

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

Roberta Sala

Università degli Studi di Torino, Italia

**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*.



Edizioni  
Ca'Foscari

#### Peer review

Submitted 2023-03-02  
Accepted 2023-04-03  
Published 2023-07-05

#### Open access

© 2023 Sala | © 4.0



**Citation** Sala, R. (2023). "Crossing the Border. A Comparative Study of the Forest in the Poems of Gennadij Ajgi and in the Actions of *Kollektivnye Dejstvija*". *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 3(1), 1-18 | 27-44.

**DOI** 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2023/01/004

27

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 Popovič 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-

---

<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 inaccessibly 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

---

<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

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,

---

<sup>3</sup> 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')<sup>4</sup> 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, disenchanting 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.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Quoting Esanu (2013, 96): "[Out-of-town-ness] (zagorodnost') is another specific KD aesthetic term that Monastyrskij 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'".

<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the Chuvash poet himself denotes the wood explicitly as a marginal space, for example, in the title of the poem *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 - среди 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)<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> 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).

<sup>7</sup> 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 berėzy* 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? -  
одиноко 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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-

---

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> 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 Poézija* Элементарная Поэзия (Elementary Poetry).<sup>10</sup> 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 Poézija*. The works are based on the aesthetics of the avantgardes and anticipate the performances of *Kollektivnye Deistvija*.

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)

## Bibliography

- Ajgi, G. Айги, Г. (1991). "Snova: mesta v lesu" Снова: места в лесу (Again: Places in the Forest). *Zdes' Здесь (Here)*. Moskva: Sovremennik, 113-14.
- Ajgi, G. Айги, Г. (1992a). "Mesto: v Lesu: za ogradoj" Место: в лесу: За оградой (Place: In the Forest: Beyond the Fence). *Teper' Vsegda Snega* Теперь всегда снега (Now There is Always the Snow). Moskva: Sovetskij Pisatel', 79.
- Ajgi, G. Айги, Г. (1992b). "Šumjat berezy" Шумят берёзы (The Birches Rustle). *Sveči vo mgle i neskol'ko pesenok* Свечи во мгле и несколько песенок (Candles in the Darkness and Some Canzonets). Moskva: Izdatel'stvo S.A. Nitočkin, 43.
- Ajgi, G. (2000). "Again: Places in the Forest". Transl. by P. France. High, J., *Crossing Centuries. The New Generation in Russian Poetry*. Jersey City: Talisman House Publisher. Transl. of "Snova: Mesta v Lesu". *Zdes'*. Moskva: Sovremennik, 1991, 113-14.
- Ajgi, G. Айги, Г. (2001). "Razgovor na rasstojanii (Otvety na voprosy druga)" Разговор на расстоянии (Ответы на вопросы друга) (Story from Afar [Answering a Friend's Question]). *Razgovor na rasstojanii* Разговор на расстоянии (Story from Afar). Sankt Peterburg: Limbus Press.
- Belozorovitch, A. (2019). "Ajgi e Malevič: dialogo a distanza". *Comparatismi*, 4, 80-93. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14672/20191593>.
- Bookchin, M. (1982). *The Ecology of Freedom. The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy*. Cheshire Books.
- Caramitti, M. (2010). *Letteratura russa contemporanea. La scrittura come resistenza*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.
- Costlow, J. (2013). *Heart-Pine Russia. Walking and Writing the Nineteenth-Century Forest*. Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press.
- Esanu, O. (2013). *Transition in Post-Soviet Art. The Collective Actions Group Before and After 1989*. Budapest; New York: Central European University Press.
- Groys, B. (1979). "Moscow Romantic Conceptualism". *A-Ja*, 1, 3-12.
- Groys, B. (2013). "Forward. Creating a Clearing". Esanu, O., *Transition in Post-Soviet Art. The Collective Actions Group Before and After 1989*. Budapest; New York: Central European University Press, XIII-XVII.
- Hoffmeyer, J. (1996). *Signs of Meaning in the Universe*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Iovino, S. (2004). *Filosofie dell'ambiente. Etica, natura, società*. Roma: Carocci.

- Iovino, S. (2006). *Ecologia letteraria. Una strategia di sopravvivenza*. Milano: Edizioni Ambiente.
- Janeček, G. (1996). "The Poetics of Punctuation in Gennadij Ajgi's Free Verse", *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 40(2), 297-308. <https://doi.org/10.2307/309471>.
- Josephson, P.; Dronin, N.; Mnatsakanian, R.; Cherp, A.; Efremenko, D.; Larin, V. (2013). *An Environmental History of Russia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kabakov, I. Кабаков И. (1998). "Rasskaz I. Kabakova (Ob Akcijah 'Komediija', 'Tretij Variant', 'Kartiny')" Рассказ И. Кабакова (Об Акциях 'Комедия', 'Третий Вариант', 'Картины'). I. Kabakov's Report (on the Actions 'Comedy', 'Third Version', 'Paintings'). *Monastyrskij* 1998, 58-64.
- Korčagin, K. Корчагин, К. (2016). "Prostranstvo i sub"ekt v poezii Gennadija Ajgi" Пространство и субъект в поэзии Геннадия Айги (Space and Subject in the Poetry of Gennadij Ajgi). *Russian Literature*, monogr. *Gennadij Ajgi*, 79-80, 111-24. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ruslit.2016.01.009>.
- Lipoveckij, M.; Engström, M.; Glanc, T.; Kujuk, I.; Smola, K. (eds) (2021). *The Oxford Handbook of Soviet Underground Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197508213.001.0001>.
- Maran, T. (2019). "Deep Ecosemiotics: Forest as a Semiotic Model". *Recherches Sémiotiques*, 39(1-2), 287-303. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076237ar>.
- Maran, T. (2020). *Ecosemiotics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Monastyrskij, A. Монастырский А. (1998). *Poezdki za Gorod* Поездки за город (Journeys Out of Town). Moskva: Ad Marginem.
- Pagani-Cesa, G. (1983). "Note per uno studio del mondo ciuvascio nella poesia di Gennadij Ajgi". *Oriente Moderno*, 2(63), 127-48. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22138617-0630112011>.
- Parisi, V. (2013). *Il lettore eccedente. Edizioni periodiche del samizdat sovietico, 1956-1990*. Bologna: il Mulino.
- Pieralli, C.; Spignoli, T.; Iocca, F.; Larocca, G.; Lo Monaco, G. (a cura di) (2019). *Alle due sponde della cortina di ferro*. Firenze: goWare.
- Popovič, D. (2005). "Pravo na trup": Power, Discourse and the Body in the Poetry of Nina Iskrenko". *The Russian Review*, 64(4), 628-41. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9434.2005.00378.x>.
- Postovalova, V.I. Постовалова, В.И. (2016). "Slovo i molčanie v chudožestvennom mire G. Ajgi" Слово и молчание в художественном мире Г. Айги (Words and Silence in the Artistic World of Gennadij Ajgi). *Russian Literature*, monogr. *Gennadij Ajgi*, 79-80, 99-110. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ruslit.2016.01.008>.
- Propp, V.J. Пропп, В.Ю. (1986). *Istoričeskie korni volšebnojskazki* Исторические корни волшебной сказки (The Historical Roots of Fairy-Tales). Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Leningradskogo Universiteta.
- Puummeister, O.; Kõvamees, E.; Kull, K. (2022). "Semiosis is Always at the Border, Which Operates It". *International Journal of Psychoanalysis and Education: Subject, Action & Society*, 2(2), 112-14. <https://doi.org/10.32111/SAS.2022.2.2.8>.
- Rueckert, W. (1978). "Literature and Ecology. An Experiment in Ecocriticism". *The Iowa Review*, 9(1), 71-86.
- Sala, R. (2019). "Fuga dall'io nel bosco primordiale. Una prospettiva ecocritica sulla poesia russa della *novaja volna*", *CoSMo*, monogr. *Antropocene*, 15, 297-311. <https://doi.org/10.13135/2281-6658/4031>.



- Sedakova, O. Седакoвa, O. (2006). "Ajgi: Ot'ezd" Айги: Отъезд (Ajgi: Departure). *NLO*, 3.
- Sigej, S. Сигей, С. (2001). "Тайное знание russkich futuristov" Тайное знание русских футуристов (The Secret Knowledge of Russian Futurists). *Slavica Tergestina*, 9(15), 195-233.
- Stahl, H. (2022). "The Open Subject and Translations from Nature: Answers to the Anthropocene in Contemporary Poetry (Gennadij Ajgi, Les Murray, Christian Lehnert)". *The Anthropocene Review*, 9(2), 185-205. <https://doi.org/10.1177/205301962110386>.
- Weststeijn, W.G. (2016). "Ajgi and Chlebnikov". *Russian Literature*, monogr. *Gennadij Ajgi*, 79-80, 5-12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ruslit.2016.01.002>.
- Wheeler, W. (2006). *The Whole Creature. Complexity, Biosemiotics and the Evolution of Culture*. London: Lawrence & Wishart Ltd.

