

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), *Svjshchennaja 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 nefi* (*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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