

Rethinking Soviet Selfhood in the Era of the Anthropocene: From the Foucauldian Paradigm to the Naturecultural Theory of the Subject

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In his now classic essay “The Climate of History: Four Theses” (2009), Dipesh Chakrabarty reflects on the challenges that the crisis of climate change poses to “our capacity for historical understanding.”¹ Chakrabarty sketches the genealogy of the distinction between natural history and human history: he traces such division to Giambattista Vico’s eighteenth-century arguments about the limits of human reason and to “the old Viconian-Hobbesian idea that we, humans, could have proper knowledge of only civil and political institutions because we made them, while nature remains God’s work and ultimately inscrutable to man.”² As Chakrabarty and other scholars have pointed out, the sense of culture as unfolding in a different register from nature has remained, until recent decades, at the core of the scholarly understanding in the human sciences—a framework of thinking that anthropogenic climate change has exposed as deeply flawed. “Anthropogenic explanations of climate change spell the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history,” resumes Chakrabarty.³

Anthropogenic climate change obliges the academy to rethink “humaneness” and to activate in its classrooms a deeper understanding of the fundamental, thoroughgoing intertwining of human ideas, lives, and actions with natural environments. How are scholars to undertake such a change in the study of history, such as research into Soviet-era lives and experiences? I propose that in studies of Soviet subjectivities, such a framing discloses the need to rethink subjecthood from the perspective of the naturecultural continuum.⁴

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1. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 201.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

4. The term “naturecultures” refers to the thoroughgoing connectedness of the categories of “nature” and “culture.” The term is associated first of all with Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour. “Flesh and signifier, bodies and words, stories and worlds: these are joined in naturecultures,” writes Donna Haraway. Donna Jeanne Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago, 2003), 20. A similar term is “ecosocial” which conveys “the fundamental interdependence of societal and ecological contexts.” Nancy Krieger, *Ecosocial Theory, Embodied Truths, and the People’s Health* (New York, 2021), 17.

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Soviet studies has typically viewed the concept of the self or the subject from the perspective of the subject's relationship to state-oriented ideological currents, following a tradition grounded in René Descartes and, more recently, Michel Foucault.⁵ Such studies have contributed substantially to our understanding of the Soviet era, but they have been unable to give due weight to the human ability to situate and define one's sense of self in and across several scales, to identify with personal, homely, communal, ethnic, national, global, planetary, and even cosmic perspectives—and to the role played in these processes by one's bodily interactions with material surroundings.⁶

The aim of this article is to supplement existing studies of Soviet subjecthoods with a multiscale perspective attuned to naturecultural aspects in subject formation. The factors that condition era-specific models of subjecthood include state-ideology and shared cultural value-systems, but they also include concrete, bodily interactions with a primary environment—the place one has settled, the daily objects one encounters. Bodily sensoria shape the scale of intimacy in self-identification, a primary level upon which other scales of identification can be built—regional, national, global, planetary, and even cosmic.⁷ In thinking about Soviet-era subjecthoods, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries focus on state ideology, the theme of “how one-sixth of the globe was gobbled up by words,” might profitably be supplemented to include multiscale considerations of the ways that words, feelings, things, environments, and bodies intermingle, and the ways in which the bodily, enfolded human subject takes shape through encounters with all kinds of matter, living and nonliving.⁸ “File-selves,” defined primarily through the subject's relation to state ideologies, should make space for multilayered, fluid, bodily selves that are in active, constitutive interaction with everything that presents itself to sense and thought.⁹

5. Descartes, whose philosophy is commonly celebrated as a foundation of (western) modernity, is famous for his effort to prove existence through contemplation alone, stripped of any physical (i.e., environmental) context that might be susceptible to misjudgment by the senses. While Michel Foucault's discursively constructed subject is often juxtaposed to Descartes's self-sustained subject, both of these thinkers focus on the ideational at the expense of the sensory.

6. Some prominent examples of studies in Soviet subjectivities include Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1999); Eric Naiman, “On Soviet Subjects and the Scholars Who Make Them,” *The Russian Review* 60, no. 3 (July 2001): 307–15; Igal Halfin, *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Cambridge, Mass.A and London, 2003); Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, Mass.A and London, 2009); Anatoly Pinsky, “Subjectivity after Stalin: Guest Editor's Introduction,” *Russian Studies in History* 58, nos. 2–3 (2019): 79–88.

7. It is useful to distinguish between the “global” and the “planetary.” Dipesh Chakrabarti describes the global as a “humanocentric construction” and the planet as “an ensemble that constitutes the Earth system.” Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago, 2021), 19, 70.

8. This is Eric Naiman's phrase describing the aim of the volume *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space*. Eric Naiman, “Introduction,” in Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman, eds., *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space* (Seattle, 2003), xvi.

9. Sheila Fitzpatrick defines file-selves as “the selves or accounts and histories of selves that are documented in bureaucratic files labeled with the person's name,” see

The essay proceeds as a genealogical excursion into understandings of Soviet subjecthood, moving from the state-ideological framework to a multiscalar naturecultural framework. I first highlight the role of Foucauldian thinking on analyses of Soviet subjectivities and review some post-Foucauldian critical options for understanding subjecthood. Relying on Estonian and Latvian late Soviet-era critical thinkers, I then introduce a multiscalar naturecultural understanding of Soviet-era subjecthoods. I turn to environmentally attuned considerations by two important authors of the late Soviet years—the Latvian novelist Alberts Bels and the Estonian poet and essayist Jaan Kaplinski. Bels’s and Kaplinski’s critical voices contributed powerfully to their own era, but this essay will show that their work has untapped potential to advance our critical understanding of subjecthood in the twenty-first century. The focus on Estonian and Latvian authors works to extend the scope of research on Soviet subjectivities from Russian subjectivities towards an approach that is inclusive of other nationalities of the USSR, thus contributing to the “decolonizing turn” with its aim of decreasing Russo-centrism in Soviet studies.¹⁰

The particular model of subjecthood presented by Bels and Kaplinski involves a self that is a social subject, but that also deeply identifies with its surrounding ecosystem of living and nonliving matter. In their writings, a naturecultural model of subjecthood conveys an ethical sense of belonging and responsibility, together with the deep concern for growing ecological imbalances and rising levels of pollution. Other intellectuals, of course, voiced ideas similar to Bels and Kaplinski: this essay situates Bels’s and Kaplinski’s elaborations in the context of environmental thought in the 1960s–1980s, with special attention to the impact of Albert Schweitzer’s conceptual framework. Thus, this article also testifies to continuities of thought across different ideological regimes.

In this project, I use “subject” and “self” synonymously as terms that include Butlerian “socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility,” but also involve the affective experience of encountering the world.¹¹ Subjecthood is thus here understood as constantly shaped by a broad range of external engagements.¹² In Soviet studies, distinctions are sometimes made between the self and the subject; in such an approach, subjecthood tends to

Fitzpatrick, *Tear off the Masks!: Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia* (Princeton, 2005), 14.

10. The decolonizing turn aims to make proper space for discussion of non-Russian cultures in scholarly conceptions of the Russian empire, the Soviet Union, and the post-Soviet era. The decolonizing approach is premised upon an understanding of Russian/Soviet rule as employing imperial and colonial strategies. I have articulated some basic principles and provided an extensive bibliography in Epp Annus, “An Ecosocial Approach to Decolonizing Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies: Some Practical Thoughts, Potentially Useful Concepts, and Theoretical Frameworks,” *ASEEES NewsNet* 63, no. 3 (2023): 2–6; Epp Annus, *Soviet Postcolonial Studies: A View from the Western Borderlands* (London, 2018).

11. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1999), 23.

12. A good introduction to some varieties of such thinking is offered in Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject* (New York, 2015).

be taken as an ideological construct.¹³ My own position is that since ideological and affective-perceptual factors are thoroughly intertwined in subject-formation, efforts to separate these under different registers would not provide additional clarity for analysis.

The Foucauldian Subject in Soviet Studies

Cartesian and Foucauldian underpinnings are common in thinking about Soviet subjecthood. Michel Foucault's explorations of the role of power, knowledge and language in the formation of the subject dovetail very comfortably with the widespread foregrounding, in Soviet studies, of the individual's relationship with Soviet ideology, or, as a Foucauldian might put it, the individual's relationship to discursive manifestations of state power.

A Foucauldian view of the subject places an emphasis on subjects who function within constitutive networks of power-relations. The model of the panopticon, where people are situated in a clearly structured space, easily observable under the eyes of authorities, contains for many of his readers the quintessential model of power-structures: the question here is not about the "external" imposition of control *per se*, but rather about the subject's awareness of the gaze of authority and responsiveness to the possibility of being submitted to judgment.¹⁴

Surveillance in a modern state, for Foucault, is not strictly about an external gaze, but concerns the innermost structures of subjectivity. For Foucault, this formative vision of power—formative in the sense that it forms subjects in a given time and place—originates in Christian institutions and the aim of individual salvation: the Christian version of power "cannot be exercised without knowing the inside of people's minds, without exploring their souls, without making them reveal their innermost secrets."¹⁵ Such a mode of power has been taken over by the modern state as "a modern matrix of individualization."¹⁶ In this model, truth, power, surveillance, knowledge, and language are tied together in ways that make it deeply challenging to contest the established power structure from anything like an exterior vantage point.

There is no doubt that Foucault's work offers profound insight into the functioning of modern societies, yet, as was typical of many thinkers of his generation, his focus and interests are bound to logocentric and anthropocentric aspects of human existence. Given the deep influence of Foucault's

13. Anatoli Pinsky has favored the term "subject" over "self," explaining: "By subjectivity, I mean a subject or individual created historically in dialogue with dominant and less-dominant political, social, and cultural institutions and phenomena." Alexey Golubev understands by subjectivity "the ideological construction of individuality—a subject as an effect of the work of structures of power" and by selfhood "the personal and cultural misrecognition of one's bodily, emotional and discursive heterogeneity and fragmentariness—misrecognized as the unity of the self." Anatoly Pinsky, "The Diaristic Form and Subjectivity under Khrushchev," *Slavic Review* 73, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 805. Alexey Golubev, *The Things of Life: Materiality in Late Soviet Russia* (Ithaca, 2020), 24.

14. Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris, 1975).

15. Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (Summer 1982): 783.

16. *Ibid.*

thinking within the humanities and its emphasis on discursive elements of power, it comes as no surprise that mainstream Soviet studies have acquired a strongly Foucauldian flavor. Take, for example, Jochen Hellbeck's well known articulation of the relationship between the individual and communist ideology: "The individual operates like a clearing house where ideology is unpacked and personalized, and in the process the individual remakes himself into a subject with distinct and meaningful biographical features."¹⁷

From Foucault toward a Naturecultural Continuum

The after-Foucauldian and post-poststructuralist years of scholarship in the critical humanities have significantly extended the horizons of thought about subjecthoods in philosophy, cultural studies, and other fields within the humanities. Substance, stuff, flesh, matter, immanence—the vulnerable, precarious body, instead of abstract ideas, has been foregrounded, but without leaving behind questions of power, language, and ideology. "A piece of meat activated by electric waves of desire," is how Rosi Braidotti describes the embodied subject,

a text written by the unfolding of genetic encoding. . . it is a folding in of external influences and a simultaneous unfolding outwards of affects. A mobile entity, an enfolded type of memory that repeats and is capable of lasting through sets of discontinuous variations, while remaining faithful to itself.¹⁸

The affective turn has actualized categories of moods, attunements, affects, and feelings as substantial parts in shaping and expressing human subjectivity.¹⁹ New materialism has encouraged us to "think the deep, dense materiality of bodies-in-time"; ecocriticism and environmental studies have brought into focus the entangled unity of all living beings and their surrounding natural environments.²⁰ Bruno Latour has articulated how networks are "simultaneously real, like nature, narrated, like discourse, and collective, like society."²¹ Staci Alaimo has rearticulated human corporeality "as trans-corporeality, in

17. Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind*, 12–13. My suggestion is not simply that Foucault himself has had a significant direct impact on Soviet studies, but also that many other widely read social thinkers operate within a basically Foucauldian paradigm. See Anatoly Pinsky's discussion about different meanings of subjectivity in Soviet studies: Anatoly Pinsky, ed., *Posle Stalina: Pozdnesovetskaia sub'ektivnost' (1953–1985): Sbornik statei* (St. Petersburg, 2018). Pinsky also draws attention to new approaches, with the focus shifting "from discourse to materiality": Pinsky, "Subjectivity after Stalin," 85.

18. Rosi Braidotti, "Teratologies," in Claire Colebrook and Ian Buchanan, eds., *Deleuze and Feminist Theory* (Edinburgh, 2000), 159.

19. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, 2010); Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham, 2007); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, 2003); Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (Cambridge, Eng., 2015).

20. Braidotti, "Teratologies," 161; Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York, 2016).

21. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 6.

which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world.”²² Environmental humanities, econtology, critical posthumanism, transhumanism and similar fields of study have added complexities of their own to the critical humanities.²³

In Soviet studies, recent work with an environmental focus—for example, work by Batsheba Demuth and Pey-Yi Chu—has not only drawn attention to human subjects as affected by forces of nature and by “the ways energy moved over the land and through the sea,” it has also invited us to approach human relationships with natural environments “not in terms of conquest or degradation but rather co-evolution.”²⁴ Andy Bruno’s recent research on environmental subjectivities of the Soviet far north has most explicitly made an effort to “insert spatial and material interactions into a field [study of the Soviet past] that has sometimes overprivileged the impact of discourses”—an aim that the present study shares.²⁵ These excellent works often focus on the remote or exceptional or catastrophic: Kate Brown’s work on plutonium disasters, Bathsheba Demuth’s on the Bering Strait, Andy Bruno’s on the Kola peninsula and the Tunguska event, Pey-Yi Chu’s on permafrost are outstanding examples.²⁶ Mieka Erley’s recent monograph, *On Russian Soil: Myth and Materiality* (2021), draws attention to the nature-culture continuum at the heart of Russian culture, with its attention to “soil as a crucial site for modernization and its fantasies.”²⁷ Erley highlights the central role of soil in Russian culture and nation-building by focusing “on modern myths, discourses, and metaphors related to soil” and on “the resistances of soil as matter.”²⁸

Beyond the field of environmental history, new directions in the humanities have found other places to reside in Soviet studies. Studies of science fiction have turned toward eco-materialism and toward transhumanist and posthumanist approaches: Colleen McQuillen has proposed an eco-materialist reading of late-Soviet science fiction and has highlighted “the complex interplay of bodies and environment” in Pavel Amnuel’s work; Elana Gomel has explored how Russian science fiction combined humanism

22. Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington, 2010), 2.

23. A good overview of the many and varied new trends in the critical humanities can be found in Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova, eds., *Posthuman Glossary* (London, 2018).

24. Batsheba Demuth, *Floating Coast: An Environmental History of the Bering Strait* (New York, 2019), 4; Pey-Yi Chu, *The Life of Permafrost: A History of Frozen Earth in Russian and Soviet Science* (Toronto, 2021), 21.

25. Andy Bruno, “Environmental Subjectivities from the Soviet North,” *Slavic Review* 78, no. 1 (Spring 2019): 1.

26. Kate Brown, *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters* (Oxford, 2013); Kate Brown, *Manual for Survival: A Chernobyl Guide to the Future* (New York, 2019); Demuth, *Floating Coast*; Andy Bruno, *The Nature of Soviet Power: An Arctic Environmental History* (New York, 2016); Andy Bruno, *Tunguska: A Siberian Mystery and Its Environmental Legacy* (Cambridge, Eng., 2022); Chu, *Life of Permafrost*.

27. Mieka Erley, *On Russian Soil: Myth and Materiality* (Ithaca, 2021), 2.

28. *Ibid.*, 3.

with posthumanism.²⁹ In a more down-to-earth mode, Susan Reid, Alexey Golubev, and others have stressed the impact of material objects and human-made environments in supporting the sense of selfhood.³⁰ Choi Chatterjee together with Karen Petrone has outlined the wide range of social factors that impact subject positions:

Perhaps if we can situate the Soviet self along a continuum of the domestic setting, the intimate collective, the larger socially imagined realities of class, ethnicity, gender, religious affiliations, and nationality and explore how it intersects with the discourses and practices of the state, we might better be able to trace the individual's range of possible actions within his or her complex and multiple subject positions.³¹

How, then, to conceptualize Soviet-era naturecultural subjecthood, while navigating the Cartesian trap that would overemphasize the rational consciousness at the expense of one's bodily situatedness in the world? Moreover, while renewing our attention toward the basic matter of existence, we also need to avoid the "romantic trap" of uncritically regarding Soviet-era subjects as living in harmonious unity with the forces of nature. What is needed, in principle, is rather simple: a more attentive eye toward the plurality of actual life, toward the fact that humans have always lived in relationship with the earth and everything that grows on it, and with non-human creatures of various kinds. Once the scholarly gaze adjusts its vision to see these aspects of human beings-in-the-world, they come to appear everywhere: in everyday practices, in fiction and in essayistic writing, in public discussions, in all kinds of cultural production.

Toward a Multiscalar Naturecultural Subjecthood: Bels, Kaplinski, and Methodological Premises

Critique of the Cartesian worldview and the dismantling of the nature-culture opposition were present in late Soviet-era articulations of selfhood, as were attempts to forge a worldview grounded, in the words of Estonian mycologist and science communicator Ain Raitviir, on the "ethical sense of unity with all nature."³² Raitviir criticized the Cartesian glorification of human minds at the expense of other living beings—and the corresponding demotion of those other beings as "soulless automata."³³ The poet Jaan Kaplinski (1941–2021), likewise, equated Cartesianism with "outdated" and careless attitudes toward

29. Colleen McQuillen, "Human Adaptation in Late-Soviet Environmental Science Fiction," 106, and Elana Gomel, "Our Posthuman Past: Subjectivity, History, and Utopia in Late-Soviet Science Fiction, 37–54, in Colleen McQuillen and Julia Vaingurt, eds., *The Human Reimagined: Posthumanism in Russia* (Brighton, MA, 2018).

30. Susan E. Reid, "Cold War Binaries and the Culture of Consumption in the Late Soviet Home," *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* 8, no. 1 (February 2016): 17–43; Golubev, *The Things of Life*.

31. Choi Chatterjee and Karen Petrone, "Models of Selfhood and Subjectivity: The Soviet Case in Historical Perspective," *Slavic Review* 67, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 986.

32. Ain Raitviir, "Aukartus elu ees," *Looming*, no. 12 (1970): 1858, 1867. Unless stated otherwise, translations from Estonian, Latvian, and Russian are mine—Epp Annus.

33. *Ibid.*, 1867.

animals; he instead strove to promote a respectful and caring attitude toward all living beings.³⁴

Works by Alberts Bels (born 1938) and Kaplinski allow us to outline a late Soviet-era model of the multiscalar self, one defined in the context of the naturecultural continuum and through its relational ties to the surrounding environment. Both Bels and Kaplinski emerged as important critical voices in the 1960s and sustained their position through the 1970s and beyond.³⁵ Bels wrote conceptual fiction that focused on urgent social issues of the day and provided detailed cultural analysis; his slow-paced novels were often supported by sociological data, including lengthy passages of philosophical contemplation. Bels's novel *Saknes* (Roots, 1982) could be read as a semi-fictional ecological tract or as a manual for a forest worker: the primary storyline of the novel follows—in great detail—the lives of forest workers in the Latvian SSR in 1978–79. The novel displays deep concern about the state of local Latvian forests as well as the state of planet Earth, and is thus of particular relevance for this essay. Kaplinski, an Estonian poet, was among the leading critical thinkers in Tartu intellectual circles, a polyglot who read and translated from many languages and was later nominated for the Nobel prize in literature. He was deeply interested in aboriginal cultures in different parts of the world, yet also very much invested in modern poetry, and throughout his oeuvre he addressed environmental concerns. This article takes a special interest in his environmentally attuned essays from the late 1960s and 1970s.

The status of Bels and Kaplinski is quite different from the ordinary diarists who have often been under scrutiny in Soviet studies: both authors articulated well-grounded cultural critique and performed serious social analysis. It makes sense, then, not to treat Bels's and Kaplinski's writings only as primary sources for studying Soviet-era subjecthoods (as one might with Soviet-era diaries), but also as critical analyses that merit further elaboration.

This essay's analysis of Bels's and Kaplinski's model of selfhood considers three aspects in the buildup of the multiscalar self: (1) the scale of intimacy and the formation of the self through the affective and ideational relation to the surrounding environment; (2) care and reverence for life as the grounding attunement; (3) the tangled unity of the local and the intimate, the global and the planetary. The basic premises of the naturecultural "theory of the subject," developed in the following sections, include an emphasis on multirelationality and fluidity: subjecthood is here understood not as a self-enclosed set of fixed characteristics, but as a space of relationality, with a great variety of constituents continuously contributing to the sense of self. In Judith Butler's words, "I am, quite fundamentally, occasioned by what is outside of me."³⁶

34. Jaan Kaplinski, "Eelarvamused ja eetika. Utoopilisi mõtisklusi," *Looming*, no. 12 (1968): 1861.

35. Jaan Kaplinski lost much of his standing among the Estonian intelligentsia of the early 1980s. He had been an instigator of the *Neljakümne kiri*, a letter written and disseminated in 1980 and signed by many Estonian intellectuals, warning of the consequences of Russification policies. In the wake of police interrogations and many searches of his premises, Kaplinski issued a public statement, distancing himself from the letter, an event that caused great general disappointment.

36. Butler, *Senses of the Subject*, 45.

A well-functioning self is composed of multiple relationalities and operates successfully in different overlapping registers—the self is multirelational. The multirelational self is multiscalar, as we will observe in the next sections, it can meaningfully make sense of itself on several scales of identification, from the intimate to the global and the planetary. Fields of relationality that contribute to subjectivation are in flux; borrowing from Maurice Merleau-Ponty, we can understand the trajectories of subjecthood as forming “knots of significations which will be unraveled and tied up again in a different way in a new network of knowledge and experience.”³⁷ From various spaces of relationality, certain relations can be foregrounded as constitutive, while leaving other relations in the shadows—a process of selection that accompanies any effort to turn the multiplicity of life into text, including Bels’s fiction and Kaplinski’s poetry and essays.

The Formation of the Self Through its Affective and Ideational Relation with its Environment, or, the Scale of Intimacy in Subject-Formation

For both Bels and Kaplinski, the developmental trajectory of a small child offers material for ruminating upon the role of intimate environments in the formation of subjecthood. Here, we should take into account that various building blocks in the formation of selfhood can be analyzed on the basis of three basic modes of encounter: (1) direct sensory contact, such as touch or vision, a material connection with things physically at hand—everyday objects, nearby environments, family, friends. These are entangled with (2) ideas, values, dreams, and imaginaries, and are colored by (3) affects, attunements, and emotions—awe, wonder, reverence, anxiety, fear, love, pain, loss, and longing. These encounters are made meaningful through discourse: for a modern self, it is close to impossible to escape the rule of language and verbalization, to step outside of meaning-making processes.³⁸ In the development of a child, both Bels and Kaplinski foreground the role of direct sensory contact and the affective bond created between children and the material presence of their direct surroundings.

In the autobiographical essay *Mina (Myself, 1973)*, Jaan Kaplinski suggests that the surroundings during one’s first years of life will provide a grounding role in subsequent formations of one’s personality.³⁹ Kaplinski reflects on his own first surroundings as a child: he was born in the countryside, his family estate was seized by the German army in late 1943, and the Kaplinski family was given a substitute apartment in Tartu, which was destroyed later in the

37. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, 1964), 142; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Partout et Nulle Part,” *Signes* (Paris, 1960), 178–79.

38. From another perspective, Donna Haraway is surely correct to emphasize that “We also live with each other in the flesh [with animals—Epp Annus] in ways not exhausted by our ideologies.” Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*, 17.

39. Kaplinski attributes such a view to psychoanalysis. In psychoanalysis, childhood is indeed assigned formative importance, but not typically in terms of one’s nonhuman, physical surroundings, such as trees or fields. Jaan Kaplinski, *Kust tuli öö: Proosat* (Tallinn, 1990), 42.

war. Kaplinski reminisces and reflects on the formative influence of these early experiences:

Yet as the first and the most authentic environmental background, I still remember the house and the summery garden encircled by dark firs, separated from the rest of the world. . . . in retrospect, I realize that I have always longed to go back there; I have been, consciously and unconsciously, in search of the house, the garden, and the forest in the countryside.⁴⁰

The author then goes on to further describe his earliest memories as a two-year old, valorizing these as “most authentic”: the buzzing of bees around his grandfather’s beehives, the midsummer atmosphere with its sharp contrasts between the heat of the sun and the coolness of shade, an old farm dwelling, a spacious garden by the house, the hedge of full-grown fir trees surrounding the garden and the dwelling—in short, a typical midsummer scene on a central-Estonian pre-Soviet farmstead.

Kaplinski spent his post-war childhood summers with relatives, in another old farmstead with a comparable atmosphere, and later, in 1970, after indeed spending years in search of a suitable place, he bought the old Mutiku farmstead to establish his summer-home there.⁴¹ For Kaplinski, acquiring the Mutiku home resonated specifically as part of his quest for selfhood.⁴² “What is me? How am I myself?”—in his 1973 essay, Kaplinski calls finding the answer to such questions “perhaps the most important thing that I have to do.”⁴³ Among all the potential building blocks of selfhood, Kaplinski foregrounds attentiveness toward natural environments, a lifestyle close to nature, and an affinity with one’s surroundings: in the essay *Mina* these are connected to a child’s primary impressions, imprinted in memory.

The novel *Saknes* (*Roots*, 1982) by Alberts Bels presents a “case study” similar to the one given by Kaplinski.⁴⁴ The first pages of *Saknes* present the coming-to-self-awareness story of little Jānis, whose childhood home (like Kaplinski’s) is an old farm dwelling, which now serves as the forest district headquarters and provides housing for the chief forester (Jānis’s father) and his family. The reader is informed that Jānis’s “first and deepest encounter

40. *Ibid.*, 43–44.

41. Jaan Kaplinski, “A Home Named Tammiku,” trans. Saul Lipitz, *Index on Censorship* 33, no. 3 (2004): 140–47; Thomas Salumets, *Unforced Flourishing: Understanding Jaan Kaplinski* (Montreal, 2014), 31.

42. “Return to the countryside” was a common cultural trend of the late Soviet decades. While for many, the “rural turn” meant acquiring a small plot and setting up a light-structured summer home in the vicinity of a city, others bought a farm home or renovated the family farm buildings. Such dwellings were generally associated with a strong sense of authenticity. Epp Annus, *Sotskolonialism Eesti NSV-s: Võim, kultuur, argielu* (Tartu, 2019), 259–71.

43. Kaplinski, *Kust tuli öö*, 52.

44. Kaplinski’s oeuvre is strongly autobiographical and many elements of his life-story are known down to the level of sensorial impressions—of Bels’s life, by contrast, only very basic facts are given in interviews and secondary sources: Bels grew up in the countryside, on the family farm, until he went to study at a technical school in Riga in 1953. Both men grew up fatherless. Dace Lüse and Dace Üdre, *Alberts Bels* (Riga, 2010), 12–13; “Alberts Bels,” Nacionālā enciklopēdija, <https://enciklopedija.lv/skirklis/90245-Alberts-Bels> (accessed December 7, 2022).

with the world” had happened when he awoke in his baby carriage, under the great oak tree, and had seen the oak tree branches intertwining and stretching upwards, their leaves moving slowly in the wind and making a peaceful, continuous rustling. “The world opened up for the boy through the deep-green crowns of the trees,” and the familiar faces of the father and mother “merged in the boy’s consciousness with the dark green oak leaves.”⁴⁵ The narrator then proceeds to describe the gradual accretion of new elements to Jānis’s world, from his wanderings around home, in the fields and in the forest, and then later also kindergarten and school.

We can deduce a preliminary theory of subjecthood from Bels’s and Kaplinski’s coming-to-awareness narratives: both envision the gradual formation of the subject from his or her primary contact with the surrounding world. Bels’s poetic description is painted in harmonious tones and Kaplinski’s is overshadowed by loss and nostalgia, yet both convey a culturally acknowledged logic of self-formation with deep roots in countryside life: there, the child is often taken along on caretakers’ daily tasks, and thus grows and develops in direct contact with natural environments. Bels’s description in particular represents a common cultural practice, dating back to pre-Soviet eras and traceable both in folklore, visual arts, and fiction.⁴⁶ Such subject-formation foregrounds the role of natural environments on the scale of intimacy in subjecthood—there, the formative relations are those that pertain to one’s direct sensory contact with one’s immediate surroundings, together with one’s primary human interactions.

Bels and Kaplinski thus propose a model of selfhood that extends beyond the body, to include the surrounding environment in a way that, in Kaplinski’s case, makes one strive to return to such a surrounding in search of self-restoration or self-completion.⁴⁷ This line of thinking resonates with the concept of the self-world or *Umwelt*, developed by the Tartu University graduate Jakob von Uexküll (1864–1944), an important environmental thinker whose ideas were discussed during the late Soviet era also.⁴⁸ In a 1982 article for

45. Alberts Bels, *Saknes: Romāns* (Rīga, 1982), 9.

46. One characteristic example comes from the canonical Estonian folk song *Lauliku lapsepõlv*, given arrangements by various composers, with lines such as “Mother took the cradle to the hayfield.” One might also recall here the environmentally-grounded identity of the “bugs of the earth,” suggested in Diana Mincyte’s research on Stalin-era subsidiary farming in Lithuania, which, she showed, produced subjects “in tune with the natural environment.” One of Mincyte’s informants went so far as to declare that “above all we were the bugs of the earth.” Diana Mincyte, “Everyday Environmentalism: The Practice, Politics, and Nature of Subsidiary Farming in Stalin’s Lithuania,” *Slavic Review* 68, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 43.

47. In a somewhat similar mode, I have elsewhere described how homely places and objects become spatial extensions of the self. Epp Annus, “Comparative Spatial Intimacies and the Affective Geography of Home: Imaginaries and Sense-Regimes in the Soviet-Era Baltics,” *Space and Culture* (Online First, March 2, 2023).

48. Uexküll’s influence extends from biology to phenomenology and semiotics (giving rise to biosemiotics). Environmental studies have in recent decades drawn attention to the ways that Uexküll’s theories transgress the nature-culture divide. Uexküll’s summer home in Puhtu, Estonia was nationalized after the Soviet takeover and later housed a research station for ornithology. Later in the Soviet years, three-day springtime seminars in theoretical biology were occasionally held there; one in 1977 was specifically dedicated

an Estonian popular science magazine, *Horisont*, Uexküll's framework was explained like this:

Uexküll tries to determine what in an organism creates an organic whole. And he concluded that this whole, this physiological building plan, includes, in addition to the body of the organism, the part of the environment that surrounds the organism also. . . . this surrounding part belonging together with the organism is the *Umwelt*.⁴⁹

Uexküll's concept of an *Umwelt* helps explicate Bels's and Kaplinski's sense of a subjecthood that exceeds the strict bounds of the body and takes account of the subject's relational bond to his or her surroundings, including the way the subject makes it meaningful for him- or herself.⁵⁰ The self is a relational entity that extends outward, into its "aroundness."⁵¹ From the perspective of subject formation, the process of shaping the chaos of the world into meaningful entities unfolds as part of the continual process of human self-formation. The creation of an *Umwelt* or self-world is at the same time also the process of subjectivation. In this process, some details of the world as chaos become foregrounded and arranged in a meaningful way, some others are lost, and some become cornerstones in the elaboration of one's sense of self.

From here, more questions follow: how do humans delimit the boundaries of their self-world? What role do affective linkages play in this process? How is the scale of intimacy in subjecthood, one's self-identification with one's primary surroundings, tied to the shared human world with its multiscalar accretions? How are particular models of selfhood connected to transnational networks of ideas? The next section focuses on the role of affect—here, feelings of awe and wonder—both in binding the subject together with its surrounding environment and in the circulation of transnational environmental thinking. One of the touchstones in this inquiry will be Albert Schweitzer's influential ideas about a reverence for life.

to Uexküll's research. Jaan Kaplinski was among the participants of the 1977 seminar; Yuri Lotman participated in 1982 (Kaplinski was acquainted with Lotman, but from among Tartu-Moscow school of semiotics participants, he was closest with Aleksandr Piatigorsky). "Kroonika," *Eesti Loodus*, no. 9 (1977): 619; Kalevi Kull, "Jakob von Uexküll: An Introduction," *Semiotica* 134, nos. 1–4 (2001): 1–59; Kalevi Kull and Ekaterina Velmezova, "Jaan Kaplinski ja semiootika," *Acta Semiotica Estica* 15 (2018): 194–213.

49. Kalevi Kull, "Et elu mõista, tuleb kaasa elada," *Horisont*, no. 3 (1982): 32–33. Compare also to Kalevi Kull's later definition of *Umwelt* in Kalevi Kull, "Umwelt and Modelling," in Paul Copley, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Semiotics* (London, 2010), 43.

50. Kaplinski refers directly to Uexküll in his work. Uexküll's ideas also circulated actively in the wider German-speaking cultural sphere; as Timothy Morton and others have observed, Uexküll's views "profoundly influenced" Martin Heidegger, a phenomenological philosopher whose works are presently going through a new revival in twenty-first-century environmental philosophy. Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), 99.

51. The eco-philosopher Timothy Morton explains *Umwelt* through Martin Heidegger's thinking (which Morton calls "supremely environmental philosophy") as "the deep ontological sense in which things are 'around'" or "an 'aroundness' of being in the world." Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 83, 98, 135.

Care and Reverence for Life as Grounding Affective Attunements

The early pages of Bels's novel *Saknes* describe, in minute detail, the slow movement of two people through the forest at dawn, on Tuesday, April 24, 1979: Jānis Liepsargs takes his eight-year-old son to hear, for the first time in his life, the early morning song of a wood grouse. The wood grouse, a large bird with a majestic tail that can be fanned wide, is a rare sight, but this cautious bird stops singing and flies away at the least suspicious sound. In Bels's novel the boy follows his father into the forest, taking great care not to frighten the bird; both stay quiet as the cock makes clicking sounds and they move very cautiously, just a step or two, when the bird makes swishing sounds. They sense how the forest is alive and how it breathes. The boy takes care to precisely imitate his father's every move, to stop right when the father stops, and to move as slowly and quietly as the father does. Little Jānis is utterly disappointed at first, when he cannot catch the sound of grouse, even as his father points him the direction. As they get closer to the bird and the boy hears the song of the wood grouse, he feels as if the forest had become full of life. Moving very cautiously, they get quite close to the bird and admire the beauty of its feathers in the first rays of daylight.

This beautiful, languorous description, with its attentiveness to a sense of wonder, is presented mainly from the perspective of eight-year-old Jānis, full of excitement over his great adventure moving through the forest in early dawn hours. The whole seven-page passage is as much about the forest and the wood grouse as it is about the human relationship to the forest and its inhabitants, and about one's ability to hear, to listen, and to be both caring and attentive towards one's surroundings.

Again, Bels's novelistic world-building bears close similarity to essayistic writings by Jaan Kaplinski.⁵² Kaplinski, too, writes in detail about human encounters with natural environments, using phrasing akin to Bels's, with an emphasis on the sense of wonder, on seeing more fully, and on the necessity of moving with cautious respect for the sensitivities of the world. In his 1972 essay *Ökoloogia ja ökonomika* (Ecology and Economy), Kaplinski refers to a hazel grouse, a close relative to Bels's wood grouse:

Without even noticing we will start stepping very quietly, so as not to disturb the hazel grouse with chicks or the pike spying under the leaf of a water lily. We will become more modest, more cautious, and smaller. And yet we begin to see more, to partake in more than when we rushed through the forest and through the world, noisily and in a hurry.⁵³

52. Such affinities are obviously not a particularity of Baltic literatures. Within the wider Soviet sphere, comparisons can be made with Leonid Leonov's novel *Russkiy les* (Russian Forest), the works of canonical Kirgiz author Chingiz Aitmatov, and many others. See also: "Antropocene and Russian Literature," ed. Alec Brookes and Elena Fratto, a special issue of *Russian Literature* 114–115 (June–July 2020).

53. Jaan Kaplinski, "Ökoloogia ja ökonomika," in his *See ja teine* (Tartu, 1996), 79–80. Kaplinski's essay remained unpublished until 1996; it is not known how widely the manuscript circulated before its publication.

In the 1972 essay, the attitude of wonder and care toward natural environments and toward all living beings is associated with Albert Schweitzer's dictum "Reverence for Life"—an attitude that, according to Kaplinski, many implicitly follow without the need to put it into words. "A person does not express or talk about things that are taken for granted," explains Kaplinski.⁵⁴ Yet those who avoid disturbing the ants in their path or who do not kill a viper are proceeding from the impulse of care, awe, and reverence.⁵⁵

In his 1968 essay *Eelarvamused ja eetika. Utoopilisi mõtisklusi* (Prejudices and Ethics: Utopian Contemplations), Kaplinski explicitly opposes the Cartesian disregard for the non-human with Schweitzer's "Reverence for Life," here explained by Kaplinski as "wonderment toward the life unfolding in all beings and the commitment to defend this life."⁵⁶ For Kaplinski, "reverence for life" is understood as part of an ethical position that combines emotion and reason and that is highly critical of the "infantile" privileging of humans over other lifeforms.⁵⁷ Kaplinski envisions a utopian world where a peaceful balance is established in nature and in human-animal interactions: "Wild birds will fly in the homes of this future human being and deer and giraffe will peer inside the windows. There will be no substantial difference left between forest and park, as there will be no more difference between wild and domestic animals."⁵⁸ The 1968 essay bears a "cautiously optimistic" tone: Kaplinski seems to be sincerely hopeful about the "progress of human conscience" over the ages and about the possibility of grounding human interactions with natural environments on a reverence for life.⁵⁹

Late Soviet-era environmental thought took inspiration from a diverse body of thinkers, but Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) and his promotion of reverence for life made an especially distinguished contribution.⁶⁰ Kaplinski's contemporaries shared the poet's appreciation of Schweitzer's ideas: from 1965 onward, references to Schweitzer appeared frequently in the Estonian media, in various ecological discussions, literary analyses, pedagogical writings, and in broader cultural conversations. In 1969, in the journal *Nõukogude Kool* [Soviet School], Jaan Eilart even suggested supplementing school curricula with concrete pedagogical steps based on Schweitzer's ideas and promoting the general aim of "sustaining and developing maximum ecological diversity" as the main task "everywhere on Earth, in all continents, in all locations."⁶¹ In

54. *Ibid.*, 54.

55. *Ibid.*, 53–54.

56. Kaplinski, "Eelarvamused ja eetika. Utoopilisi mõtisklusi," 1861.

57. *Ibid.*, 1863.

58. *Ibid.*, 1865.

59. *Ibid.*, 1862–63.

60. For Kaplinski himself, a far greater impact than Schweitzer's was left by the Estonian religious philosopher Uku Masing, his mentor who lived in internal exile, unable to make public use of his erudition. There was an important affinity between Masing's and Schweitzer's views: both felt close to the non-living world, both found inspiration in eastern religions, and both were highly critical of western colonialism. Salumets, *Unforced Flourishing*, 89–100; Sven Vabar, "Uurimus Uku Masingu tõest" (MA Thesis, University of Tartu, 2007).

61. Jaan Eilart, "Teoreetilisi lähtekohti looduskaitse käsitlemiseks koolis," *Nõukogude Kool*, no. 7 (1969): 538, 541.

a similar spirit, Ain Raitviir wrote a lengthy essay about Schweitzer's life and thoughts and stated that "an ethical world-view is actually an ethical sense of one's unity with all nature."⁶² In 1985, Kalevi Kull and Rein Kuresoo credited Schweitzer for establishing "a potential foundation for modern ecological ethics."⁶³

Schweitzer's popularity and influence in the USSR reached well beyond the Baltics; indeed his Baltic success relied on his legitimation by the centers of Soviet power.⁶⁴ Particularly after his death in 1965, Schweitzer, a promoter of peace and nuclear disarmament and an anti-colonial thinker, came to be highly regarded and widely translated in the USSR.⁶⁵ In the 1973 introduction to the Russian translation of Schweitzer's *Kultur und Ethik* (Civilization and Ethics), Vladimir Karpushin locates Schweitzer's ideas within the state-recognized Marxist-Leninist paradigm and claims Schweitzer as a critic of the "great social tragedy"—namely the cultural crisis of modern bourgeois society. According to Karpushin, "The way out of this crisis was provided by the theory of Marxism, the end to this tragedy of culture is brought by socialism."⁶⁶ Such Marxist contextualizations affirmed Schweitzer as a thinker in tune with the values of the Soviet state.⁶⁷

Baltic environmental thinkers, for their part, did not duplicate Karpushin's effort to identify Schweitzer's critique as having special pertinence to bourgeois society in the west. Somewhat to the contrary, they identified themselves as living in the global world—not a socialist paradise—that was suffering

62. Raitviir, "Aukartus elu ees," 1867.

63. Kalevi Kull and Rein Kuresoo, "Albert Schweitzer Eestis," *Looming*, no. 7 (1985): 989.

64. Schweitzer first gained international renown as one of the most celebrated organists and Bach-interpreters of his day. He forsook his successful career as a scholar and musician in order to study medicine and become a doctor; he then set up, financed, and worked for decades at a hospital in Lambaréné in French Equatorial Africa (now Gabon). Like everyone, Schweitzer was constrained by the horizons of his times, the mid-twentieth century: he was fiercely anticolonial, yet he was paternalistic toward the natives in his hospital in Lambaréné; he was deeply influenced by Indian religions, yet his readings will strike contemporary eyes as Orientalist.

65. Russian-language Schweitzeriana includes translations and several biographies; of these, the lengthy and detailed biography by Boris Nosik, *Shveitser* (Moscow, 1971) was translated from Russian into Estonian (1976) and Latvian (1980). Also widely read and translated was Iurii Levada's 1965 memorial-article: Iurii Levada, "A. Shveitser—myslitel' i chelovek," *Voprosy Filosofii*, no. 12 (1965): 91–98. In Estonian, a collection of Schweitzer's essays *Aukartus elu ees* (Reverence for Life) was published in 1972, and *Kultuur ja eetika* followed in 1984. In Latvian, *Vēstules no Lambarenēs* (Letters from Lambaréné) was published in Riga in 1982, in Lithuanian, *Tarp vandenu ir džunglių* (Between Water and Jungle) in Vilnius in 1979 and *Kultūra ir etika* in 1989.

66. Vladimir Karpushin, "Predisloviie," in Albert Schweitzer, *Kul'tura i etika* (Moscow, 1973), 29.

67. Frey and Hasselmann refer to another striking claim of communist exceptionalism, in which a 1946 Cheliabinsk exhibition mirrored claims in international geology, but with additional emphasis on the exceptionally fruitful "combination of minerals and communism." Felix Frey and Anne Hasselmann, "Stones at War: The Chelyabinsk War Exhibition of 1946 and Soviet Environmental Thought," *Environmental History* 26, no. 3 (July 2021): 548.

“an ethical bankruptcy” that “threatens life on Earth with collapse.”⁶⁸ For Kaplinski, Raitviir, Eilart, and others, “reverence for life” served to bridge local and global ethical perspectives: it supported an articulation of subjecthood through its affective relationship to the surrounding environment, but also linked the subject and its self-world to global environmental ideas.⁶⁹ Such multiscale subjectification will be further explored in the next section.

From the Local and the Intimate to the Global and the Planetary

Alberts Bels’s novel *Saknes* includes a precisely dated storyline unfolding in Latvia, 1978–79, yet the novel also positions its characters within the larger continuum of life on earth, sometimes described in global and planetary terms. Human activities, the growing trees, the factory nearby, era-specific issues of pollution and shortages, the role of cultural memory in people’s lives—all this is presented as forming one complex social and environmental life-system, symbolized through the image of roots that intertwine and even grow into each other. Roots also symbolize the hidden historical “depth” and the planetary scope behind concrete present-day phenomena such as Latvia’s pine forests: the pine forests are not “just there”; they are produced by millennia-long climatological developments and are part of a planetary ecosystem.

One of the central passages in *Saknes* combines a scene of illegal tree-cutting with a discussion of global and planetary developments. The narrative voice gives a summary of the change in local climate conditions since the end of the Ice Age and recalls the first emergence of forests in the Baltic Sea region thousands of years ago. The narrator highlights the planetary importance of forests: “The mother of humanity is the ocean,” the reader learns, and yet the oceans are polluted. “Each year, nine million tons of waste are thrown into the Pacific Ocean. Thirty-nine million tons of waste are thrown into the Atlantic.”⁷⁰ The forest, another great producer of oxygen on Earth, as Bels’s narrator points out, has remained relatively pure.⁷¹

In the same passage, *Saknes* offers the image of a shared train ride as a metaphor for the interconnectedness of all life on Earth:

We all sit in a train.

What! Men are surprised.

This train is BIOGEOCENOSIS!

68. Kaplinski, “Eelarvamus ja eetika,” 1865. Estonian essayists did make brief reference to Marxism, but without Karpushin’s self-congratulatory capitalism-communism opposition. Instead they situate Marxist thought within the centuries-long continuum in the development of ideas. Kaplinski includes Marxism among “ideologies of dissatisfaction” that develop utopian aspirations. Raitviir, “Aukartus elu ees,” 1868; Kaplinski, “Eelarvamus ja eetika,” 1864.

69. Similar ideas continue to circulate in the field of environmental research: Dipesh Chakrabarty’s monograph has subsections “Modernity and the Loss of Reverence” and “Wonder and Reverence.” Chakrabarty does not refer to Schweitzer, however. Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, 194–204.

70. Bels, *Saknes*, 130.

71. *Ibid.*, 130.

Never in our lives had we heard such a word!

The train is long and heavily laden. In the first car ride microorganisms, in the second—plants, then animals, and in the very last one, packed together like sardines in a tin—human beings.”⁷²

The narrator proceeds to describe the heavily laden train, suggesting that its cars are the product of climatological, geological, geographic, biological, cosmological, and agrotechnical conditions. This train of “biogeocenosis,” the train of the ecosystem, makes no stops on its journey through the millennia, and even the dead remain on board.⁷³ As the narrator points out, the harm done by the illegal cutting of young pine trees is not simply damage done to a few trees, but damage done to the ecosystem where humankind is bound together with microorganisms, plants, and animals. The vision of life thus presented in the novel is both multiscalar and intertwined: human selves and their actions are situated on both local and planetary scales, the scale of concrete trees in a forest, bound within the planetary scale of shared existence on Earth. Human selves are situated in concrete, at-hand locations, but they are also part of the planetary “train of life.” Such positioning also includes an implicit suggestion that, behind damaging incidents of forest-theft or industrial pollution, is a deficiency in planetary-scale thought, a mono-scalar, blinkered vision of life and one’s position within it.

Kaplinski echoes these concerns expressed in *Saknes*, but the Estonian essayist also directly ties his critique of industrialization to questions of selfhood. An important theme in Kaplinski’s explorations of selfhood can be articulated as *the reach of one’s self-world*: in Kaplinski’s view, developed societies, both capitalist and socialist, have constricted human consciousness. Kaplinski juxtaposes a caring attitude toward all living beings and natural environments—reverence for life—with the effort to accelerate economic growth in the industrial era, the production of both new needs and new products to satisfy these needs, and, as a result, cultural value-systems that place their emphasis on the accumulation of things.⁷⁴ In the essay *Ökoloogia ja ökonoomika*, Kaplinski writes:

We want what is beautiful and expensive to be our “own,” close to us, at the reach of hand and eye. . . . We dress well, we furnish our apartments as nicely as we can. If the house belongs to us, we embellish this, too, yet we relegate the street and the city to oblivion, extending hardly any care at all to the cultivation and beautification of landscapes beyond this narrow sphere—it appears that the limits of our selves can be measured within a couple of meters, sometimes perhaps a couple dozen meters, but rarely more.

It seems that the human being itself has, in recent centuries, suffered a significant contraction of its boundaries.⁷⁵

72. *Ibid.*, 128.

73. *Ibid.*, 128. The term biogeocenosis was introduced by Vladimir Sukachev in the 1940s and was used in the USSR for describing specific conglomerations that combined both biological and geological components. Bels uses the term rather freely.

74. Kaplinski, “Ökoloogia ja ökonoomika,” 62.

75. *Ibid.*, 70.

The reach of human self-worlds is historically conditioned and grounded in the sociocultural logic of a given society. Accordingly, Kaplinski poses a profound identification with the environment as characteristic of our ancestors in the pre-industrial era, such that the constitutive relationship between the self and its environment extended far beyond one's belongings and direct surroundings; industrial societies, by contrast, he poses as having brought about "the minimization of the human self."⁷⁶ The diminished modern self is derived from its indifference toward environmental problems and an impoverished sense of responsibility: "Perhaps we have shrunk the self to its minimum, in order to shirk responsibility for our unecological deeds, to disavow them as at an 'exterior' remove."⁷⁷ For the planet Earth to be a place for sustainable living, self-worlds need to be extensive. The sense of self needs to be tied to more than just a familiar sweater, the walls of one's apartment, the home-garden; in short, human selves need to adopt a more multi-scalar vision that includes larger, even planetary considerations.

The writings of Bels and Kaplinski present an environmentally conscious subject who emerges as multiscalar: a subject who identifies through his or her direct, affectively experienced environment, but who also realizes the intrication of local, global, and planetary processes. Such a subject-position includes, first of all, the scale of intimacy or the phenomenological scale: the belonging-together with one's directly sensible surroundings, including natural environments. The sense of wonder and a care-taking stance strengthens the affective link between the subject and its environment. In addition to the intimate-phenomenological groundedness of the subject, the imaginative extension of the human self-world scales up to assume global and planetary reach and includes a vision of the unity of all living and nonliving matter, as something calling upon one's resources of care. The binding link between different scales of subjecthood is provided by care and concern: in this sense, *subject is constituted by relations of care*, as these stretch from the intimate to the planetary and beyond.⁷⁸ The writings of Kaplinski and Bels skip across different scales, sometimes focusing on closely knit self-worlds, sometimes on the earthly as directly graspable and at the same time a metaphysical entity, and sometimes extending to embrace a planetary wholeness. The scalarity of selfhood is here not a neatly nested system; instead, subjecthood emerges as trans-scalar, and global processes reflected back in local circumstance. The global (conceived as distinct from the planetary) is predominantly the negative side of the story, the site of global pollution and devastation caused by

76. *Ibid.*, 72.

77. *Ibid.*, 73.

78. Such an accretion is deeply Heideggerian: Martin Heidegger gives a poetic vision of the nature of care through one of the fables of Hyginus, in which humanity is created from the union of the body, spirit, and care. The fable assigns "Care" (Cura) the role of shaping the first human being and thus the right to possess it for as long as it lives. For Heidegger, *Sorge* (care in German) is not just one of many possibilities of human life; *Sorge* is a primordial structure that lays the ground for human existential potential. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen, 1963), 198–222. Heidegger's ideas were discussed in Estonian intellectual circles in the late Soviet era.

industrialization driven by the desire for quick profit, a desire shared by both capitalist and socialist world orders.

This article has discussed in detail various imbrications among local, global, and planetary scales, without linking these to the national scale. In his environmental writings, Jaan Kaplinski leaves national particularities fully out of consideration. Bels's *Saknes*, however, occasionally underscores specifically Latvian attributes of the naturecultural unity presented by the novel. The national scale is activated in his reference to Latvian pines and Latvian forests, in his introductory histories of local animal species, and in his assertion of the importance of cultural continuity and transgenerational memory. *Saknes* presents its theme of roots and rootedness by way of condensed multiscale imagery: the forester at the heart of the novel feels the *Roots* farm to be home in a most multifarious sense—a dwelling shared by a family, but also including a sense of “Latvia, Nature and the Earth.”⁷⁹ The chief forester at one point also recollects his father's words: “the forest is the cradle of our nation.” In a thoroughly naturecultural mode, the story of the nation is intertwined with its natural environment.⁸⁰ Somewhat distinct from the theme of naturecultural rootedness and continuity, *Saknes* also presents an ambiguous scale of economic reality that directly impinges upon experience—the scarcity of necessary equipment, the damaging impact of a nearby factory—but Bels desists from assigning any label to this scale, whether “Soviet” or any other indication of the state.⁸¹

Kaplinski's writing also includes a cosmic scale, a critical vision of the Earth and global problems as seen from the perspective of outer space.⁸² He warns against the possibility that human explorations of outer space might turn into another version of exploitative colonialism. The poet imagines alien cultures assessing the “cosmic ethical maturity” on Earth “according to our ability to sustain and protect everything that lives.”⁸³ The cosmic perspective displays human failures of care as an egregious ethical lapse: “Once we can accustom ourselves to thinking in a cosmic perspective, even if gradually, the

79. Bels, *Saknes*, 293.

80. *Ibid.*, 185.

81. In many Baltic novels of the 1970s–80s, the inefficiency and carelessness evident in everyday economic realities weighs heavily in characters' lives. As Bels explicitly presents it in his novel, local governments were helpless against the environmental damage wrought by all-Union enterprises. A similar critique was also expressed elsewhere in the Baltic media; for more detail, see Epp Annus, *Environment and Society in Soviet Estonia, 1960–1990* (under contract with Cambridge University Press).

82. In the 1960s, the golden age of space exploration, visions of the Earth from space and the potential encounter with extraterrestrial civilizations were widely popular topics all over the Soviet Union (and elsewhere in the globalized world). By the late 1970s, these themes had acquired pessimistic tones and existential depth, but had sustained their popularity: Chingiz Aitmatov's novel *I dol'she veka dlitsya den'* (The Day Lasts Longer Than a Hundred Years) was read all over the Soviet Union. Aitmatov provides a multiscale, ecologically sensitive epic vision, in which life on a harmonious green-thinking planet, *Lesnaya Grud'*, is juxtaposed to power struggles and a prevailing carelessness toward nature and heritage on Earth (with a specific locality of Kazakhstan). The monograph *Alberts Bels* repeatedly draws parallels between Bels and Aitmatov. Lāse and Üdre, *Alberts Bels*.

83. Kaplinski, “Eelarvamused ja eetika,” 1865.

misjudgments and inconsistencies in earthly matters appear in an even more disturbing and irrational light.”⁸⁴

Naturecultural Selfhood and Environmental Movements

One might wonder whether the Kaplinski-Bels model of subjecthood was an abstract elitist construction, a thing apart from actual practices in the life of society. Kaplinski and Bels were, after all, among the leading intellectuals of their era. Their writing was an act of constructing selfhoods, a selection from a multiplicity of possible subject-positions. In this respect, a poet, an essayist, the writer of a conceptual novel, a diarist—all are engaged in a similar project—they are constructing the self through writing.

It is true that not everyone was so intensely interested in questions of selfhood as Kaplinski or as comprehensive in judgment as Bels. Yet naturecultural multiscalar selfhood, articulated by Bels and Kaplinski, was rooted in widely shared environmental concerns of the era. These two authors were not exceptional voices; rather, they elaborated on themes that circulated both locally and globally during this period. Kaplinski and Bels voiced common cultural trends in linking the sense of self to a traditional farmstead or in expressing an affinity with natural environments. They articulated, in their own ways, common worries and cultural tropes, abundantly present in fictional writing, life-writing, and media discourse: as the ecological situation had become dire in many respects, environmental concerns came to be voiced more frequently and more openly.⁸⁵ In this respect, Baltic critics were participants in a global trend: by the mid to late twentieth century, obtrusive pollution in many parts of the world forced an environmental reckoning, the urgency of which spread both locally and globally. The environmental bestseller *The Silent Spring* (1962) by US author Rachel Carson and the Club of Rome report *The Limits of Growth* (1972) were widely discussed in the US, Canada and all over Europe; the dire import of these and similar texts came to influence debates in Soviet Russia and in the Baltics as well.⁸⁶ In Latvia, the Great Tree Liberation

84. *Ibid.*, 1865.

85. In 1970, in response to an interviewer’s question concerning the state of water protection in the republic, the head of the Environmental agency in the Estonian SSR gave his blunt assessment, “The situation is very bad,” and he listed dead bodies of water: Keila, Vöhandu, Põltsamaa, Piritu, Väike-Emajõgi, Jänijõgi rivers, Võrtsjärv lake. “Looduskaitsepäeva intervjuu,” 259. It was also widely known that the Baltic sea was “among the most endangered ecosystems.” Jaan Eilart, *Inimene, ökosüsteem ja kultuur: Peatükke looduskaitsest Eestis* (Tallinn, 1976), 53.

86. A translation of *The Silent Spring* was published in Russian in 1965, and in Estonian in 1968. Exchanges with Moscow scholars were of seminal importance for Baltic researchers and critics, especially in discussions of the computer modelling of possible future scenarios of the Earth, presented in *The Limits of Growth* and other publications by the Club of Rome. Concerning *The Limits to Growth* in Russian popular media and scientific publications, see Donald R. Kelley, “Economic Growth and Environmental Quality in the USSR: Soviet Reaction to ‘The Limits to Growth,’” *Canadian Slavonic Papers/Revue Canadienne des Slavistes* 18, no. 3 (September 1976): 266–83; Julia Lajus, “Soviet Official Critiques of the Resource Scarcity Prediction by Limits to Growth Report: The Case of Evgenii Fedorov’s Ecological Crisis Rhetoric,” *European Review of History: Revue Européenne d’histoire* 27, no. 3 (May 2020): 321–41.

Movement, stemming from an indignation over the wanton destruction of great old trees, found widespread popular support in the mid-1970s, and led to both lively discussion in the press and grassroots efforts to locate these grand trees, prune away their undergrowth, and register them for legal protection.⁸⁷ In Estonia, the Estonian Nature Protection Society, founded in 1966, soon had over 15,000 members; by the mid-1980s, it was approximately 22,000.⁸⁸ One of its many achievements was the establishment of Lahemaa National Park in 1971, the first national park in the Soviet Union.⁸⁹ Latvians soon followed suit, establishing Gauja National Park in 1973.

Subjectivation with a marked environmental emphasis can manifest itself through divergent models of subjecthood and can rely on different modes of identification with one's environment. Russian village prose with its stark rural-urban opposition and its nostalgia for vanishing rural communities differed starkly from Kaplinski-Belsian naturecultural multiscalarity. Certainly, a nostalgia for rural authenticity was a cultural feeling shared by many in the late Soviet era: in Estonia, such feelings were typically channeled into a summer-home culture which provided accommodation for the dream of rural authenticity within modern urbanized society. In Latvian literature, village-nostalgia found explicit expression in novels by Ilze Indrāne, Haralds Gulbis, and others.

Conclusion: From the State-ideological Subject toward Multiscalar Naturecultural Subjecthood

This project has been motivated by the urgency of rethinking the role of academic scholarship today in light of anthropogenic climate change. How could the ethical necessity of rethinking humanness, necessitated by the present climate crisis, be reflected in research strategies and classroom discussions of earlier periods, such as the history of the Soviet Union? This essay suggests that one productive option would be to address questions of Soviet-era subjecthoods from the perspective of one's affective connections to natural environments, tracking and tracing the multiscalarity of subjecthood.

Soviet-era subjects did not make sense of their lives, aims, and accomplishments solely in relation to the Soviet state, but also in relation to things and relations closer at hand and in relation to ideas and conditions of a global and planetary scale. In some contexts, periods, age groups, and classes of people, the role of official Soviet discourse weighed more heavily in people's lives—but even so, a multiplicity of ideas and a mosaic of imaginaries was present in any era. While the subject versus state ideology model may address how people positioned themselves in relation to Soviet rule, such analyses should not hinder us from exploring other era-specific spectra of human

87. Katrina Z. S. Schwartz, *Nature and National Identity after Communism: Globalizing the Ethnoscape* (Pittsburgh, 2006), 60–62.

88. The Estonian Nature Protection Society grew out of the Tartu Students' Nature Protection Circle founded in 1958, the first in the USSR. Douglas R. Weiner, *A Little Corner of Freedom: Russian Nature Protection from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Berkeley, 1999), 313.

89. Robert W. Smurr, "Lahemaa: The Paradox of the USSR's First National Park," *Nationalities Papers* 36, no. 3 (July 2008): 399–423.

subjectivity. Soviet-era selfhoods were formed, like other modern selfhoods, through relating, in certain ways, to things and sensations, to ideas, demands and values, to environments, institutions, and more. They were shaped by different relational fields, both spatial-material-sensorial and imaginary-ideological. There is no way to fully explore the trajectory of a subject-formation of even a single person, but it is fully feasible for scholars to articulate clusters of dominant themes and to outline common cultural patterns and models of subjectivation.

The ethical attitude of reverence for life and the widely shared concern about both local-level environmental damage and the future of the planet support a multiscale naturecultural model of subjecthood, as this essay has shown. Jaan Kaplinski and Alberts Bels advocate for an understanding of selfhood as based on feelings of affinity with life on earth, supported by reverence and care. In their articulation, such selfhood appears as an ethically grounded way of living in the world. Different temporalities are combined in this model of selfhood: the global scale emerges through its historical development, the intimate scale as a sensed bodily presence, and the cosmic scale as both a warning and a possibility for the future. Here, one can distinguish between *personal-phenomenological* and *pedagogical-prescriptive* aspects in models of subjecthood: at the phenomenological level, this is about a deeply personal relationship to living beings and to the surrounding environment. At the pedagogical-prescriptive level, concern for the future of the planet is posed in opposition to the culture of consumption and industrial development, on account of their overexploitation of natural resources. At this level, the model of extended selfhood is presented as a *social ideal and an aspiration*, even as it also articulates a critique of the corrupt or constricted moral vision of those in power who are unwilling to act more decisively.

Finally, while this article followed a particular kind of late Soviet-era model of selfhood, grounded on the nature-culture continuum, many other grounding assemblages and specters of relationality were present as cultural possibilities for subjectivation in the 1960–80s. Both Bels and Kaplinski themselves also explored other subject-positions, including those dominated by urban modernity or family and fatherhood. Kaplinski and Bels, Schweitzer, and others were, of course, certain kinds of ideologists, critical thinkers who relied upon and learned from other thinkers as well as from what they experienced in their affective encounters in the world.

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