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WOODEN MATTER, BODILY MEMORIES AND STALINIST DYSTOPIAS: AN ECOCRITICAL INTERPRETATION OF *HOMO LIGNUM* BY IGOR' MAKAREVICH

Abstract: The present paper provides an original analysis of the project Homo Lignum, by the Russian artist Igor' Makarevich, through the lens of ecocriticism. Homo Lignum is a multimedia project that integrates various art forms, including sculpture, photography, painting, and literature. Makarevich developed this project between 1996 and 2015, continuously adding new materials and curating several exhibitions, both in Russia and abroad. Homo Lignum revolves around the fictional character of Nikolai Borisov, whose deep-seated obsession with trees and wood—significantly linked to the repressive context of Stalinism—unfolds through the pages of his diary. Manuscripts of his writings are displayed in exhibitions as part of the installations, alongside various wooden objects.

Drawing on material ecocriticism—as theorized by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann—and Stacy Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality, this study emphasizes the socio-political significance of wooden matter and bodies in Soviet Russia. Firstly, it highlights the narrative potential of both human and non-human matter, which absorbs and reflects the dystopian effects of repressive historical forces. Secondly, it examines the agency of trees and the agentic nature of wood, emphasizing their active role in shaping human narratives and, thus, offering anti-hierarchical perspectives on non-human subjects.

Keywords: Igor' Makarevich, Homo Lignum, material ecocriticism, transcorporeality, wood, Stalinism.

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1. Introduction

The multilayered project *Homo Lignum*² was conceived by the Russian artist Igor' Makarevich³ in the years immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was developed through the introduction—or removal—of materials, art objects and texts in the course of several exhibitions held both in Russia and abroad between 1996 and 2015⁴. *Lignomania*, the first installation related to this work, included photographs of the artist wearing a wooden Pinocchio mask and was displayed at the XL Gallery in Moscow (1996). The detailed story of its protagonist was conceived only two years later, during an artist residency at Civitella Ranieri Foundation in Italy. As the author himself observes,

‘The project’s essence then evolved over time. In 1998, in sunny and picturesque Umbria, a gloomy character was born: Nikolai Ivanovich Borisov, complete with “selected passages from his diary”. While in his notes Borisov opens the doors to the darkest regions of his self, in everyday life he remains the modest and inconspicuous accountant of a furniture factory.’ (Makarevich, 2023b:p.146)

The diary of Nikolai Ivanovich Borisov, entitled *Izbrannnye mesta iz zapisei Nikolaya Ivanovicha Borisova, ili Tainaya zhizn' derev'ev* (“Excerpts from the Notes by Nikolai Ivanovich Borisov, or the Secret Life of Trees”) was later supplemented with new entries (*Istoriia shkafa*, “The story of a cupboard”), which Makarevich created for the exhibition in Lodz (Poland) of 2015. According to the authors of the catalogue *In situ* (2009),

‘*Homo Lignum* is perhaps Makarevich’s most complex project. In this series, he synthesizes a wide range of previously developed motifs and techniques of representation: manuscripts, sculptures, enacted photographs.’ (Makarevich & Elagina, 2009)

² Makarevich initially co-authored the project with his wife, the artist Elena Elagina (from an interview of the author with Igor' Makarevich, 27/11/2024).

³ Igor' Makarevich was born in 1943 in Trialeti, a mountain village of Georgia, and moved to Moscow in 1951, where he still lives.

⁴ In Russia, Makarevich’s exhibitions including the installation *Homo Lignum* were held in Moscow (X Gallery [1996], Spider & Mouse Gallery [1999], National Center for Contemporary Arts [2003], State Tretyakov Gallery [2015]), in Nizhny Novgorod (National Center for Contemporary Arts [2000]), and in Saint Petersburg (Navicula Artis Gallery [2014]). Among the exhibition venues abroad, the following should be mentioned: Kunsthistorische Museum in Vienna (2008; this installation led to the publication of the catalogue *In situ*, 2009), Galerie Blue Square in Paris (2010), Atlas Sztuki Gallery in Lodz (2015). For further information on exhibitions and artworks by Igor' Makarevich, see the artist’s website: <https://makarevichelagina.com/en/> (last accessed on 07/01/2025).

Silkscreened prints of the diary were displayed as part of the installations, alongside wooden objects, drawings, and photographs related to Borisov's story, all of which were crafted by Makarevich himself. Therefore, this project not only combines literature with other artistic forms, but the variety of materials employed—all derived from woodworking—significantly contributes to the narrative.

From the manuscripts, we learn that Nikolai Ivanovich Borisov was born in Moscow in 1927 and died in 1989. He spent most of his life in the Soviet capital, where he shared a communal flat with his mother until her death, in 1952. During his childhood, he lost two significant figures: his uncle Zhora, who was arrested in 1937 and executed as part of the Stalinist purges, and his father, who died at the front in 1944. Both these characters are related to the roots of Borisov's obsession with wood and trees, which forms the central theme of *Homo Lignum*. Indeed, as a child the main character was deeply fascinated by the stories his uncle used to tell him, which allowed him to escape the claustrophobic reality of Soviet life and explore imaginative dimensions. Borisov's memories of the time spent with his uncle are closely tied to the knob handle of Zhora's cane, the wooden texture of which provided him with a peculiar form of sexual pleasure. At the same time, being enchanted by the wood-processing taking place at the furniture factory where his father was employed, Borisov got too close to a planing machine and suffered a serious head injury. The protagonist's fictitious diary spans the period from 1947 to 1968 and focuses on the impact of Stalinist terror on his life, as well as on his obsessive attempts to process trauma in the years following the dictator's death. Borisov believes that a tree is growing inside his body, which would enable him to perceive reality more intensely than other human beings, and, thus, to grasp the secret of life. He devises multiple strategies to transform into a tree, involving a series of *prayers* and rituals that bring his dendrophilia to light (Makarevich & Elagina, 2009; Sharp, 2019; Kotyleva, 2023; Makarevich, 2023b).

The main literary source for *Homo Lignum* is Aleksei Tolstoi's novel *Zolotoi kljuchik ili Prikljucheniiia Buratino*⁵ ("The Golden Key or the Adventures of Buratino", 1935) (Makarevich, 2023b:p.146)⁶, an ideological appropriation of Carlo Collodi's book *Le avventure di Pinocchio* ("The Adventures of Pinocchio", 1883). The plot conceived by Tolstoi is, indeed, adapted to the Soviet values of collectivism, class struggle, patriotism, and heroism, transforming the main character, Buratino, into an ideal Stalinist hero (Vid, 2013). In contrast,

⁵ In the novel, Buratino leads a revolution of puppets against the puppeteer Karabas Barabas (*Mangiafuoco* in Collodi's original story), who symbolizes the evils of capitalism.

⁶ From a conversation of the author with Igor' Makarevich (27/11/2024).

Makarevich's *wooden* character originates from the artist's intention to subvert Soviet collectivist ideals by pursuing a deeply personal utopia—one that entails merging with primordial wooden matter. Nikolai Borisov is an anti-Soviet hero—the *anti-Buratino*—as he retreats into the depths of his own subjectivity rather than devoting himself to the betterment of the collective. He belongs to the category of the *malen'kie lyudi* (“little men”) crushed by social and historical forces, of whom Nikolai Gogol's Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin is a leading representative⁷. In this context, the quotation of phrases from Franz Kafka's diary at the end of Borisov's memoirs reinforces his characterization as an outcast (Makarevich, 2023b:p.146; Kotyleva, 2023:p.153; Sharp, 2019:p.212)⁸. The socio-political context shaping the protagonist's obsessions and frustrations is a “period of Soviet totalitarianism where all things human were questioned, condemned, concealed or destroyed” (Patsukov, 2023:p.150). In this light, *Homo Lignum* can be seen as partly autobiographical, as the urban reality emerging in Borisov's diary draws inspiration from Makarevich's own experience of Moscow during the 1950s and 1960s (Sharp, 2019:p.215). On the one hand, the artist was well integrated into Soviet society, working as a book illustrator, theatrical artist and photographer (Makarevich & Elagina, 2009)⁹. At the same time, he was active in the underground cultural scene of the Soviet capital. In the 1950s, while studying at the Secondary Art School in Moscow, he met many artists who would later play a significant role in the capital's *vtoraya kul'tura* (“second culture”) (Makarevich & Elagina, 2009). Furthermore, from 1983 to 1989 he was a member of the Moscow Conceptualist artistic group *Kollektivnye Deistviya* (“Collective Actions”)¹⁰. Borisov's marginalization can be

⁷ Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin is the main character of the novel *Shinel'* (“The Overcoat”, 1842), by Nikolai Gogol. Borisov's name is a tribute to the Russian writer (Makarevich, 2023b:p.146).

⁸ Beyond the aforementioned, critics have identified further meaningful models for the figure of Nikolai Borisov. In particular, both Anastasia Kotyleva (2023:p.153) and Jane Sharp (2019:p.212) stress the reference of Makarevich's exhibition *Homo Lignum. Story of the Wardrobe* (Navicula Artis Gallery, Saint Petersburg, 2014) to the text by Georges Bataille *Story of the Eye*. Sharp also underlines Makarevich's inspiration to Oberiu—and especially Daniil Kharmis and Aleksandr Vvedensky—and to Kazimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin's works (2019:p.210). Additionally, Vitaly Patsukov states that “Homo Lignum belongs to the genre of social dystopias in the tradition of Orwell and Zamyatin, but built on the mythologization of personal life. [...] The style of Soviet classics such as Konstantin Paustovsky, Vitaly Bianki, and Alexei Tolstoy shimmers through this prose, paradoxically combined with the mythologies of Franz Kafka and Michel Houellebecq” (2023:p.150).

⁹ Together with Elagina, Makarevich was even commissioned by the state to create several monumental artworks throughout the 1980s (Gerber, 2018:p.167).

¹⁰ For information on *Kollektivnye Deistviya*, see: Kalinsky, 2012; Esanu, 2013; Gerber, 2018; Sala, 2023. Makarevich's role in the group was significantly related to the photographic representation of the actions. Although *Homo Lignum* and the artist's contribution to *Kollektivnye Deistviya* were parallel projects—as Makarevich himself underlined in a conversation with the author (27/11/2024)—

related to the experience of Makarevich's own generation of unofficial artists: "their tragedy resembles Borisov's to the extent that they share the traumatic experience of dependency on values inherited from the Stalinist era—and their real outcomes" (Sharp, 2019:p.215).

Given these premises, in the present article I aim to reconceptualize the interpretations of *Homo Lignum* offered by existing criticism, mostly centered on Makarevich's a-posteriori reprocessing of Stalinism and the obsessions it engendered, by focusing on the narrative of matter embedded in this work. Indeed the project—which occupies most of the artist's post-Soviet period—delves deeply into the potential of different materials and non-human agencies to shape Borisov's story. Given the centrality of trees and wood—as well as its by-product, paper—in both the protagonist's life and the installations of *Homo Lignum*, I adopt material ecocriticism, as theorized by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, as the methodological framework for investigating the agency of non-human matter. Moreover, considering the multiple intersections between Borisov's own body and wood, I rely on Stacy Alaimo's concept of *transcorporeality* to explore how exchanges with non-human agencies shape the protagonist's identity. Wood held a specific significance in Soviet society, primarily associated with the economic-industrial and recreational functions of forests, highly popularized by Stalinist propaganda¹¹. Through his deeply bodily experience of trees and wooden matter, Borisov seems to challenge the Soviet conceptualization of both the forest and human relationships to it, thus questioning ideology itself. At the same time, he powerfully reclaims his own subjective dimension within an autocratic system repressing both self-expression and creative exchanges with non-human subjects¹². His body, thus, becomes an ethical symbol of permeability between human and non-human agencies, both defying hierarchical narratives and reflecting their effects on the individuals.

, the significance of woods in both works must be stressed. Indeed, a substantial portion of the actions performed by the Conceptualist group took place outdoors and involved the presence of trees or small forests. In this context, a connection can be drawn between the atavistic experience of the woods evoked by *Kollektivnye Deistviya's* works (see Vsevolod Nekrasov's account of the action *Desyat' Poyavlenii*, "Ten Appearances", 1981 [<https://www.collectiveactionsgroup.org/16/16vn> (last accessed on 09/01/2025)]; Kalinsky. 2012:pp.70–89]) and the "archetypal images" of "the magical world of the forest" (Patsukov, 2023:pp.150) emerging in Borisov's narrative.

¹¹ For information on the conceptualization of the forest in the Soviet economic and cultural context, see Kochetkova, 2024 and Brain, 2011.

¹² As Timo Maran emphasizes, autocratic and extremist ideologies tend to establish "closed symbolic spaces" that partially interrupt communication between humans and the ecosystem (2020:p.51).

2. Material ecocriticism, cultural objects and transcorporeality

In a series of articles published in 2012¹³, as well as in their introduction to the collection *Material Ecocriticism* (2014), Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann inaugurate the *fourth wave* of ecocriticism, whose focus is centered on the agency of matter and its narrative potential (Colligs, 2023:p.6). Considering the *material turn* and the emergence of *new materialisms* in the academic discourse during the first decade of our century, the scholars reflect on its implications for ecocritical studies. The new focus on materiality, as stressed by Iovino,

‘has a very broad and multidisciplinary scope. Inaugurated by fields of research across the social sciences, and in particular by a recent debate in feminism and feminist science studies, it touches a vast array of disciplines, from political and economic sciences to epistemology, disability and interspecies studies, gender and queer theories, geography, and the research on technology and new media.’ (2012b:p.52)

Scholarly attention to matter in these disciplines has gradually emerged as a consequence of new discoveries in natural sciences over the twentieth century, as well as of consciousness about the material effects of the current environmental crisis, globalization, and the ongoing evolution of technology. In the humanities and in the social sciences, it represents a reaction to the *linguistic turn* of previous decades, related to the primacy of linguistic constructions over materiality in certain strands of postmodern and poststructuralist thought (Iovino, 2012b:p.52; Iovino & Oppermann, 2012a:pp.75–76). By contrast, current material studies redirect attention to the concreteness of matter, both in relation to the dimension of the body—challenging the body-mind dualism (Iovino, 2012b:p.52)—and to the agentic potential of material substances. New materialisms reconceptualize the notion and scope of agency itself, moving beyond the traditional idea that it pertains solely to intentionality—and thus to human or divine subjects (Iovino, 2012b:p.53).

In the field of ecocriticism, the emergence of studies on materiality has shed light not only on the agency inherent in matter, but also on its narrative potential:

‘[...] the world’s material phenomena are knots in a vast network of agencies, which can be “read” and interpreted as forming narratives, stories. Developing in bodily forms and in discursive formulations, and arising in coevolutionary landscapes of natures and signs, the stories of matter are everywhere: in the air

¹³ I refer to the following papers: Iovino, 2012a; Iovino, 2012b; Iovino & Oppermann, 2012a; Iovino & Oppermann, 2012b.

we breathe, the food we eat, in the things and beings of this world, within and beyond the human realm. All matter, in other words, is a storied matter.' (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014:p.1)

Matter is “a text composed by multiple agencies” (Iovino & Oppermann, 2012b:p.451), whose constant dialogue determines reality. Also human narratives are inevitably intertwined with stories unfolding through matter, which invalidates any anthropocentric or hierarchical visions (Iovino, 2012b:p.56). In this context, for instance, landscapes can be analyzed as material *texts* arising from the cultural, political and physical interactions of humans with their land (Iovino, 2012b:p.61). Similarly, bodies exhibit a meaningful narrative potential related to organic matter, individual identities, and socio-political processes occurring within specific cultural frameworks. As observed by Iovino, “the body is a privileged subject for material ecocriticism” as, first of all, it “reveal[s] the reciprocal interferences of organisms, ecosystems, and humanly made substances” (Iovino, 2012b:p.59), thereby invalidating any dualistic separation between human and non-human agencies. Moreover, the body functions as a “material palimpsest”, narrating the effects of its interactions with “material substances and discursive practices”, which manifest in the body’s states of health (Iovino, 2012b:p.59). In this regard, material ecocriticism significantly relies on the notion of transcorporeality, developed by Stacy Alaimo in her seminal work *Bodily Natures* (2010). According to the scholar, human bodies are permeable and constantly interact with both physical and socio-political environments, undergoing transformations as a result. Food, for instance, serves as a clear example of transcorporeal substance: through the process of eating, it becomes incorporated in the human body, affecting its organic composition (Alaimo, 2010:pp.12–14). At the same time, also social, political, economic and ecological forces significantly shape the substance of our bodies insofar as they determine issues of environmental justice, environmental health, and specific cultural attitudes (Alaimo, 2010:pp.18–19). Awareness of our deep interconnectedness with a network of environments, as well as with other bodies, considerably alters the perception of our own identities, linking self-knowledge to the scientific exploration of the material world and its effects on our organic substance (Alaimo, 2010:pp.20–22). In this context, autobiographical narratives “incorporate[ing] scientific and medical information in order to make sense of personal experience” (Alaimo, 2010:p.87), which Alaimo defines *material memoirs*, emerge as biographies of—often diseased—bodies, striving to frame them “within power structures that have real material effects” (Alaimo, 2010:p.86). These narratives combine personal memoirs with physiological information, highlighting

the entanglement of the self with “material agencies which are simultaneously biological, political, and economic” (Alaimo, 2010:p.87).

Lastly, within the framework of material ecocriticism, not only matter is regarded as the site of multiple creative narratives, but texts themselves—including books, artworks, films, etc.—are also interpreted as material objects endowed with agency. Ecocritical studies centered on materiality conceptualize “the text as matter” (Iovino, 2012b:p.61) in two senses. First, every cultural product is inherently a material object, possessing physical characteristics that influence its meaning and participating in social, economic, and ecological processes related to its production and dissemination. Simultaneously, the materiality of human texts pertains to their impact on cultural systems and their potential to transform them by spreading new ideas (Iovino, 2012b:pp.61–62).

Relying on the concepts illustrated above, the following sections analyze the project *Homo Lignum* by focusing on two fundamental aspects of its conceptual framework. First, the creative agency of non-human matter featured in both Borisov’s diary and the artistic installations is investigated, emphasizing its significant impact on his story. In the second place, the centrality of the protagonist’s body is examined as a model of transcorporeality. Through its material interactions with wood and Soviet reality, his body reveals the deep interconnectedness between ideology and corporeal substance, ultimately manifesting in both psychological turmoil and physical distress. In this context, Borisov’s diary can be interpreted as a unique form of material memoir, since it unintentionally documents the physiological effects that the socio-political environment exerts on him.

3. Borisov’s narrative through material agents

In this section, Borisov’s story, as it emerges both in the pages of his diary and in the installations of *Homo Lignum*, is analyzed by examining the leading narrative role of the non-human agents involved in the artwork. All these agents are linked to wooden matter, as they are either composed of or derived from wood, thereby physically constituting the protagonist’s obsession with this substance. At the same time, they function as cultural objects, their creative agency being shaped by the combination of material qualities, symbolic values, and the emotional significance attributed to them by Borisov. Cultural objects can be defined as “externalized manifestations of ideas [that] make it possible to share meaning and therefore culture” (McDonnell, 2023:p.196). They are both cognitive and material, as they embody ideas through a medium (McDonnell, 2023:p.198). The inherent

agency of cultural objects has the potential to affect humans. In particular, their material qualities determine the human *affordances* of their meanings and uses, which depend on the cognitive, perceptual and physical capacities of specific individuals (McDonnell, 2023:p.201). The material agency of cultural objects becomes especially evident when they are decontextualized, allowing for humans to physically experience unexpected interactions with them (McDonnell, 2023:p.208) and, thus, to question their shared symbolic value. Also the—usually subjective—aesthetic and emotional significance attributed to certain cultural objects influences their agentic potential (McDonnell, 2023:pp.210–211).

In my analysis, the narrative role of non-human agents in *Homo Lignum* is examined through their classification in two distinct categories: that of forests and trees, and that of wooden objects and wood-derivatives (such as the diary and photographs). Both categories appear in Borisov's narrative as well as in the installations¹⁴.

3.1. The forest and the trees

As it clearly emerges in the title of Borisov's diary, the heart of his obsession with wood is related to its derivation from trees. Indeed, not only does the protagonist believe that a tree is growing inside his body, but he also talks to plants, takes pictures of them as a way to grasp their essence, and feels a deep emotional connection with them—rather than with human beings. Forests appear in his narrative as living subjects, significantly influencing Borisov's both physiological and mental states. In this connection, Britta Maria Colligs ascribes to woods a form of *physical/psychological sylvan agency*, which emerges in their interactions with humans: “the forest can influence the individual human on a physical as well as psychological, and thus on a cognitive, level and become either a dangerous territory or a restorative realm” (2023:p.26). Furthermore, trees in *Homo Lignum* can be examined as cultural objects insofar as the sylvan agency they exert on Borisov is related to their material characteristics—as he sensorially perceives them—, their emotional significance for the protagonist, and also their shared symbolic conceptualization in Russian culture. The latter, in particular, is associated with the archetypical connotation of the forest emerging in both the folkloric and literary narratives of the Russian people¹⁵. As underlined by James Billington, the vast and pristine

¹⁴ Forests and trees appear in the installations through Makarevich's paintings and drawings.

¹⁵ For information on the value of the forest in Russian fairy tales, see Propp, 1986; the identity value of woods for the Russian people is investigated by Costlow, 2013.

wooded areas surrounding Old Muscovy have meaningfully shaped Russian “icons of identity” since the 13th century, offering not only physical sites and materials for the building of settlements, but also a flourishing imagery for the creation of narratives (1966:pp.16–26). In this connection, Borisov’s idea of trees as ideal and primordial realms, allowing him to escape the claustrophobic urban reality of the Soviet dimension, emerges in several passages of his diary where he dwells on the enchanting beauty of vegetation:

‘20/09. 1950. Огромные тополя стояли, переливаясь всеми оттенками золота в холодном утреннем воздухе, [...]’ (Makarevich, 1998)¹⁶

‘18/02. 1954. Иней такой выпал – все деревья на бульваре покрыты толстым слоем снега. Каждая веточка запорошена, красота немыслимая.’ (Makarevich, 1998)¹⁷

The agency originating from the symbolic conceptualization of the forest as a pristine site also emerges in Borisov’s dream concerning a deer. In a passage of his diary dating back to 1947, the protagonist focuses on the primordial strength and magnificent beauty transpiring from the animal, which he sees in his dream while running across ancestral woods.

‘4/09. 1947. Всю ночь снился олень. Большой, красивый, он бегал вокруг меня, и я чувствовал приближение его разгоряченного сильного тела. Порой его черные дрожащие ноздри были совсем рядом с моим лицом и запах этого прекрасного животного входил в меня с бодрящий воздухом леса. [...] Он исполнял танец, каждое движение которого было мне бесконечно знакомо и понятно, влекло, опьяняло все мое существо.’ (Makarevich, 1998)¹⁸

The deer’s vigorous, non-human physicality is directly linked to the agency of the forest: both the animal’s *scent* and the *air* of the woods *perform* the action of penetrating Borisov. Moreover, through his sensory experience, the protagonist highlights the correlation between the material characteristics of the forest and its agency. The heady effect of trees on Borisov is vividly described also in other

¹⁶ ‘20/09. 1950. The enormous poplars stood shining in all shades of gold in the cold morning air, [...]’. Unless otherwise specified, all the translations from Russian are by the author of this article.

¹⁷ ‘18/02. 1954. The frost fell—all the trees on the boulevard were covered with a thick layer of snow. Every branch was strewn with it; the beauty was unimaginable.’

¹⁸ ‘4/09. 1947. I dreamt of a deer the whole night. Big and beautiful, it ran around me, and I felt its heated, strong body approaching me. At times, its black, trembling nostrils were so close to my face, and the scent of this magnificent animal penetrated me along with the invigorating air of the forest. It performed a dance, every movement of which felt infinitely familiar and clear to me; it attracted, intoxicated my entire being.’

passages of his diary. An illustrative example is his unexpected encounter with a linden tree, whose characteristics—perceived by the protagonist through sight and touch—allow him to metaphorically transcend into another dimension, achieving both mental and physical ecstasy.

‘06/10. 1955. [...] На днях забрел в какой то двор, там липа стояла. Очень старая, кора влажная, холодная, я стал ее гладить, шепотом с ней говорю. Застало глаза серой мглой, двор уже далеко внизу, а вокруг меня темные листья волнуются, шелестят и много птиц.’ (Makarevich, 1998)¹⁹

Borisov’s experience of trees deeply contrasts with the conceptualization of woods in Soviet reality. Actually, through his sensory approach to the materiality of plants, he decontextualizes forests as cultural objects, revealing unexpected and anti-hierarchical approaches to non-human subjects. As mentioned above, Soviet woods are strongly associated with both recreational and utilitarian values (Kochetkova, 2024). The former pertains to group excursions into nature, a widespread form of tourism in the Stalinist period. The Russian term *turizm* in fact “refer[s] most often to walking, hiking, biking, and camping, often along excursion routes” (Gorsuch, 2003:p.763). In the 1920s, it was appropriated by Soviet ideology, becoming by the 1950s “a form of mass action through *doing*”, requesting the citizens’ participation as a means to achieve the Soviet utopian project (Gorsuch, 2003:p.763). Borisov’s rejection of any collective experience of the forest is reflected in the disgust he feels during the excursions into nature with his colleagues. In particular, in a diary entry dated June 30, 1957, he contrasts his sacred vision of trees with a traumatic sexual encounter involving a woman during a group excursion. The impurity of this blasphemous exchange—as Borisov perceives it—is amplified by the fact that it occurs in a small forest, in the presence of an enchanting, almost divine, birch.

Through his narrative, Borisov also challenges the Soviet utilitarian conceptualization of forests, related to their industrial uses for the production of consumerist goods²⁰. Even though he works in a furniture factory and owns several tools for woodworking, the man conceives wood as creative living matter endowed

¹⁹ ‘06/10. 1955. [...] A few days ago, I happened to be in a courtyard, and there stood a linden. Very old, with damp, cold bark. I started stroking it, speaking to it in a whisper. My eyes were clouded with a gray mist, and the courtyard was already far below. Around me, dark leaves swayed and rustled, and there were many birds.’

²⁰ During both the Stalinist and post-Stalinist period, several efforts were made to preserve the country’s wooded areas, as a means to ensure raw material for timber production, maintain hydrological stability, promote the scientific study of vegetation, and safeguard nature’s beneficial effects on people. Despite this, numerous forests were irreparably damaged to fuel industrial production (Brain, 2011; Kochetkova, 2024).

with the life of trees, rather than as a passive substance meeting human needs: “the flesh taken off the tree does not die; a shaving and a plank are still alive until they find their homes in the orange heat of fire” (Makarevich, 2023a:p.136). At the same time, he decontextualizes the wooden cultural objects featured in his story, exploring new affordances of meaning and use related to their material properties, as will be illustrated in the following subsection.

3.2. Wood, wooden objects, and materiality

Borisov’s dendrophilia originates from his fascination with the texture of wood and develops through his interactions with objects made of or derived from this material. The mutuality of these exchanges, aimed at transforming his body into a tree, clearly reveals the agency exerted on him by wood. The protagonist devises a series of rituals implying sensory contact with specific objects, some of which are specially crafted by him, while the others are pre-existing products repurposed to suit his intentions. The first wooden artefact mentioned in Borisov’s narrative is uncle Zhora’s cane knob, whose agency influences the protagonist on multiple levels, starting from his very childhood. This object is in fact primarily tied to the emotional value Borisov ascribes to it, rooted in his memories of Zhora. At the same time, its material texture, as mentioned above, elicits the protagonist’s sexual tension towards it. Lastly, when the cane knob is partially damaged by a fire, Borisov carves it anew, inadvertently shaping it into the form of Buratino. While working on the wooden object, he feels inspired by Zhora’s spirit, whose intentionality seems to transfer into wood. Borisov’s identification with the protagonist of Aleksei Tolstoi’s novel is strengthened by the mask he creates, which, along with the cane knob, forms part of his ritual evening *purifications*, culminating in orgasmic pleasure²¹. The structure of this mask is made of papier-mâché, with a long nose carved from wood. When wearing it, Borisov tries to have it cling to his face as a way to alienate from the external world and facilitate his fusion with wooden matter. As a result, the symbolic value of the cultural objects related to Buratino operates in an oxymoronic way, serving as a reminder of the Soviet hero whose features Borisov does not embody. The kind of fulfillment he pursues is in fact deeply individualistic. Makarevich’s dystopian reinterpretation of Soviet values is also reflected in the wooden cupboard, which is the focus of the installation *Istoriia shkafa*. The author imagines that Borisov, upon finding this item in the trash, is profoundly struck by it.

²¹ For his *purifications*, Borisov also crafts six wooden items, which he calls *icons* as a way to stress the spiritual character of his rituals.

‘Подошёл поближе и увидел остатки шкафа, как потом оказалось, из ореха [...]. Идя по Хлебному, не мог успокоиться, сердце так и прыгало в груди.’ (Makarevich, 2015)²²

The conventionally shared significance of the cupboard—linked to its function as a container of objects—is redefined by the emotional value Borisov assigns to it, particularly as it retains the aura of its unknown previous owner: “Должно быть, кто то умер, вот вещицы и снесли сюда. Кому это нужно? Вот жизнь человеческая!” (Makarevich, 2015)²³. Besides, this piece of furniture evokes a childhood episode associated with the protagonist’s emotional tension towards his cousin, followed by his father’s punishment. The agency of the wooden object, however, is primarily connected to its materiality. The protagonist is in fact accidentally struck on the head by a larch plank while attempting to insert it in the cupboard, which gives him sexual pleasure. This episode, as Makarevich himself observes, echoes Elena Novikova-Vashentseva’s story. The woman changed her life and became a famous proletarian writer after her alcoholic husband struck her on the head with a wooden log. This stresses the transformative potential—the agency—inherent in wood, vividly expressed also by the wooden character of Buratino²⁴. For Borisov, however, the transformative force of wood operates in the opposite direction, confirming his anti-heroic nature.

Besides appearing in the narrative, the aforementioned objects also constitute a significant part of the installations in *Homo Lignum*, where they are presented as physical items carved by Makarevich himself. They can be regarded as *texts* in the sense expressed by Iovino (2012b:pp.61–62): their narrative agency derives not only from the artistic message they convey, but also from their material qualities. As noted by Sharp commenting on the exhibition in Lodz, “wood literally represents wood”, and its “redundancy is both wryly humorous and cathartic” (2019:p.215). Indeed, the installation *Istoriia shkafa* features a cupboard, inside which the artist fixed a mechanism reminiscent of a guillotine to evoke the plank that struck Borisov’s head. Therefore, the wooden object itself becomes a palimpsest of its inherent narrative agency, which in turn shapes the protagonist’s narrative. Lastly, photographs of Borisov and manuscripts from his diary are placed within the piece of furniture. Both are printed on paper, which is itself a derivative of wood. The presence of these art

²² ‘He came closer and saw the remains of a cupboard, which later turned out to be made of walnut [...]. Walking down Khlebnny street, he couldn’t calm down; his heart kept pounding in his chest.’

²³ ‘Someone must have died, and that’s why these things were brought here. Who needs them? Such is human life.’

²⁴ From an interview of the author with Igor’ Makarevich (27/11/2024).

objects has characterized *Homo Lignum* since earliest exhibitions, highlighting their significance in conveying Borisov's story²⁵. Not only they narrate through images and words, but, most importantly, they embody the potential to preserve the essence of human and non-human subjects through their material properties. This aspect is made clear by the protagonist, who believes that the *secret life* of both trees and himself is kept in photographic negative films. Moreover, he moves his affection for his dead uncle and mother to objects symbolizing them, linking their agency to both material properties and the emotional value he ascribes to them: "Вот от дяди Жоры от трости рукоятка, от мамочки все вещи берегу. Может, когда человек с того света приходит, ему его знак какой-то тут необходим" (Makarevich, 1998)²⁶.

4. Transcorporeal interactions in Stalinism

The narrative function of Borisov's diary, as mentioned in the previous section, relies on both its material qualities—which connect this object to wood—and its discursive content. Regarding the latter, the protagonist's writings can be considered as an unwitting form of material memoirs in the sense suggested by Alaimo. In fact, they provide detailed insights into how interactions with wood shape his corporeality, including specifics about his deteriorating mental state and the damage inflicted on his body. Furthermore, as previously observed, the protagonist's material relationship with trees is influenced by his obsessive tendencies, which, in turn, are partly a product of the socio-political context.

What emerges from Borisov's diary is first of all an exploration of unconventional ways to engage with and perceive his body—and, consequently, his identity—, influenced by his attraction to trees and wooden matter. The significance of wood as the source of his physical and cognitive transformations is related to both its material texture and its symbolic value in the Soviet context. The protagonist's interactions with this substance represent an unconscious attempt to reclaim his identity within a repressive system imposing the collective over the subjective dimension. At the same time, fusion with wooden matter is a hallucinatory trauma response to Stalinist terror, which implies escaping the limits of his human body to join a pre-existential dimension of organicist connection with non-human substances²⁷. In this regard,

²⁵ As previously mentioned, the development of Borisov's story in his diary entries followed the creation of the character's photographs for the exhibition *Lignomania*.

²⁶ 'So from uncle Zhora the cane knob, and from mom I keep all her things. Maybe, when someone comes back from the other world, they need some kind of their own sign here.'

²⁷ In this connection, it must be observed that Nikolai Fyodorov's Cosmism exerted a significant influence on the works of both Makarevich and Elagina (Turkina, 2023). While this aspect deserves

Borisov perceives his body as fragmented matter interchangeable with wood, rather than as a unitary whole:

‘04/10. 1950. [...] я почувствовал, как все мое тело превращается в гнилую труху.’ (Makarevich, 1998)²⁸

‘06/10. 1950. Теперь ясно: от чего-то могу превратиться в труху, в гниль в любую минуту. Значит на самом деле сделан-то я весь из одного дерева [...]’ (Makarevich, 1998)²⁹

The protagonist is even convinced that his arboreal nature provides him with unique perception abilities as compared to other humans:

‘11/12. 1950. [...] я полностью убедился в том, что внутреннее мое строение совершенно иное чем у остальных людей. Прежде всего, все пространство моей черепной коробки занимает особое дерево, ветви которого произрастают в остальные области моей головы, т. е. в глаза, уши, носовую полость, небо и т. д. Эти ветви корректируют мои органы чувств, настраивая их особым образом.’ (Makarevich, 1998)³⁰

In order to bring out his true identity, Borisov devises techniques aimed at transforming his body into a tree, introducing wood directly into himself. First, he creates a tool covered with wooden thorns that compresses his chest, slowing his breathing rhythm to mimic that of a plant. In the exhibitions of *Homo Lignum*, this device is represented by a wooden gynecological chair, evoking an instrument of torture. Besides, Borisov’s transcorporeal interactions with wood are vividly expressed through his ingestion of birch sawdust and oak leaves, which inevitably affects his organic composition.

In his diary, the protagonist clearly shows a link between broader socio-political forces and the *malen’kii chelovek*’s fate. Environmental factors, indeed, contribute to the development of his psychological distress, leading him to experience fear, hallucinations, and persecution mania, which, in turn, manifest in various forms of self-harm:

deeper investigation, it falls outside the scope of the present paper.

²⁸ ‘04/10. 1950. [...] I felt my whole body transforming into putrid dust.’

²⁹ ‘06/10. 1950. Now it’s clear: for some reason I can transform into dust, into rotten matter at any time. This means that I am completely made of wood.’

³⁰ ‘I am fully convinced that my inner composition is completely different from that of the others. First of all, the whole space of my skull is dwelled by a special tree, whose branches grow in the remaining parts of my head, namely in the eyes, ears, nasal cavity, palate, etc. These branches modify my sensory organs, providing them with their peculiar character.’

‘16/03. 1961. Не на кого опереться вокруг, все стучат, все подглядывают.’ (Makarevich, 1998)³¹

‘05/08. 1951. На работе, слава богу, все спокойно. Я стараюсь со всеми ладить, чтобы ни у кого не вызывать подозрения. Ведь я-то совсем другой, а никто и не подозревает.’ (Makarevich, 1998)³²

‘04/03. 1961. [...] И правильно шипы я придумал, они в тело поглубже должны входить, весь блуд из него.’ (Makarevich, 1998)³³

The protagonist, however, is not conscious of the correlation between his social environment and his attraction to wood, which he perceives as a remedy for his anguish, rather than a symptom of his psychological distress. Borisov’s mental state is also closely tied to his isolation and the lack of access to a social care system that could support him. Conversely, feeling judged by others, he creates a secret dimension in which to express his true self. This confirms Alaimo’s argument about the profound permeability of bodies to both material substances and socio-political forces conditioning human lives.

5. Conclusions

In the present paper, the project *Homo Lignum*, by Igor’ Makarevich, has been examined from the perspective of material ecocriticism, as well as through the concept of transcorporeality, developed by Stacy Alaimo. This kind of analysis shows an ethical value in line with the paradigm of

“material ethics”[, which is] based on the co-extensive materiality of human, non-human, and natural subjects, in a perspective which necessarily implies moral horizontality; and it is an ethics focused on the way discursive constructions and material bodies interplay in a given socio-political context.’ (Iovino, 2012b:p.64)

This model also implies that the profound connections between human and non-human agencies significantly shape both discursive and bodily narratives. An interpretation of *Homo Lignum* that foregrounds the narrative agency of wood, alongside that of the protagonist’s body, enables a study of Stalinist and post-Stalinist dystopias based on stories of matter. Borisov’s personal oppression, shaped by a grotesque social context, becomes paradigmatic of the Soviet people’s collective

³¹ ‘There’s no one I can rely on, everyone reports, everyone spies.’

³² ‘At work, thank God, everything is fine. I try to get along with everyone, not to arouse suspicion. I am indeed different, and no one suspects me.’

³³ ‘[...] And I correctly conceived of the thorns; they must penetrate deeper into my body, driving out all the impurity.’

experience. In this context, my analysis considers *Homo Lignum* to present the political forces at play during the 1950s and 1960s as limiting the human potential for flourishing interactions between human and non-human matter. Ideology, in fact, affected the citizens' ability to make sense of both reality and themselves. As a consequence, the development of human subjectivity—rooted in cognitive and physiological experience of the world—was hindered, negatively impacting both their mental and physical conditions. Individual illness, in turn, potentially leads to isolation and, ultimately, to the illness of society as a whole.

In this context, material memoirs offer an effective and authentic alternative to Soviet ideologized narratives—such as Aleksei Tolstoi's heroic reinterpretation of Pinocchio's story. These biographical accounts rely on narrative interactions between human corporeal matter, non-human matter, and socio-political structures. As such, they prove to be ideal instruments to illustrate the material effects of Soviet ideology on human subjects, as well as to expose the problematic nature of propagandistic visions, which dehumanize individuals by profoundly conditioning their interaction with reality. Therefore, Borisov's psychological suffering acquires a deep political meaning, as it materially displays the effects of state repression.

This analysis may serve as a foundation for future studies on Soviet and post-Soviet artistic works that foreground material and bodily substances as primary narrative agents of socio-political forces and trauma responses. Furthermore, material ecocritical perspectives have the potential to intersect productively with Russian traditions—such as Nikolai Fyodorov's Cosmism—offering an opportunity to develop locally rooted paradigms of ecocriticism within Slavic studies.

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ДРВЕНА МАТЕРИЈА, ТЈЕЛЕСНА СЈЕБАЊА И СТАЉИНИСТИЧКЕ ДИСТОПИЈЕ: ЕКОКРИТИЧКА ИНТЕРПРЕТАЦИЈА *НОМО LIGNUM*-А ИГОРА МАКАРЕВИЧА

Резиме

Овај рад пружа оригиналну анализу мултимедијалног пројекта *Homo Lignum* руског умјетника Игора Макаревича кроз призму екокритике. *Homo Lignum*, који је развијан у периоду од 1996. до 2015. године, обједињује различите умјетничке форме, укључујући скулптуру, фотографију, сликарство и књижевност. Пројекат се фокусира на фиктивни лик Николаја Борисова, човјека који је дубоко опсједнут дрвећем и дрвеним материјалом, а чија је прича испреплетена са репресивним контекстом сталинизма. Његов дневник под називом *Избранные места из записей Николая Ивановича Борисова, или тайная жизнь деревьев* чини централни дио пројекта и излаже се заједно са дрвеним објектима.

Ослањајући се на теоријски оквир материјалне екокритике, концептуализован од стране Серенеле Јовино и Серпил Оперман, као и на појам транскорпоралности који је увела Стејси Алајмо, ова студија истиче социополитички значај дрвеног материјала и тијела у Совјетском Савезу. На првом мјесту истражује се наративни потенцијал људског и нељудског материјала, који апсорбује и рефлектује дистопијске ефекте репресивних историјских сила. Осим тога истражује се дјеловање дрвећа

и активна улога дрвеног материјала у обликовању људских наратива, и на тај начин се нуди антихијерархијска перспектива нељудских субјеката. *Homo Lignum* појављује се у контексту преиспитивања односа човјека и природе, одбацујући совјетску колективистичку идеологију у корист дубоко личне и субјективне димензије. Фигура Борисова представља *антисовјетског хероја*, *Анти Буратина*, чија је потрага за самотрансформацијом кроз дрвени материјал у контрасту са колективистичким идеалима промовисаним у стаљинистичкој реинтерпретацији *Пиокија* Алексеја Толстоја. Умјесто да се посвети колективу, Борисов настоји да се сједини са дрвеним материјалом као обликом личне еманципације, субвертирајући културне и политичке конвенције.

Рад се бави улогом шума и дрвених предмета у обликовању значења пројекта. Дреће није само природни елемент, већ и наративни агент који дубоко утиче на Борисова, обликујући његову перцепцију стварности. Његов дневник биљежи покушај преображаја у дрво кроз ритуалне праксе и транскорпоралне интеракције са дрвеним материјалом, попут конзумирања пиљевине и коришћења направа за модификацију тијела. Ова перспектива у складу је са Алајмовом теоријом транскорпоралности, наглашавајући како материјалне супстанце и социополитичке силе прожимају људска тијела.

Надаље, анализа контекстуализује Борисовљеву трауму унутар совјетске репресије, показујући како његова опсесија дрвеним материјалом представља одговор на опресивно окружење. Његова отуђеност и параноја одражавају искуства многих појединаца у стаљинистичком и постстаљинистичком СССР-у, илуструјући како се политичка репресија уписује на тијела и материјална искуства.

У закључку овај рад предлаже *Homo Lignum* као примјер *материјалног мемоара*, наратива који не само да препричава Борисовљев живот, већ и физички отјеловљује ефекте тоталитаризма на људску субјективност. Екокритички приступ омогућава реинтерпретацију пројекта, не само као рефлексију совјетске историје већ и као основу за развој локално укоријењених екокритичких парадигми. У овом контексту западне материјалне екокритичке перспективе могле би продуктивно да се преплићу са руским космизмом, нудећи методолошки оквир за екокритику унутар славистике.

► **Кључне ријечи:** Игор Макаревич, *Homo Lignum*, материјална екокритика, транскорпоралност, дрво, стаљинизам.