledge formation and dissemination. This way of understanding the lagoon was important for Russians. Language came first with the necessity of describing the new environment and human activities related to it. The birth of modern Russian literature, in fact, coincided with the first attempts to describe the maritime experience, and the Neva inlet provided an imaginary seascape for this work. Indeed, Vasilii Trediakovskii wrote the first poetical description of the trip onboard the seagoing vessel probably in 1725 and five years later included this verse in the first novel published in Russian: “A Voyage to the Island of Love”. This ‘song’ contains no direct mention of the Gulf of Finland, but by default relates to the area of Kronstadt as a departure point for the vessel with the Russian traveller directed to Europe onboard (Trediakovskii 1963, 94-5).

Eventually, the Neva inlet received clearly a determined place in the local culture. The figure of Peter the Great quite predictably dominated in these imaginaries for both locals and newcomers. Dumas gave a good example of that. He conceptualized the military infrastructure based on Kronstadt through the powerful image of Peter the Great as Adamastor guarding the Neva River delta (Dumas 1993, 169-74). The image is very deep and expressive, connecting the story of St. Petersburg and the Gulf of Finland to the antique mythology and to the history of the Age of Discovery, when this giant, according to the poem by Camoes, prevented the Europeans from invading into the non-European world of Black Africa (Monteiro 2015, 120-31).

Imagination eventually underpinned the first attempts to include St. Petersburg in the more general context of European water metropolises linked to the adjacent lagoonscapes. The case of comparative vision of St. Petersburg and Venice is a perfect model of this kind. In 1728 the St. Petersburg Gazette *Sankt-Peterburgskie Vedomosti* published a report on the traditional Venetian ceremony of the Dodges' betrothal to the Adriatic Sea, with additional explanation of its historical background and symbolic meaning of it (*Sankt-Petersburgskie vedomosti* 1728). Later Mikhail Lomonosov used this image in his conceptualisation of an intimate connection between the Russian Empress Elisabeth and the Gulf of Finland, which was portrayed as "happy like a Groom on his wedding day" (Kraikovski, Lajus 2019). Therefore, imagination worked to draw parallels between the two lagoonscapes rather early.

Venice, however, was not the only possible parallel offered by the cultural imagination. Due to the hardship to go through all the artificial constructions, the strait near Kronstadt even got an unofficial name of the 'Russian Dardanelles'. Also, in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the locals often used to ironically and disparagingly call the part of the bay east of Kotlin island the 'Marquis Puddle' (*Markizova luzha*), because the sailors of the Baltic fleet were unsatisfied with the policy of the Naval Minister Jean Baptiste marquis de Traversay, who limited the navigational training of the Russian Baltic fleet to this area between 1811-28. In a word, the dynamic cultural life of the dynamic cultural city life offered many ways to conceptualize and describe the adjacent lagooncape.

Eventually, the educated community of St. Petersburg worked to create a picture of the Neva inlet as a natural object using the available instruments of observation and research. Like other experiences of 'knowing' the water area, this part of 'environing' was based on the accumulation of knowledge about the bay, related to water mobility – depth measurement, mapping, and studies of geology and sediments of the bay. Fedor Soymonov included some data on the eastern part of the Gulf of Finland in his well-known pilot instructions of the 1730s (Kraikovski 2022a). The geographic department of the newly

established St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences began its work with the exploration of the water surface of the space around Kronstadt (Kopelevich 1977, 155-6). The first charts of Neva Bay were printed in 1742. The most complete was a hydrographical survey, finished by 1859; its result was the basis for the majority of the maps and bathymetric charts issued between 1860 and 1911 (Ryabchuk et al. 2017, 194). Sea depth measurements from the Neva mouth to Kronshtadt were organized on almost a yearly basis.

The threat of floods became quite early a trigger for the Neva inlet research, as well. As early as the 1730s the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences considered the problem of sea floods as one of the most important for the general development of natural knowledge (Kopelevich 1977, 176). Yet, for St. Petersburg this knowledge was far from pure theories. However, the first scientific research on the nature and peculiarities of the Neva floods was published by the Academician Kraft only in 1777 in French, and almost 20 years later it was translated and published in Russian (Kraft 1795, 109). The catastrophic flood of 1824 gave a new start to both theoretical consideration on the nature of St. Petersburg' main natural risk, and practical designs to secure the city.. The project of a protection dam across the Gulf of Finland that had to prevent destructive floods seems to be a rather special case. Captain Charles Colville Frankland, an informed British observer in the 1830s described his stay in St. Petersburg in 1830 and 1831, e.g. 6 years after the famous flood of 1824, the highest one in the history of the city. The impression of this enormous tragedy was still strong and the inquisitive Englishman approached General Pierre Dominique Bazaine in order to see his project of the protection dam. In the evening of April 5 (Old Style) 1831 he got this opportunity, and the author provided useful explanations recorded in Frankland's diary. These notes tell a lot on the vision and understanding of the Gulf in that time.

The general began his notes with the statement that the city of St. Petersburg without a dam was "perfectly at the mercy of the Baltic Sea" (Frankland 1832, 109-10). However, he argued that the dam would provide numerous advantages for the maritime, commercial, and everyday life of the city. Indeed, the city would get protection from the marine water invasion causing floods. The Neva and the area inside the dam would become 4 ft. deeper, opening new opportunities for shipping. This would result in the inflow of freshwater into the canals, the development of a shipbuilding area on the western edge of the Vasilievskii Island - the biggest one in the Neva delta -, better conditions for the launching of the Imperial men of war, and better protection from the possible aggressors from the sea. Therefore, 5000 workers for five years could completely transform the Neva delta at an expense of 20 million rubles (Frankland 1832, 109-10). Just to compare - the railroad between Moscow and St. Petersburg in the 1840s required eight and a half years, about

50 to 60 thousand workers and almost 67 million rubles (Kraskovskiy, Uzdin 1994, 58).

This report revealed many important details on the perception of the environment of the Gulf of Finland that existed among the St. Petersburg technological experts at that time. General Bazaine, according to the document, considered the plan he prepared as a purely technical project, and the nature was portrayed as an object of transformation conducted by the well-prepared engineer. He apparently did not take into consideration the inevitable problems that the city and the settlements in the coastal zones would face if the normal level of water would raise to more than a meter. This level of understanding of interconnections between the environment and technology was at that time the thing of the future. We might consider that he had seen the city as an artificial place that could be transformed according to technical needs. The big technological projects that included the completion of artificial fairways for the seagoing ships as well as the construction of the dam in order to protect the city from the destructive floods, were completed in the late nineteenth and twentieth century.

The biota of Neva Bay, especially migratory fish like salmon and smelt, being quite actively involved in the everyday life of the St. Petersburg dwellers through practices of harvesting and consumption (Kraikovski, Lajus 2017), became object of scientific research relatively late. Yet some observations are instrumental in drawing a link between the administrative efforts of the eighteenth century, directed towards the modernization of consumption habits in the capital, and the long-term development of knowledge about the lagoonscape of St. Petersburg.

Being active in the local market of imported fish and seafood delicacies, like herring, oysters, and lobsters, St. Petersburg dwellers influenced the ecological situation of the vast area far beyond the official possessions of the Romanovs. Furthermore, at a local level culinary authority led to attempts to transform the nature of the Eastern Baltic by introducing oysters to make the Gulf of Finland a real European sea, as it is supposed be to support the prestige of the maritime metropolitan area. The oysters were intended to be transplanted to the bay near Kronstadt. This project, which started in 1747 after the order of Empress Elisabeth, was completely unsuccessful, but the very problem of the possibility of breeding oysters in the waters of the Gulf became a trigger for further consideration (Kraikovski 2018b). The impossibility of breeding oysters in Neva Bay as well as in the Baltic Sea in general, due to its extremely low salinity, was explained by leading imperial zoologist Karl Ernst von Baer in 1862. By that time he already learned a lot about fish and fisheries of the area beginning since his expedition along the southern shores of the Gulf of Finland (Lajus, Ojaveer, Tammiksaar 2007).

Scientists have expressed an interest in the fishes and fisheries of the vicinities of St. Petersburg, including Neva Bay, since the second

half of the nineteenth century. Among them there were well-known biologists such as Karl Kessler, Nikolai Danilevsky and Oscar Grimm (Lajus, Kraikovski, Lajus 2013). The first comprehensive fisheries survey in the St. Petersburg region was carried out in 1876-77 by the St. Petersburg Statistical Committee (Kessler 1864, 203). The survey described some of the Gulf of Finland fisheries, including quite significant Baltic herring fisheries that took place further West from Neva Bay and predominantly in the wintertime. In some years herring could come to Neva Bay, but their fisheries were based predominantly on freshwater and migratory species. It is very interesting that in spite of the location of Neva Bay being very close to the city of St. Petersburg, even in the mid-nineteenth century it was perceived as a not fully known waterscape. For instance, Karl Kessler, who was a pupil of Baer and a leading Russian ichthyologist of his time, suggested that he might be very close to a revolutionary discovery in fish biology. He suggested that the European eel, whose spawning area, which we now know to be in the Sea of Caribbean, was a complete mystery at that time, might spawn in the reeds near Kronstadt. On this, Kessler referred to the “local ecological knowledge” (1864, 203), namely the observation of the local fishermen.

3 Conclusion

All the heterogeneous ways of knowing the Neva inlet as one of St. Petersburg’ lagoon are in fact united within two general contexts. First, we deal with the practices of ‘environing’ that form the core of everyday life of what Michael Pearson (2006) defined as a littoral society, that is a society leaving amphibious life. Second, we deal with the interaction between the state authorities and the local urban community in relation to the idea of St. Petersburg’ development as a metropolitan locale, a stronghold of the Russian maritimity and modernity. Indeed, all the aspects of perception, imagination, and observation had to provide or improve opportunities for mobility in the littoral zone, reach a new level of safety and comfort in the littoral zone (including the symbolic capital of considering the city as a ‘reflection’ of successful and famous places, perceived as positive examples for the future), or involve the biota of the littoral zone in the transforming societal system of consumption. The dynamic knowledge of the St. Petersburg lagoon in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, in every particular moment quite different but equally consistent and complicated, represents the rapidly changing approaches to the norms and parameters of interaction between the dwellers of the coastal zone and the nature of the lagoon as a powerful non-human actor.

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The Volga, Mother of All Russian Rivers, Silent Protagonist of Vasilij Grossman's Novel *Stalingrad*

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Abstract In Russian history and culture, the Volga River represents not only a fundamental element of the landscape, but also an important cultural motif, celebrated in numerous folkloric expressions from the very beginnings of the civilisations that arose along its banks and in the territories it crossed. Starting from the end of the eighteenth century, the image of the river also became a literary motif and its presence connotes the poetic and prose writings in the following centuries. The Volga River also flows through Vasilij Grossman's novels and short stories and in particular in the novel *Stalingrad*, its presence is substantial and, above all, is marked by a semantic stratification of remarkable interest. The Volga is here a silent interlocutor of the novel's protagonists and its changing appearance reflects individual and collective instances, against the backdrop of the dramatic Battle of Stalingrad.

Keywords Vasilij Grossman. Stalingrad. Volga. Russian literature. Russian rivers.

Summary 1 Introduction. Rivers in Russian Culture. – 1.1 The Volga River in the Russian Folk-Literary Tradition. – 2 The Volga River in Vasilij Grossman's Novel *Stalingrad*.



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1 Introduction. Rivers in Russian Culture

In Russian literature, as in other national humanistic cultures,¹ riverways are connected with various historical, social and political contexts, and represent, in their variety and multiplicity, powerful symbols; at the same time, they reveal the omnipresent intersection between poetics and ecocriticism.

Whereas the element of water is an archetypal motif in numerous civilisations, in Russian cultural perception it is fully embodied in the image of the river which, over the centuries, has given rise to recurrent, as well as varied, literary representations (Ziolkowski 2020). The cultural semantics of the river is determined by specific features, such as its flow speed, its mobility, its extension, its sinuosity. It thus symbolizes movement, the pathway leading to the Other World and connecting the living to the dead. In folkloric narratives the purifying and life-giving force is attributed to the river water (Agankina et al. 2008).

The five major Russian rivers – Dnepr, Volga, Neva, Don and Angara – thus flow through space, time and cultures, finding expression in the most varied folk-literary, popular and elitist genres, and inspiring devotion and respect in the peoples who inhabit the areas washed by their waters. Over the centuries, literature and art have borne witness to the intense, not infrequently emotional and subjective feeling Russians have for their rivers (Ziolkowski 2020), an object of study in cultural environmental history, which aims at identifying the interdependence between human identities and the forces of nature (Costlow, Rosenholm 2016).

The forerunner of this scientific approach was probably the historian Vasilij Ključevskij, who, in his public lectures in the 1880s, emphasised the close connection between history and the relationship that Russians, over time, established with the rivers of their land. His learned and impassioned, as much as lococentric theses, suggested interesting and complex interrelationships between geography, hydrology and the history of settlements, noting the essential importance of seasonality and climate with their consequences on agricultural productivity and the manifestations of popular religiosity, and finally formulating general deductions derived from psycho-social conjectures (Ključevskij 1987). The river, says Ključevskij, educates the people in order to spread a community spirit, since rivers love order and regularity. Over the centuries, it has taught the Russian population corporate action, passed on to them the habit of reflection and resourcefulness as well as the disposition to welcome foreign peoples to

¹ See, in this regard, Matthewman, Mullen, Patuway 2015; Escobedo De Tapia, Mena Gonzáles 2016; Murphy, Rivero 2018.

observe their customs and interests, and thus exchange experiences and goods. It finally gathered the dispersed peoples, instilling in them the feeling of belonging to the same land and the same community (Ključevskij 1987). Its majestic floods, which occur at punctual intervals, the scholar points out, are unparalleled in the Western European hydrographic system. The Russian river knows how to temporarily transform itself from a modest torrent into a broad and abundant current, how to mark territories unsuitable for human settlements, thus making navigation trade possible and favouring agriculture. The rare floods of Russia's low-flow rivers, the historian concludes, are in no way comparable to the sudden and devastating floods of Western European mountain torrents (Ključevskij 1987).

1.1 The Volga River in the Russian Folk-Literary Tradition

Of all the great Russian rivers, perhaps the most celebrated in folkloric and literary production is the Volga, which represents an important cultural element, marked by the centuries-long layering of elements generated by mythological, poetic and religious production, as well as economic activity (Kusmidinova 2015). While the etymological origin of its name is uncertain,² its identification in the folkloric tradition with a maternal entity, *Volga-matuška* (Mother Volga),³ celebrated in some specific folkloric genres, such as the historical song and the legend, is undoubted.⁴ The attribution of a gender and sometimes a patronymic – a recurring tradition in many cultures – determines the link between nature and *socium*. The most accomplished semantic realisation of the Mother Volga motif is observed in contexts in which it designates the border of one's land, acquires the value of amorous theme, or refers to psychological parallelism with the hero or heroine protagonist of adventures (Stroganov 2017). In such songs, the image of the *Volga-matuška* is varied. In some songs composed in the nineteenth century, at the same time as this motif appears in the *častuški*, non-ritual songs, romances and paremias,

² The current name of the river could be of Slavic origin and derive from the terms *vlag*, *volg* (with the meaning of 'wet'), or of Finno-Ugric origin, thus connected with the name Vologda (with the semantic meaning of 'white', 'bright'). The ancient name of the river, Ra, derives from the Iranian languages and etymologically refers to the term 'dew' (Vasmer 1987, 336-7; Ageeva 1985).

³ An essential bibliographic source for an extensive and comprehensive survey of the subject is Dvoreckova 1937.

⁴ The Mother Volga motif appears in narrative contexts characterised by the presence of the ataman, leader of the fugitive Cossacks, the usual expression of vigorous social protest. Examples of this are the legends inspired by the figures of Stepan Razin and Ermak Timofeevič.

it hinders the union of the two lovers, while in others it makes their rapprochement possible, or constitutes for one of the protagonists, the extreme border of life (Stroganov 2017).

Precisely in the course of the nineteenth century, in the context of the vast and complex phenomenon of nationalism, the valorisation and, at the same time, idealisation of the Volga River and the surrounding lands began to inspire the emerging Russian narrative production,⁵ giving the traditional symbolism of the Mother Volga a new national identity, exalted in artistic and, in particular, pictorial production.⁶ Around the end of the nineteenth century, the national cultural reception of the Volga image changed again. Active economic development led to the need to perfect the complex system of canals, including the outstanding Mariinskij Canal, which began in the city of Rybinsk, at the confluence of the Volga and Šeksna Rivers and ended in Lake Onega, and which in the twentieth century would be extended to form the White Sea-Baltic Sea Canal. The waters of the Volga were thus already contaminated by the fuel of the ships and boats that travelled along it, and in the poetic inspiration is shown to be offended and wrathful.⁷

The representation of the Mother Volga in Soviet culture, therefore, in that period was functional to the campaign of electrification and industrialisation of the country, the tangible outcome of the Bolshevik victory against the wild and untamed force of nature. At the same time, Soviet culture tended to crystallise the iconic status of the Volga River and its denotative peculiarities – vastness, depth, strength, and freedom – as a symbol of the nation. The twentieth century witnessed the mighty work of transformation undergone by the *Volga-matuška* diverted, exploited, imprisoned by mighty dams in order to obtain huge supplies of hydroelectric energy to modernise the country and finally overcome its backwardness, a legacy of the imperial past. However, Soviet poets continued to celebrate the gran-

⁵ In the eighteenth century, the Volga motif also became a literary motif. Indeed, Nikolaj Karamzin composed the lyric *Volga* in 1793, in which the river is defined with the superlative *svjašennejšaja*, ‘holy’, ‘queen of crystal-clear waters’ and ‘mother’ (Karamzin 1966, 118-20).

⁶ In the 1860s, the Peredvižniki painters (The Wanderers) in an attempt to achieve an effective interrelationship between their art and the motherland made the Volga River a favoured subject at the turn of the century. Isaak Levitan, Il’ja Repin and Aleksej Savrasov portrayed the Volga as a backdrop to scenes of everyday life, but in one painting in particular *Večer. Zolotoj Plėš* (Evening. Golden Plyos) the river is the leading actor, conveying to the viewer an impression of boundlessness and spatial immensity (Zeister-Vralsted 2014).

⁷ One example is the poem *Volge* (To the Volga) by Aleksandr Širjavec, published in 1924, in which the poet explicitly refers to the oil slicks on the surface of the river. Širjavec dedicated several lyrical compositions to the *burlaki*, the Volga boatmen, immortalised in Repin’s paintings.

deur, solemnity and symbolic significance of the Volga River: Aleksandr Tvardovskij in the poem *Za dal'ju-dal'* (Beyond the Distance), composed between 1950 and 1960, celebrates the physical grandeur of the river, its immanence in the flow of Russian history, while Velimir Chlebnikov, between 1913 and 1922 and, later, Konstantin Fedin, between the 1920s and the 1970s, inspired by the Volga River, composed several poems and numerous short stories, respectively, to which is added Boris Pil'njak's well-known novel *Volga padaet v Kaspijskoe more* (The Volga Flows into the Caspian Sea). Thus, nature myths persisted in Russian collective memory despite their changing role and the Volga River continued to contribute to the historical ideal of tamed and celebrated nature in the art of Socialist Realism, maintaining its centrality in the dialogue between memory and identity (Zeister-Vralsted 2014). In the history of Russian civilisation, the Volga thus constitutes a multifaceted plurisemantic symbol and reflects all the archetypal cultural paradigms (birth, death, love and freedom) as well as the forms in which they find expression (Kusmidinova 2015) – the word, *slovo*, as poetry, narration and song –, thus assuming in the broad context of collective and individual reception the spatio-temporal connotations of an axial phenomenon.

2 The Volga River in Vasilij Grossman's Novel *Stalingrad*

In Vasilij Grossman's literary and non-fiction production, the Volga River also represents a recurring reference and literary motif.⁸ In the novel *Za pravoe delo* (Stalingrad), in particular, the Volga River identifies an entity precisely characterised and marked by a symbolic and semantic bearing of considerable relevance. Firstly, it is interesting to observe in the long and complex history of the paratext,⁹ that one of the titles proposed by Grossman himself and rejected by Aleksandr Fadeev – General Secretary of the Writers' Union from 1946 to 1954 – was precisely *Na Volge* (On the Volga),¹⁰ clear proof of the

⁸ It appears frequently in the novels *Vsë tečët* (Everything Flows), *Žizn' i sud'ba* (Life and Fate) and in the collection *Iz zapisnykh knižek voennykh let* (A Writer at War).

⁹ In the writer's archive, a sort of chronodiary of the path taken by the manuscript of the novel, *Dnevnik prochoždenija rukopisi romana Za pravoe delo*, has been preserved. It begins with the first entry, 2 August 1949, the day Grossman delivered the manuscript to the editorial office of the journal *Novyj mir*, and ends with the note of 26 October 1954, when the author received official news of the book's publication (Bočarov 1990).

¹⁰ In 1949, having completed the first draft of the novel, the author had published under this title a selection of eleven chapters, ten of which would go into the final version of *Za pravoe delo*, and the eleventh into that of the novel *Žizn' i sud'ba*. The editorial board of the magazine *Novyj mir* rejected the proposal *Na rodnoj vojne* (In the People's War) and on 3 June 1952, Fadeev himself informed the author that the editorial board had accepted the title *Za pravoe delo* (For a Just Cause).

centrality, in the novel, of the role that the river assumes, designating, with an intensely metonymic valence, the place and circumstances of the famous, as atrocious as decisive, Battle of Stalingrad.¹¹

It is, first and foremost, a constituent and therefore denotative element of the Russian landscape, it is its substance and immanent presence even when not visible. Almost at the beginning of the narration, this is the scenario that welcomes the silent dialogue between Mostovskoj and Andreev, two elderly guests at the last animated and convivial dinner, organised by Aleksandra Šapošnikova:

It was a beautiful summer evening. The Volga was barely visible in the twilight, but it made its presence felt everywhere: every street, every little lane, lived and breathed the Volga. All the hills and scope, the orientation of the streets - everything was determined by the river's curves and the steep cliffs of the west bank. And the monuments, the squares and parks, the giant factories, the little old houses on the outskirts, the tall new apartment blocks with blurred reflections of the summer moon in their windows - all had their eyes on the Volga, all were turned toward it. (Grossman 2019, 54; 1954, 40)¹²

At the end of the novel, when Krymov is nearing Stalingrad, where the Nazi air raid is raging, the river reappears, reassuringly bright and placid:

In a narrow gap between dense willow thickets and the far end of the earth wall lay the Volga, bright in the moonlight. (Grossman 2019, 883; 1954, 558)

11 The novel, which constitutes the first part of the diology dedicated to the Battle of Stalingrad, evokes the last, dramatic phase of the Great Patriotic War: from the second, mighty German offensive, in June 1942, with the occupation of the Caucasus oil fields and Stalingrad itself, to the Soviet counter-offensive, with the reunification of the two columns, west of the city and the consequent encirclement of the Nazi troops. In Stalingrad lives Aleksandra Šapošnikova - widow and mother of Dmitrij, arrested and deported to Siberia in 1937 together with his wife Ida - with her grandson Serëža, left alone, who later enlists as a volunteer. Aleksandra also has four daughters: Ljudmila, mother of Tolja, a fighter at the front; Nadja, daughter of her second husband, the physicist Viktor Šturm; Marusja, wife of Stepan Spiridonov, director of the Stalingrad power station and mother of Vera, a nurse; and, finally, Ženja, devoted to art, whose ex-husband, Nikolaj Krymov, political commissioner of the Red Army and a volunteer enlisted man, will lead the exodus of two hundred people from Kiev, eastwards. To the worlds orbiting the Šapošnikov family at various distances - the power station, the hospital and orphanage in Stalingrad, military circles, the Moscow Institute of Physics and the mines of the Donbass - is added the universe of Pëtr Vavilov, a Kolkhotian peasant called up to arms.

12 Here and hereafter the two sources Grossman 2019 and Grossman 1954 indicate the English translation and the Russian original published in volumes respectively.

The Volga, in Grossman's vision, is marked by precise connotations that partly derive from its manifestation, and partly from the cultural imagery of the peoples settled along its banks and in the lands it crosses. Its colour and sensory characteristics correspond, in the perception of the observer, to a composite range of sensations. The old carpenter Poljakov, a volunteer soldier and comrade-in-arms of the young Serëža, likes to fish in his small boat, in the waters of the Volga,

Enjoying the silent excitement of fishing and the magical richness of the water – water that could be cool and sad in the misty silence of dawn, soft and golden as sunflower oil on a moonlight night, or sparkling and boisterous on a day of sun and wind. (Grossman 2019, 469; 1954, 286)

Tolja is struck by the vision of the river that “sparkled like mercury, alive and resilient” (Grossman 2019, 646; 1954, 403). And shortly afterwards, before an enemy air raid,

[The Volga] was full of colour. It turned deep blue, then pink, and then shone like grey silk, as if covered by light, pearly dust. The water gave off a cool evening peace, while the steppe still breathed out heat. (Grossman 2019, 656; 1954, 409)

The river is thus a constant reference even in the stereotypical depictions we find in conventional paintings and yet, at that tragic moment, an essential component of a unity of light and darkness, and horror and wonder. Above all, however, it is the comforting presence for those who have always lived near it, such as Regimental Commissar Koluškin, who at dawn on the day when the 13th Division will face the enemy army, recalls in his speech to the soldiers a moving moment in his past life when his ailing mother had asked him to bring her bed close to the window, so that she could see the Volga. Finally, for the Russian people, it is an historical *topos*, an indelible cornerstone of cultural memory, connected in particular with popular uprisings: the legendary story of Stepan Razin is linked to the Volga. Academician Postoev, crossing the bridge over the Volga by train, hears the notes of a popular song dedicated to the Cossack rebel and, in Krymov's reflections at the end of the novel, to the Great Revolution: the heroes of an era not yet forgotten had marched towards the Volga. But in the novel *Stalingrad*, the Volga River substantiates, above all, the central theme of the war in the dual and conflicting German and Soviet perspective.¹³ The

¹³ Janet M. Hartley observes on this subject: “The river Volga took a symbolic as well as a logistical importance and come to be seen by both sides as a dividing line between

Volga, along with the city of Stalingrad, whose original name was Caricyn,¹⁴ is for the Nazi government and army a goal of conquest. Grossman imagines the thoughts and feelings of exaltation that may have animated General von Paulus as he flew over the burning city on the evening of 21 August. His “slave heart, heart of stone” must have felt all the power of the man who had given him the torch with which the German air force had set fire to the border between east and west, showing the army the way to the Volga and the giant factories of Stalingrad. Then, pointing towards the Volga, the Nazi armoured troops breached the Soviet defences and on 13 September the bloodiest phase of the battle began, with the massive strike by the Luftwaffe and the subsequent occupation of the city, symbolically sealed by the Third Reich flag planted in the Red Square of Stalingrad. And it is, in any case, the Volga River that for the Nazis identifies victory:

The Germans had seen the Volga on maps – an incorporal pale blue vein. And now here it was – the Volga itself, full of life and movement, splashing against the stone embankment, docking lags, rafts, boats and pontoons on her broad breast. And there could be no doubt what this meant: the Volga meant victory. (Grossman 2019, 54; 1954, 40)

The longed-for achievement is then celebrated with a kind of individual baptismal rite performed by the character of Peter Bach:¹⁵

During the night, Bach crept down to the Volga and scooped up some water with his helmet. At dawn when the battalion had consolidated its position and the shooting had quietened, he took the water to the command post and offered it to Preifi (Grossman 2019, 784; 1954, 493)

The ritual then becomes collective: the members of the battalion command and the commander Preifi himself observe five minutes of silence and then drink Volga water mixed with Stalingrad vodka, transforming the symbolic baptismal rite into a true rite of incorpo-

two peoples, two regimes – even two civilizations. To the Germans, the river was the extreme edge of the Third Reich” (Hartley 2021, 273).

14 It is interesting to note that the toponym Caricyn is actually a hydronym of Turkish origin (from the name Sarysu: *sari*, ‘yellow’, and *su*, ‘water’. The element of water is thus a sort of identity symbol that marks the biography of the city, which in 1961, in the context of Chruščev’s destalinisation, will be renamed Volgograd, the city on the Volga River (Pospelov 2002).

15 His surname, Bach, has an interesting semantic meaning, referring to the water motif: Bach, in German, means ‘stream’.

ration. This ceremonial act arouses in the emotional Peter Bach the need to express a new thought:

For a long time [...] I thought that Germany and National Socialism were incompatible. [...] To be honest, I too felt sceptical about Nazi ideas [...]. But now I have reached the Volga! There is more logic in this long march than in books. (Grossman 2019, 789; 1954, 495)

A mirror image of the Volga motif in the Nazi imagination is, in the Russian cultural response, the suffering inflicted on the great river, conquered and desecrated by the enemy's motifs. For the despondent Russians,

The future lay behind a curtain of dust and smoke, hidden by the din of the battle above the Volga. (Grossman 2019, 591; 1954, 368)

For the party secretary of the mine, Motorin, the image of the Soviet soldiers forced onto the bank opposite the one occupied by the Nazis inspires him a simple but heartfelt speech that he addresses to the audience of miners, a living synecdoche encompassing the millions of hard-working Soviets, to instil in them the confidence in the invincibility gained through labour: nothing would prevent the working class from defending their home (Grossman 2019, 639-40; 1954, 399-40). And the poignant beauty of the river takes on the expressive intensity of a tragic hero through Krymov's gaze:

Breathing and shimmering on the Volga lay a field of silver, gently tapering towards the south. The small waves of the boat's wake stream behind the stern, like magic pale blue mirrors. An immense sky, bright and weightless dusted with stars, spread over the river and the broad lands stretching both east and west.

Such a picture – a night sky, the solemn splendour of a great river, mighty hills and plains lit by moon and stars – is usually associated with silence, majestic calm and either stillness or slow smooth movement. But this Russian night over the Volga was far from quiet.

Over the hills of Stalingrad, above the white, moonlit buildings stretching along the Volga tremule the incandescent light of artillery fire. (Grossman 2019, 889; 1954, 562)

The suffering of the great river is rendered in the implicit reference to the asphyxiation and blindness inflicted already by the first bombs dropped by Nazi planes: dense, high clouds of plaster and brick dust rise along the Volga and, as the bombing intensifies, the darkness turns into a sinister light, a harbinger of death:

Black dust swirled over the road. High in the sky hung a shimmering glow – a glow that had now hung over Stalingrad, over the Volga and the surrounding steppe, for several nights. (Grossman 2019, 688; 1954, 429)

If the Volga River identified for the Nazi enemy the extreme border with an elsewhere to be subjugated and incorporated into their territorial and ideological domain, for the Soviets it was different:

The river may have looked like a dividing line, but in reality, it marked a perfect joint, welding together the two halves of the Soviet forces, uniting the firepower of the east bank with the west bank's unflagging courage. The Volga enabled gunners and foot soldiers to cooperate with unusual effectiveness. (Grossman 2019, 862; 1954, 543)

The end of the Red Army's strenuous resistance finds dramatic expression in the words that General Andrej Erëmenko, commander of the Stalingrad front, addresses to the secretary of the regional party committee of the same city, Ivan Prjachin:

What we are defending here, on the Volga, is not an industry. What we are defending here is Russia herself! (Grossman 2019, 439; 1954, 271)

For the inhabitants of the besieged city, the great river becomes the way to salvation, and its crossing a sort of re-edition of the passage of the chosen people – with the relocation of the power station, the hospital, the citizens with the little they manage to take with them, the reinforcements themselves – under the secular and human protection dispensed by the determination and desperate resistance of the Soviet people.

Before and after the war, every war in the history of Russia, the Volga is an immanent and living presence, and consubstantial to the existence of its people, and from its waters comes the saving breath that would seem to herald a fortunate future:

At first there was only the smell of petrol and hot oil, but that soon yielded to a calm, fresh breath of the night. (Grossman 2019, 888; 1954, 561)

In the solemn moment of the already mentioned rite of incorporation performed by Lieutenant Bach, the "Volga's moist breath was the breath of history" (Grossman 2019, 784; 1954, 493).

It is a welcoming riverbed in various moments of the novel: the coolness of its waters restores the tired limbs of the soldiers who, rid

of dust and mud, rediscover a kind of primordial purity; it is silent witness to thoughts, sensations, discoveries, intuitions that for centuries have recognised in it a silent and trusted interlocutor. The fresh wind of the river seems to bring Colonel Pëtr Novikov the thought of Evgenija, which is for him a motive of expectation and hope of future happiness. To Lieutenant Bach, the Volga River conveys the certainty of a simple and definitive solution: the reconciliation of opposites – good and evil, freedom and slavery, morality and immorality – in a pan-Germanic impulse. On the riverbank, Krymov catches himself thinking, at the height of anguish, “Keep going, Nikolay. These may be the last steps fated to take on this earth” (Grossman 2019, 887; 1954, 561). But this tragic thought dissolves into a powerful and superior feeling:

The quiet and exalted world of the Volga night seemed, in some impossible way, to be one with the war. All that was most incompatible come together: wild audacity and martial passion had merged with a sense of peace and resigned sadness. (Grossman 2019, 891; 1954, 564)

Finally, the great Russian river is a metaphor for the flow of individual life. As the Germans head towards the Volga, the director of the Stalingrad hydroelectric power station, Stepan Spiridonov, catches himself thinking “about the course of his life, who he had been and who he had become” (Grossman 2019, 41; 1954, 33). In the character of Čepyžin, an academic, it embodies the strong and simple sentiment that animates and guides an entire existence:

Nikolay Nekrasov evokes just such a feeling in his poem *On the Volga* about the vows he made as a boy, when he first saw a group of barge haulers. (Grossman 2019, 172; 1954, 114)

In commenting on the instant of emotion that the notes of a long-forgotten song arouse in Krymov, the narrator observes:

Only rarely, as if suddenly able to look down from above and glimpse the whole length of the Volga, from the hidden springs of Lake Seliger to the salty delta where it enters the Caspian Sea – only very rarely is a human being able to bring together in their heart all the different parts of their life, the sweet years of childhood, the years of labour, hopes, passions and heartbreak, and the years of old age. (Grossman 2019, 301; 1954, 223)

The numerous occurrences of the Volga hydronym (more than three hundred) make it possible to consider it not merely a motif, but a true

eco-literary theme.¹⁶ Vasilij Grossman seems to anticipate the eco-critical perspective of our time by several decades, emphasising the value of the river's naturalness, manifested in its majesty and its implicit moral teaching. The Volga cannot escape the desecration inflicted on its people by the traitor, but it offers itself as a path to salvation and liberation. It is interesting to note the change in the river's appearance in scenes dominated by the Germanic presence – the Volga is then enveloped in suffocating black smoke, or oppressed by a leaden sky. To the Soviets, instead, it almost always offers itself in its traditional version, as a glittering pathway illuminated by the light of the sun and the moon, because it protects its children, whom it nourishes with its waters, allowing them to draw energy. The hydro-electric power station is not a means of exploiting the river then, but a feeder of activity and life and whom it welcomes into its ideal embrace, allowing them to move between the two banks.

Grossman's Volga is thus an integral part of an ideal, perhaps fairy-tale Anthropocene, in which the giant Soviet factories do not pollute the environment and where the great river seems to take on the appearance of a benevolent creature, a sort of Proppian helper of the hero, called, despite himself, to perform a great feat.

Here, in the fictional reality of *Stalingrad*, the Volga is first of all an element acquired by the consciousness of each individual, to then become a symbol shared by a collectivity before returning to be a single interior experience. The flow of the waters of the great river thus delineates the path of History through the existences of individuals, in a threefold motion that, from the one, flows into the multiple, to return to the one.

¹⁶ The occurrences of the Volga hydronym in the novel *Stalingrad* are, to be precise, three hundred and fifty-four. They were recorded by means of the corpus manager and text analysis software Sketch Engine.

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Environmental Agenda in Russia Since the Beginning of the War

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Abstract The full-scale war in Ukraine, started by Russia in late February 2022, has both direct and indirect environmental and climate impact. The direct impact usually implies destruction of ecosystems and wildlife, chemical pollution, pollution from the use of warfare and infrastructure destruction. Yet, indirect consequences might have a less obvious effect. From the re-shaping of the global energy, metal, food and fertilizers markets to changes in countries' environmental and climate policies and actions, the war in Ukraine provokes change in global and national environmental and climate governance, priorities and policies in Russia and environmental activism in the country.

Keywords Climate Policy. Climate Action. Environmental Policy. Environmental Activism. Climate Activism. War in Ukraine. Russia.

Summary 1 Global Environmental and Climate Effects of the War in Ukraine. – 2 Changes in Russia's Environmental and Climate Agenda. – 3 Environmental Activism in Russia Since the Beginning of the War in Ukraine.



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1 Global Environmental and Climate Effects of the War in Ukraine

In the months following the invasion, it seemed that climate issues globally were becoming less important for the international community and national governments, and less international finance was allocated on climate-related programs. The threat emerged of a slow-down in decarbonization (Brushan 2022).

The current situation, however, demonstrates that such fears were to a certain extent exaggerated. There is increasing talk of the interconnectivity between the war in Ukraine, climate change, issues of energy and food security, the destruction of ecosystems, and a reduction in biodiversity (World Economic Forum 2022).

Some consequences of the war on the climate agenda can already be identified (Davydova 2023).

Firstly, the global energy markets are transforming: many countries have changed their oil and gas suppliers, and are hurriedly building infrastructure for liquefied natural gas, relaunching coal stations, considering extending the lifespan of nuclear power stations (or building new ones), and investing in new fossil fuel projects.

The medium- and long-term trends, meanwhile, remain unchanged: the significance and share of renewable energy sources continue to grow (IEA 2022). Investment in this sector is increasing, as it is its role in the provision of energy security, and technologies are becoming cheaper and more effective.

Secondly, the war is restructuring global food and fertilizer markets. A whole range of countries are planning to expand grain production and the sourcing of raw materials for fertilizer production, which represents a threat to ecosystems and biodiversity (Simonov 2022).

Thirdly, reductions in the supplies of metals from Ukraine, along with partial sanctions and limits on supplies from Russia, are transforming global metallurgy (KU Leuven 2022). Some of the changes impact the extraction of metals required for global decarbonization and the energy transition, including steel, aluminum, lithium, nickel, copper, and rare earth metals.

Many more spheres linked to climate and biodiversity issues are also going through a process of transformation. Russian timber suppliers redirected a lot of export to other markets (primarily to China) due to sanctions, and this had both a consequence in the increased burden on forests in other regions of the world and a consequence in form of less sustainable forestry practices in Russia itself.

2 Changes in Russia's Environmental and Climate Agenda

The war started by Russia also affects Russia's domestic environmental and climate policies, actions, and attitudes.

For many years, elites in Russia have treated environmental and climate issues as somewhat marginal. For them, 'green agenda' was similar to the 'charity' agenda – both issues should have been addressed when the basic demands of socio-economic development, extraction and export of resources, and personal enrichment of the elite groups had been taken care of.

The trend towards the growing importance of 'green' and climate agenda in the world, included in the foreign policy agenda, has gradually become recognized in Russia as well. In 2009, during the United Nation Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen, Dmitry Medvedev, then President of Russia, approved the Climate Doctrine (Climate Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2009).

In September 2019, Russia joins the Paris Agreement. At the same time, the threat of carbon border regulation which would make Russian exports more expensive, was becoming increasingly real due to the new European Green Deal package (and the so-called Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism to be introduced), and it stimulated further debates and actions in Russia in the field of climate legislation and green policy in general. A lot of this remained just the lip service and did not go beyond political statements, declarations and promises.

At the United Nations climate talks, Russian delegates for years claimed too little recognition of the climate role of the Russian forests – and in general, a significant underestimation of Russian ecosystems' role in "saving the world's climate". With the carbon border regulation in sight, these statements intensified.

But the approach to the assessment of Russian natural capital and its use has remained (and remains) extremely instrumental. Often the essence of these statements comes down to the fact that the forests and other ecosystems of the Russian Federation already perform all their functions – so there can be no further demands for Russia towards an ambitious climate policy.

Especially since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Russia has been trying to instrumentalize its 'green' potential as a bargaining chip in international negotiations calling up for building up further dialogue and international cooperation on neutral 'environmental' topics. An example of this are Russia's recent statements at the latest United Nations Climate Conference in Sharm el-Sheikh in November 2022 (Davydova 2022).

In its domestic climate policy, since the start of the war, Russia has remained formally a party to all international climate agreements (including the Paris Agreement), and continues to declare the

importance of the climate agenda in the country and globally. However, the official Russian Federation now sees the main interest and prospects for climate cooperation with the 'non-Western' countries, primarily the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), but also the Gulf countries, and countries of Southeast Asia and Africa (Davydova 2022).

Russia is also trying to instrumentalize neocolonial rhetoric, claiming the importance of building a multipolar world, creating its own, sovereign 'green' and climate agenda, which would not be influenced by the Western countries (Davydova 2023). Another target is to enhance climate and environmental cooperation with countries in the global South, particularly focusing on technology transfer matters. In this regard, Russia is primarily interested in exporting its nuclear technologies and further technologies related to natural resources extraction.

Meanwhile, within the country, additional legislation regarding environment and climate is being developed and adopted. Political statements have emphasized the importance of Environmental Social Governance (ESG), and companies have made commitments to uphold ESG principles.

However, it is difficult to observe significant actions being taken in the field of emission reduction or the financing of climate adaptation programs (Kuzmina 2022). So far, announced climate goals, including those set out in the *Long-Term Low Emissions Development Strategy to 2050*, among them – achieving carbon neutrality by 2060 –, remain only on paper. Overall, Russia's climate goals have always been characterized by international experts as "critically insufficient" (Climate Action Tracker 2022).

Development of an action plan for the implementation of the Long-Term Low Emissions Development Strategy has been pushed back to 2023, and will probably be pushed further. A number of other legislative acts and standards in the field of environmental protection have been shifted in time, canceled or put on pause, business representatives continue to demand the further abolition of environmental requirements in difficult social and economic conditions, access to international 'green' technology and finance in Russia is significantly complicated. Now the country is trying to look at opportunities to access non-Western sources of 'green' financing, including in the Arab world and Southeast Asia.

Among the measures already implemented to soften the environmental legislation there are the postponement of the new requirements to create automatic emissions control systems for the most polluting enterprises, the postponement of the experiment on introducing emission permits for polluting industries, the exemption of enterprises from scheduled environmental inspections, and further easement of environmental standards for vehicles in the country.

In March 2022, the Russian government approved the Plan for Economic Development under Sanctions Pressure (2022), which aimed at adapting the country's economy to sanctions – including the area of environmental protection.

Nature protected areas so far have been hit the hardest – there are a lot of ongoing attempts to ease their protection status to allow infrastructure construction, also without environmental impact assessment.

Such attempts provoke active criticism by the environmental community and civil society – some legislation reforms in the area of natural protection have been stopped or withdrawn, but the attempts continue. The main reason for these changes is the need to build new infrastructure, mainly tourist infrastructure – with sanctions restrictions due to the war in Ukraine, domestic tourism continues to grow, and investors are increasingly interested in developing new construction, also close to nature protected areas.

3 Environmental Activism in Russia Since the Beginning of the War in Ukraine

Before the beginning of the war in Ukraine, environmental activism has been on the rise across various regions in Russia (Davydova 2021). Since then, political restrictions, repression and persecution of any kind of protests have further increased.

In 2022, 177 new cases of pressure on more than 186 environmental activists and 19 organizations in 25 regions of Russia have been recorded. As a result, criminal cases against 16 activists were initiated, 9 of them received sentences (7 received real terms in a colony, 1 a suspended sentence, 1 restriction of freedom). At least 161 administrative cases were initiated against the activists (Russian Socio-Ecological Union 2023).

Throughout 2022, the State put significant pressure on environmental organizations, recognizing them as foreign agents. During 2022, 5 Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) were added to the register of foreign agents, 3 of them have decided to shut down. In March 2023, World Wildlife Fund (WWF)-Russia was recognized as a foreign agent (*The Moscow Times* 2023). In April, the international organization Bellona Foundation, which was previously active in Russia, was designated as an 'undesirable' organization in the country (Bellona Foundation 2023). As a result, any form of cooperation with it the organization can potentially lead to criminal prosecution.

In 2022, Russia revoked the citizenship of Arshak Makichyan, a prominent climate activist associated with Fridays for Future Russia. The decision to strip him of citizenship was reportedly based on

his anti-war stance and public criticism of climate and environmental policies within the country (*The Moscow Times* 2022).

Still, Russian activists continue to engage in environmental protests. According to the Russian Socio-Ecological Union (2023), the main topics for environmental protests in Russia at the moment are the topics of access to environmental information (including civil air quality monitoring systems that continue to appear in many regions of Russia), air and water pollution, parks and 'green' areas in cities and urban areas, as well as waste management, including plans to build incinerator plants across the country and plans to expand improperly working landfills.

At the same time, many environmental and climate activists have made the decision to leave Russia and are currently residing in Georgia, Armenia, Turkey, Germany, Montenegro, the Baltic countries, and other regions worldwide. Despite their physical relocation, they strive to maintain contact with the activists and experts remaining in Russia.

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The Green Practices of Tyumen Residents Traditions, Values and Meanings

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Abstract This article studies the green practices of residents of the largest city in Western Siberia (Tyumen, Russia) and the values and meanings which motivate them to participate in green practices. Via questionnaires the prevalence of green practices among residents is investigated in relation to age and gender of practitioners. Traditional practices emerge as the most common, including cleaning and landscaping the territory, caring for animals and planting greenery. The participation in green practices is revealed to result in a sense of satisfaction and belonging to a supreme cause; to give an opportunity to influence the city environment; to preserve moral values among residents and to create an atmosphere of happiness in the city. Based on these results, we conclude by suggesting ways to scale such green practices.

Keywords Social practices. Green practices. Green initiatives. Green values. Scaling the green practices.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 1.1 Methods. – 1.2 Results. – 2 Discussion. – 3 Conclusion.

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1 Introduction

Environmental degradation, resource scarcity, emission increase and climate change are forcing humanity to reorient social practices to make them eco-friendlier (Steffen et al. 2018). Social practices are a set of activities carried out by the population in a local area to meet the requirements of society. Following E. Giddens, social practices are understood as repetitive sets of actions that form the material basis of social life by means of rules and resources which are reproduced in space and time (Giddens 1984). The supporters of theories of practice believe that social practices are originated due to innovations transforming various elements of these practices (Shove, Pantzar, Watson 2012, 12-13). Links between them are then consolidated and new practices are stabilized and routinized (House 2019). After that, the scaling of practices spreads via new practitioners (Shove, Pantzar, Watson 2012, 451). The greening of social practices requires similar processes. Green innovative initiatives can be supported and scaled by collective and individual actors of green practices. In this article we define green practices as the social practices aimed at harmonizing the relations between people and the natural environment (Zakharova et al. 2021a), for example, minimizing the use of resources and the generation of waste and emissions.

To scale green practices, collective and individual actors can collaborate and support each other (Lamphere, Shefner 2017) but elements of social practices such as skills, infrastructure and meanings can be transformed (Shove, Pantzar, Watson 2012; Shove, Walker 2014). J.A. Lamphere and J. Shefner emphasized that the greening of three American cities was carried out thanks to the efforts of municipalities, businesses, public organizations, activists, and universities including “policymaking, regulation, investment, event organization, and coalition building” (Lamphere, Shefner 2017, 15). However, the scaling of green initiatives involves certain difficulties. For example, the scientists considered the activities of active residents of urban and public organizations to be green grassroots initiatives and noted that usually these initiatives did not have enough resources and support to realize their potential, although they could solve important social problems and change the social practices of local communities (Vita et al. 2020; Antonova 2021; Shabanova 2021; Bushkova-Shiklina, Musikhina 2020). Therefore, it is important to expand green initiatives, on the one hand by increasing quantities of practitioners and territorial coverage (scaling out), on the other hand, by building experiences of grassroots initiatives into managerial solutions at all government levels (scaling up) (Lunenborg, Geuijen, Meijer 2020). Scaling can be carried out by both collective (authorities, NGOs) and individual (practitioners) actors. The interaction between the government and practitioners of green practices is possible on

account of common goals, values, and material interests (Lamphere, Shefner 2017).

In Russia, data on the prevalence of green practices is presented in surveys conducted by various organizations, such as Russian Public Opinion Research Center (RPORC),¹ Public Opinion Foundation,² and Levada Analytical Center (Levada-Center).³ In addition, there are scientific studies of individual practices, for example, separated waste collection (Ermolaeva, Rybakova 2019); reduction of consumption (Zakharova et al. 2022), and factors and conditions for the involvement of Russian population in green practices (Shabanova 2019; 2021). Other scientists are interested in the age characteristics of green practitioners (Antonova 2021; Antonova, Abramova, Polyakova 2020; Bushkova-Shikhina, Musikhina 2020) and gender features of participants (Zakharova et al. 2021b). Researchers have also noted that some green practices have a long historical tradition (Dementieva, Ereemeeva, Sulimov 2016; Kostyaeva, Plyusnina 2018; Zagladina, Arsenova 2019) while other green practices have emerged as a response to the global trend towards sustainability (Kashcheev, Usyk, Vingert 2021; Kiselev, Mayorova, Markin 2021; Har'kova 2018). However, to date there is no study concerning the values and meanings that motivate residents of a large Russian city to participate in green practices.

The current study identifies several key features of green values. Environmental values are socially determined and harmonize the relationship between society and nature (Zakharova et al. 2023b). The scientists note the diversity of green values and subscribe to the stance that these are “the various ways in which individuals, processes and places matter” (O'Neill, Holland, Light 2008, 1). From this perspective, the issues of green practices and green values are closely intertwined; the study of green practices should begin by examining what values underlie these practices. Green values realized through ecological activities are termed relational. Relational values were presented as an attempt to overcome the narrow view of nature only through the prism of instrumental or moral values (Chan, Gould, Pascual 2018). For example, many economic activities (fishing, hunting, gathering) can be driven by instrumental values and a deep commitment to nature (Gladun, Zakharova 2020). Through shared green values, people can unite. Relational values are also key elements of the cultural context through the evaluation of nature's contribution to human life. In this regard, values are historically and spatially conditioned relationships and meanings that connect people with their environment and ecosystems (Klain, Satterfield, Chan 2014).

1 <https://wciom.com>.

2 <https://fom.ru>.

3 <https://www.levada.ru/en/>.

In addition, some researchers consider green values to be the most important factor affecting sustainable behavior (Lazaric et al. 2020). In 2012 the French environmental agency (ADEME) funded a study to find out who green consumers were and what exactly they did (Lazaric et al. 2020). 3005 families took part in the survey. They were asked 85 questions which were connected with the purchase of organic food, the use of environmentally friendly equipment (washing machines), separate waste collection, energy conservation and the use of transport. According to the results of the study, the most important factors influencing sustainable behavior were green values and the closest social sphere (friends, peers, neighbors, colleagues, etc). The green practices can be individual and collective (Balsiger, Lorenzini, Sahakian 2019). Individual practices can be demonstrated by turning off lights or buying energy-saving light bulbs, i.e. sustainable consumption. An example of a collective practice is the recognition of the role of politics and legal regulation in achieving environmental goals and social change as well as activities of non-governmental and environmental organizations.

Our research focuses on the green practices and green values of Tyumen residents. Tyumen is one of the larger towns of the Russian Federation, with a population of 700.000. Residents of the city have a high income and standard of living. City residents enjoy spending time in parks, green spaces and on the waterfront. There are many places for recreation near the city such as beaches and hot springs in summer, and sledging hills in winter. There are several environmental communities in the city as discussed in previous studies (Zakharova et al. 2022; 2023a). Communities that care for stray animals, promote eco-products (e.g. vegetarian products) and organize separate waste collection are the most numerous. Environmental communities regularly organize eco-festivals, where eco-activists talk about opportunities to participate in volunteer organizations, greening everyday life and responsible consumption, as well as showing films, organizing workshops, demonstrating the reuse of things, and playing environmental games. Many residents regularly participate in cleaning and landscaping the territory. Nevertheless, for the last two years the surveys indicate that residents' dissatisfaction with the environmental situation in the city has been growing, which is worsening due to the increased environmental pollution and waste accumulation and increased migration, connected to regional economic growth. According to the quality-of-life rating, Tyumen ranks 14th out of 250 cities,⁴ but according to the environmental well-being index,

⁴ https://www.domofond.ru/statya/polnyy_reyting_250_gorodov_rossii_pokachestvu_zhizni/6764.

Tyumen ranks 29th out of 150 cities.⁵ The city authorities and residents can collaborate in solving environmental problems, however, so far, there is almost no interaction. The main reason of this fact is a lack of knowledge of residents' green practices and the values and meanings which motivate residents to participate in green practices. We have here examined the involvement of residents in green practices, such as vegetarianism/veganism, sustainable consumption, care for stray animals, cleaning and landscaping the territory, planting greenery, separate waste collection, using a reusable cloth bag.

The aim of the article is to identify the resident's green practices and the values and meanings which motivate them. We formulated four research questions:

What kind of green practices are residents engaged in?

What values do residents consider green values?

What does it mean for residents to participate in green practices?

How do you describe yourself when you participate in green practices?

To answer the research questions, we conducted a sociological questionnaire with 635 residents. The results of the study will help to make more effective solutions to reinforce green practices and to involve residents in both new and traditional green practices. In addition, cooperation on environmental issues is an important condition for scaling up and scaling out. It is necessary to study the fundamentals of the interaction between residents.

1.1 Methods

To answer the research questions, we conducted a sociological questionnaire of the residents of Tyumen on participation in green practices harmonizing relationships between society and nature (May 2020-February 2021). Our empirical study is based on a collection of original response-based data. Quota sampling was used to represent the population by gender and age. The sample was 635 persons aged 18 and over. The questionnaire was conducted online using the digital service [surveymonkey.com](https://www.domofond.ru/statya/rejting_ekologicheskogo_blagopoluchiya_v_150_gorodah_rossii/7337).

To answer the first research question – What kind of green practices are residents engaged in? – we asked the respondents this question and gave them eight answer options, based on the analysis of research articles and previous investigations (Zakharova et al. 2022; 2023a). Then an open-ended question was asked to enable respondents to indicate ecological practices that were not on our list and

⁵ https://www.domofond.ru/statya/rejting_ekologicheskogo_blagopoluchiya_v_150_gorodah_rossii/7337.

to understand what kind of practice residents consider as green practice.

To answer the second research question – What values do residents consider green values? – respondents were provided with a list of fifteen values based on J. O'Neill, A. Holland, A. Light (2008) and The Earthscan Reader in Environmental Values (2005). Respondents could choose up to three items.

To answer the third research question – What does it mean for residents to participate in green practices? – we asked the following questions:

What does it mean to you to participate in green practices?

How did you feel when you first became involved with green practices?

What can the participation of residents in green practices affect?

Through these questions we can understand the motives and goals of resident's participation in green practices.

We then asked the fourth research question – How do you describe yourself when you participate in green practices? – to reveal the self-perception of residents as participants in green practices.

We studied the relationship between the answers to these questions and the age of respondents considering the prevalence of historically traditional (routine) practices and new (innovative) practices in Russia. We assumed that older people would be more likely to participate in historically traditional practices, while young people are more likely to participate in green practices that have appeared recently. We examined the relationship between the answers to these questions and the gender of the participants, considering the dependence of eco-friendly behavior on the gender of respondents identified in previous studies (Zakharova et al. 2021b), which have found that females are more inclined to eco-friendly behavior than males; however, how gender affects their understanding of green values and self-perception has not been investigated before. At the last stage, we analyzed and visualized the data obtained to demonstrate the features and differences in the participation in green practices of people of different ages and genders.

1.2 Results

In the first stage of the study, respondents were asked to select the ecological practices in which they participate. 62.5% of residents actively take part in cleaning and landscaping the territory. This is the most common green practice. Almost half of the residents (48 %) care for stray animals. 39% of residents are involved in the planting of greenery. More than a quarter of residents participate in such practices as separating waste, sustainable consumption, using a reusable cloth bag. Fewer residents declared their participation in the zero waste practice.

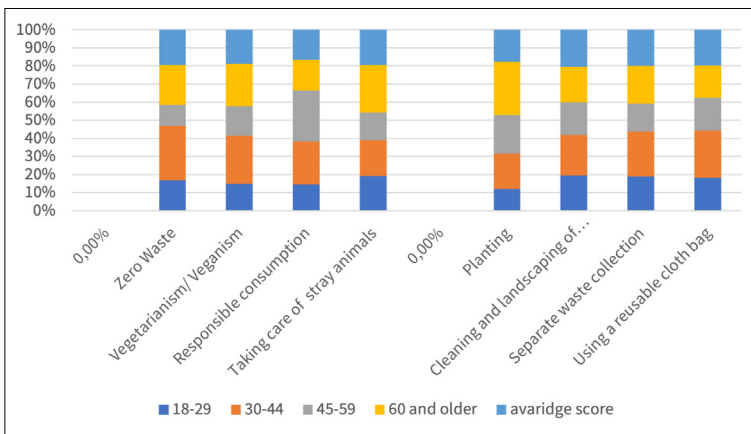


Figure 1 What kind of green practices are residents engaged in? (age distribution)
(Какими зелеными практиками Вы лично занимаетесь?)

People over 60 are more likely to engage in planting greenery; people aged 45 to 60 are more responsible for consumption; people aged 30 to 45 are more likely to separate waste for further processing.

In addition, respondents evaluated to what extent each of the proposed attributes represented green values. The results showed that characteristics like “care”, “responsibility”, “sustainable consumption”, “respect”, “harmony”, “ecosystem” represented green values to the greatest extent. These features were identified as green values by over 80% of residents. According to respondents, characteristics like ‘diversity’ and ‘equality’ represented green values to the least extent [fig. 2].

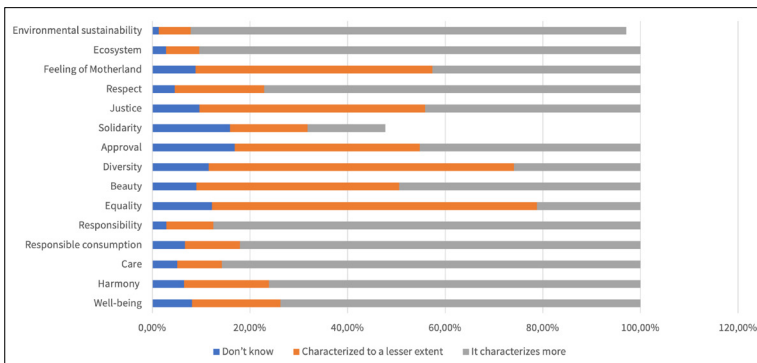


Figure 2 What values do residents consider green values? (general sample)
(Какие из перечисленных определений характеризуют зеленые ценности?)

The gender analysis indicated that there is a significant difference in how people perceive green values between males and females. For example, 86.5% of females and 76% of males indicated that the feature “harmony” represents one of their top three green values; 93.42% of females and 85.71% of males prioritised “care” as a green value; 90.43% of females and 83.97% of males identified “responsibility” as green value. It is interesting to observe that 64.84% of females believed that beauty was the most significant aspect of green values, while 53.85% of males believed that beauty was the least significant aspect of green values. In addition, the majority of the males surveyed pointed out “solidarity” as less characteristic of green values, while the majority of females reported “solidarity” as more characteristic of green values [fig. 3]. Similarly, almost half of the males believed “feeling of motherland” as characterizing green values to a lesser extent, while half of the females named “feeling of motherland” as characterizing green values to a greater extent. The assessments of males and females for other features do not show any significant difference.

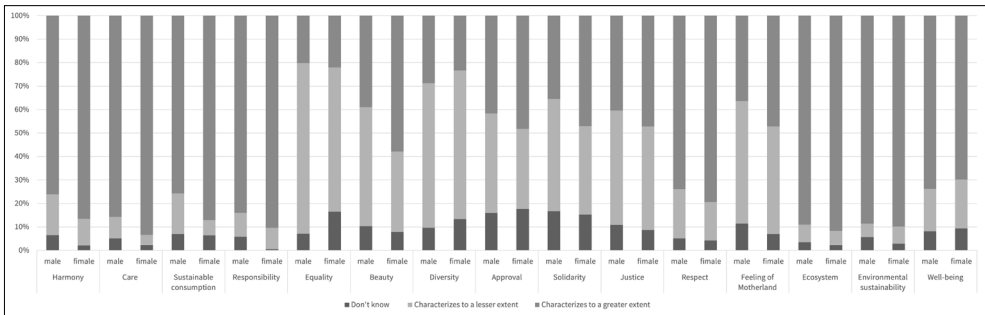


Figure 3 What values do residents consider as a green values? (gender distribution)
(Какие из перечисленных определений характеризуют зеленые ценности?)

To explore what it means for respondents to engage in green practices, we asked three questions. When asked “What does it mean to you to participate in green practices?” the majority of respondents noted that engaging in green practices means “benefit” (95.18), “norm” (85.11%), “value” (85%), and “debt” (80.33%) [fig. 4].

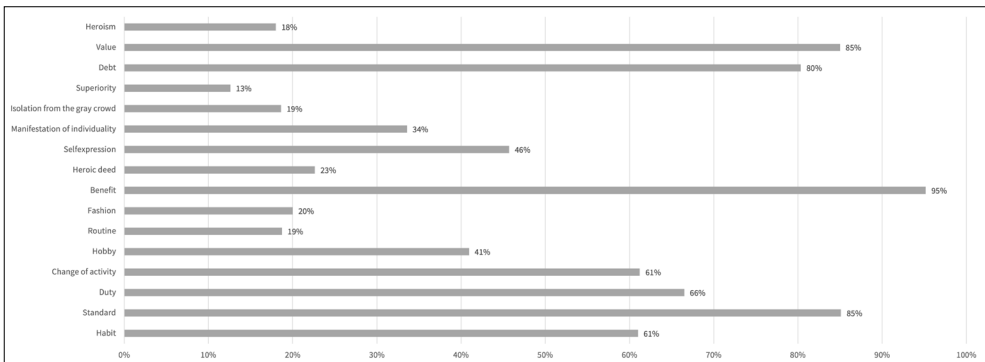


Figure 4 What does participation in green practices mean to you? (general sample)
(Занятие зелеными практикам, это)

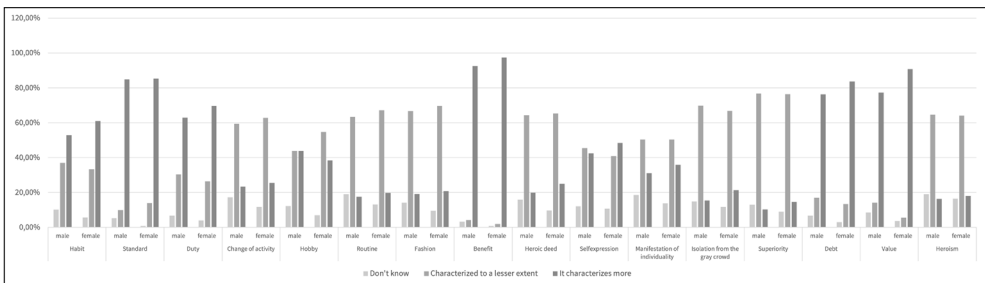


Figure 5 What does participation in green practices mean to you? (gender distribution)
(Занятие зелеными практикам, это)

Females are more likely than males to believe that the proposed variants for the green practices meaning characterize their participation in these practices, except for the “standard” [fig. 5]. Males and females choose the value “standard” equally.

The next question was “How did you feel when you first became involved with green practices?” [fig. 6]. Answering this question, the female respondents often noted that they had a sense of pride and belonging to a supreme cause, and the male respondents noted a sense of belonging to a supreme cause. In addition, some interviewees indicated other causes, for example, a sense of curiosity and a desire to make the planet better.

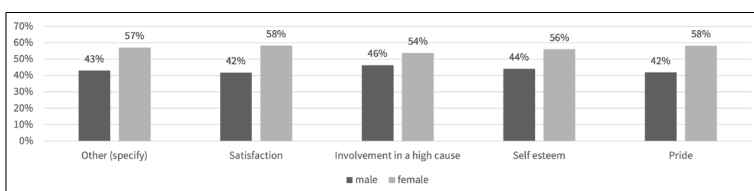


Figure 6 How did you feel when you first became involved with green practices? (gender distribution)
(Вспомните какие чувства у вас возникли, когда вы первый раз участвовали в зеленых практиках)

The last question was “What can the participation of residents in green practices affect?” [fig. 7]. The results of the survey suggest that the participation of residents in green practices can affect the cleanliness of the city (96.37%), the environmental situation in the city (92.21%), the image of the city (83.09%) and the quality of life in the city (79.65%). Interestingly, almost 70% of respondents indicated that participation in green practices can affect the feelings of happiness of residents. Less than half of respondents noted the importance of green practices in creating jobs, improving residents’ well-being, increasing trust in authorities and reducing poverty in the city.

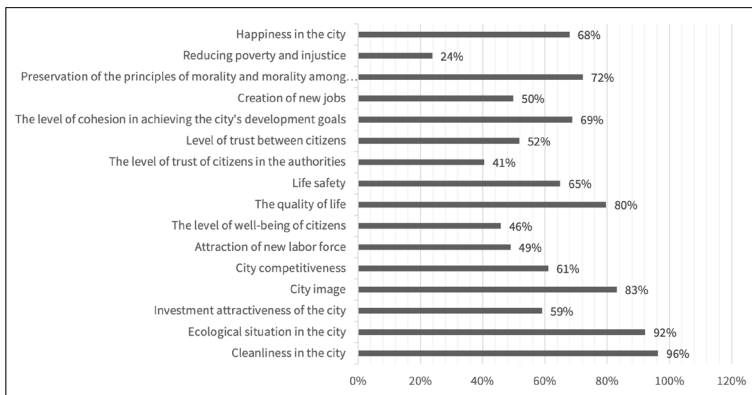


Figure 7 If a majority of residents were to participate in green practices, how would this affect city life? (general sample) | (Если большинство горожан будет заниматься зелеными практиками, как это повлияет на жизнь в городе?)

The analysis of the answers to this question shows no significant differences by gender.

Answering a fourth research question “How do you describe yourself when you participate in green practices?” most respondents (53%) described themselves as modern people who should care about nature [fig. 8]. 32% described themselves as conscious citizens. Only 10% of respondents considered their participation in green practices as civic activism.

An analysis of gender features shows that a higher percentage of female respondents described themselves as a modern person when participating in green practices [fig. 9]. Male respondents were more likely to describe themselves as conscious citizens.

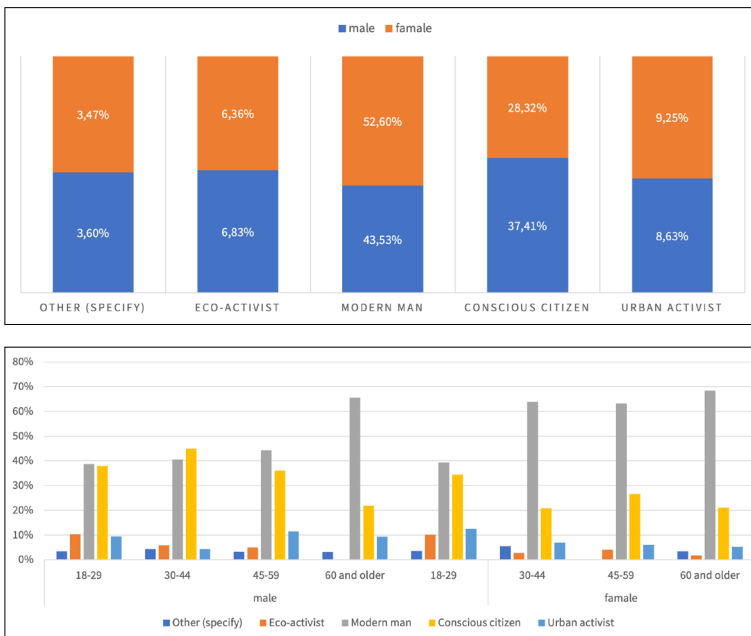


Figure 8 How do you describe yourself when you participate in green practices? (general sample)
(Как бы вы охарактеризовали себя как участника зеленых практик?)

Figure 9 How do you describe yourself when you participate in green practices?
(gender and ages distribution) | (Как бы вы охарактеризовали себя как участника зеленых практик?)

2 Discussion

We have identified the green practices that the inhabitants of a large Russian city are already taking part in. According to our survey of Tyumen residents, these are considered to be vegetarianism/veganism, sustainable consumption, care for stray animals, cleaning and landscaping the territory, planting greenery, separate waste collection, using a reusable cloth bag [fig. 1].

We considered practices such as cleaning and landscaping the territory and planting as historically traditional for Russia, and assumed that they are more often dealt with by older people as a habit. The study confirmed that these practices are generally the most common among Tyumen residents and that older people more often engaged in planting greenery than young people. In addition, the elderly generation care significantly more for stray animals. New to Russia are zero waste practices and responsible consumption; residents of Tyumen do not often participate in them because the meanings, skills and infrastructure associated with these practices are

not yet formed in society (Zakharova et al. 2022). Infrastructure constraints also play a role with regard to separate waste collection (Zakharova et al. 2022). Volunteer organizations can provide skills and demonstrate the value of separate waste collection, but find it difficult to develop widespread infrastructure i.e. to install containers for different sort of waste and to organize the transportation and recycling of waste (Shabanova 2019).

Part of green practices is individual solutions, for example, vegetarianism/veganism, sustainable consumption and using a reusable cloth bag. Another part is collective practices such as care for stray animals, cleaning and landscaping the territory, planting greenery, separate waste collection. Our research shows that collective practices are more common, confirming that the influence on the environment and shared values matter (Lazaric et al. 2020; Balsiger, Lorenzini, Sahakian 2019). Collective practices have significant development potential because previous studies show that only a quarter of those surveyed reinforce the social links that arise between practitioners through participation in organizations (Zakharova et al. 2023a). However, eco-activists and organizations are regarded as the main contributors to green practices and their institutionalization.

We examined the age characteristics of the participants in green practices to assess the process of routinizing. We suggested that seniors citizens participate more often in historically traditional practices and that youths are more likely to participate in new practices. Moreover, according to previous studies (Zakharova et al. 2021b), females are more environmentally friendly than males, so we investigated further the gender tendencies in the perception of green values, the meaning of green practices, and self-identification in green activities. This gives an overview of what values and meanings can help strengthen green practices and on what basis social links within practices can be established.

The analysis of the data obtained and its comparison with the results of other studies suggests a number of findings.

Firstly, J.A. Lamphere and J. Shefner investigating the experience of greening three cities in the United States (Chicago, Little Rock, Knoxville), concluded that the development of a green economy was based on the interaction and cooperation of all social actors, despite the complexity of organizing such interaction (Lamphere, Shefner 2017). However, the experience of cooperation in the field of the environment is almost nonexistent in the Russian Federation. Thus, the strategic document National project “Ecology”,⁶ approved by the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment of the Russian Federation, includes projects related to the reform of waste management,

⁶ <https://ecologyofrussia.ru/>.

the creation of protected natural areas, the development of ecotourism, the conservation of Lake Baikal and the Volga River, and the implementation of an air quality monitoring system. Although the aims of the National Project “Ecology” are relevant for Russia, the projects are not consistent with existing environmental initiatives of residents and do not involve broad participation of the people. For example, 29% of Tyumen residents take part in separate waste collection. At the same time, they are far behind the rest of Russia in the practice of separate waste collection. According to RPORC (VCIOM 2020), 49% of Russians are already involved in waste sorting. Tyumen residents lag behind because only volunteer associations organize separate collection; the city waste management system does not involve sorting waste by households, there is no infrastructure for separate collection, and waste processing is not developed. This situation does not allow residents to get involved in implementing the Russian government’s strategic goals. The same situation exists in the other cities of Russia (Korenyuk, Fedorova 2021). Researchers estimate that the potential for separate waste collection by volunteers is already exhausted, because the enthusiasm of activists has reached its maximum (Shabanova 2021; 2019). The integration of such collective actors as government and business in the development of separate waste collection can therefore give new impetus to this practice. Further involvement of residents requires the development of a convenient infrastructure for separate waste collection, education of the people, stimulation of entrepreneurship in the processing of waste and the production of goods from recycled materials, that is, elements of a circular economy (Shove, Pantzar, Watson 2012). Thus, grassroots initiatives solve problems similar to those of government, but exist as in parallel worlds and sometimes even clash (Ezhov 2019).

Secondly, people’s green practices are seldom extended to politics (Antonova, Abramova, Polyakova 2020). According to RPORC (VCIOM 2020), the majority of Russians’ green activities are mainly motivated by their daily needs. The Russians are actively involved in the cleaning and planning of the territory, planting greenery, they are ready to engage in the separate collection of waste. Our research has shown that the most common green practice is the cleaning and landscaping. 62% of Tyumen residents take part in this practice, which is lower than the RPORC score (79%) (VCIOM 2020). This green practice has a long history as a form of socialization (Kostyaeva, Plyusnina 2018) and now remains an important socio-economic practice considered by the residents as a way to solve environmental problems (Zagladina, Arseneva 2019). Furthermore, 40% of Tyumen residents are involved in the planting of greenery, which is almost in line with the RPORC’s 44% (VCIOM 2020). This practice also has a long historical tradition (Dementieva, Ereemeeva, Sulimov 2016). Practices that require political involvement, such as eco-activism, volunteerism,

donations, petitions, are less common. According to RPORC (VCI-OM 2020), only 5% of the population are engaged in organizing environmental actions, 4% work as volunteers at such events, 7% donate funds to nature protection organizations, 27% signed petitions for nature protection. According to our research, people rarely participate in such practices as zero waste, sustainable consumption, using a reusable cloth bag. Thus, residents are involved in traditional and everyday green practices. Although the greening of society is impossible without political transformations, most residents avoid influence on governance.

Thirdly, the importance of practices reducing consumption is not noted by respondents. According to our study, Tyumen residents believe that they are not involved in the social practice of zero waste (refuse, reduce, reuse, recycle, recover (5R)), aimed at reducing consumption. Only 6% of Tyumen residents answered that they participate in this green practice. 29% of Tyumen residents stated that they participate in sustainable consumption, which includes zero waste. Previous studies have confirmed this situation (Zakharova et al. 2022). We assume that the reason for such responses is the lack of awareness of residents about the zero waste practice, while sustainable consumption is considered in the media as a new cultural paradigm (Bushkova-Shiklina, Musikhina 2020) in conditions of resource scarcity and increasing demand in the market of green products (Kiselev, Mayorova, Markin 2021). Thus, there is a potential for scaling out practices reducing consumption, but they are not currently popular.

Therefore, an analysis of the practices in which residents are involved showed the gap between these practices and governance, as well as their apolitical nature. In addition, the green practices of residents are not aimed at transforming society, reducing production and consumption; their goal is adaptation to environmental changes.

3 Conclusion

To identify the green practices of residents and the values and meanings which motivate them to participate in green practices we conducted our study in Tyumen, the largest city in Western Siberia.

To scale up green practices we have identified which elements of these practices need to be developed and which links between them need to be strengthened. The results of the analysis indicate that the interaction between residents and authorities is not sufficiently developed to promote the greening of society. We found a gap between residents' green practices and authorities' policies regarding certain practices, while other practices are not supported by the state. Residents' green practices differ from activities declared in government policy documents, and residents prefer traditional green practices that do not involve political participation. Urban green practices rarely aim at solving environmental problems by reducing consumption or transforming social attitudes and practices, but instead focus on adapting to environmental degradation.

To scale out green practices, we defined the age-specific features of residents participating in green practices, as well as gender-specific perceptions of green values and meaning of green practices, participants' self-identification. We asked residents of Tyumen what values they consider green. "Ecosystem", "harmony", "care", "response", and "respect" are among the green values that more than 60% of residents recognized. The activities in which these values are implemented can be the basis for closing the gap between the green practices of residents and the governance and politicization of these green practices. It is important to understand what these practices mean for residents in order to scale green practices (Shove, Walker 2014). Analysis of the responses shows that almost all respondents were proud to have been introduced to green practices for the first time. Satisfaction and the opportunity to participate in a great cause were also commonly noted responses of residents in relation to a first involvement in ecological practices. Most respondents feel like modern and responsible people when involved in green practices. Almost all respondents hope that their participation in green practices will have an impact on cleanliness, the environmental situation, the image and quality of life in the city. These answers are in line with the green values that we identified.

The obtained results suggest that the interaction between residents and the authorities for the greening of society can develop in the following ways:

- Green practices of residents have a significant potential for participation in landscaping, cleaning, and improving of the urban environment, because most residents are willing to participate in such practices that have historical roots.

- The green practices of residents can become the fundamental for the development of a circular economy in the city, because volunteer organizations have gained significant experience in introducing separate waste collection into everyday life and in building logistics chains for transporting waste for recycling. This experience can be used to educate people, stimulate small companies in producing goods from recycled materials and develop infrastructure for separate waste collection.
- Green practices of residents can be used to solve important social problems of the city, for example, caring for stray animals. Many residents are involved in the practice of caring for stray animals and NGOs have experience of organizing shelters for stray animals.
- Practices aimed at reducing consumption should receive constant support from the authorities, as it is not enough to adapt to environmental changes. It is important to conserve resources and reduce waste by supporting practices such as reuse, exchange, sharing, recycling, refusing to purchase, repairing, etc.
- The common efforts of residents and authorities should be used to involve males in green practices, who are still less likely than females to report participation in green practices. The organization of events such as repair cafes would allow not only to involve the population in practices aimed at reducing consumption, but also to involve males in green practices, because males are more often involved in technological repairs.
- Gender differences in the perception of green values and green practices should be studied when developing strategies for engaging new practitioners, organizing events and establishing social links within practices. For example, the proposed activities can be organized on the basis of common values and meanings shared by the majority of residents as activities aimed at cleaning the city, improving the urban environmental situation, greening the image of the city and raising the residents' feelings of happiness. The importance of green practices in creating jobs, improving residents' well-being, increasing trust in authorities, and reducing poverty in the city should be emphasized at eco festivals and environmentalist events, which are often organized in the city by eco-organizations.

Our results can be useful for both eco-activists and authorities in order to make decisions about the promotion of green practices.

A limitation of the study is related to the non-exhaustive list of green practices used in the survey. Although respondents had the opportunity to answer "other" and write what other practices they are engaged in, very few people took advantage of this opportunity, preferring to choose from the proposed list.

Future investigations should relate the discussion of our results to the context of international studies aimed at a deeper understanding of scaling of green practices, barriers and opportunities for cooperation between people, administration, entrepreneurs, NGOs and universities.

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