

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.

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Edizioni
Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2023-05-19
Accepted 2023-06-19
Published 2023-06-30

Open access

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Citation Kalinin, I. (2023). "Economic Rationality and Socio-Technological Fantasy. Soviet Oil and its Geochronological Formation (A. Konchalovsky's *The Siberiade*, 1978)". *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 3(1), [1-26] 91-116.

DOI 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2023/01/008

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 *Ordeal* (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 Sibirade* 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 Sibirade* 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 Sibirade* 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 Siberiade*, 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.

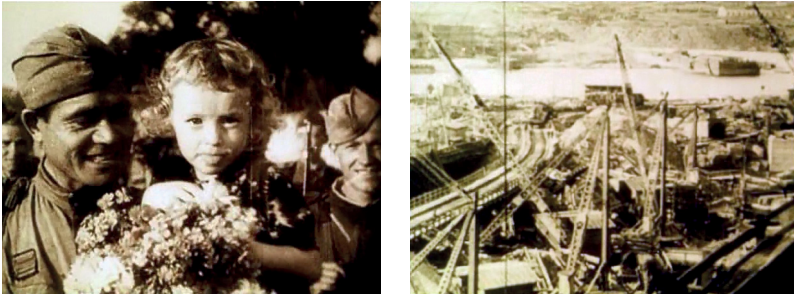


Figure 1a-b All images are frames by Andrei Konchalovsky's *The Siberiade*. 1979. Colour, 275"

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:

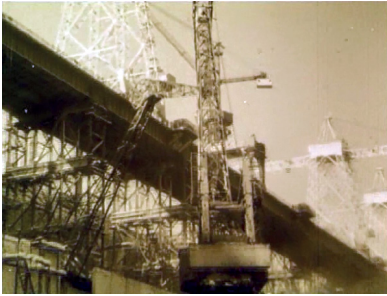
The road to oil is not only the road to death, it is also the road to peace. Fortunately, it all depends on who progresses along this road. And now Soviet and American cosmonauts are already in space. The Apollo-Soyuz space flight. The historical handshake in space. (Ezhov, Mikhalkov-Konchalovsky 1976,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

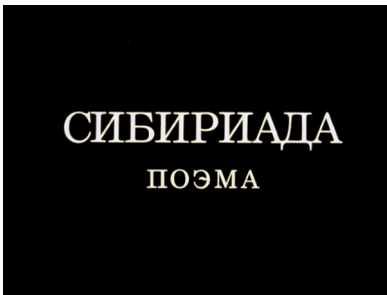


Figure 6

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 Sberiade*. This new national socialist epic immerses the history of the formation of the *Volksggeist* 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 Sberiade* 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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