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## Ecocriticism as Subversive Aesthetics

**Abstract:** Art is subversive when it crosses the boundary of the generally acceptable, though over time such art can and does become mainstream. A much more complicated question is what is subversive in aesthetics? Ecocriticism has already become, along with ecofeminism and animal studies, an academic discipline. It can be defined as subversive if it is understood in terms of an attitude, which is not anthropocentric. And here is the catch: how can the human also encompass the alien? The question that emerges here is all but rhetorical: how can we decentre and amplify our human consciousness and perspective to include zoocentric, biocentric or geocentric positions? At this point the contemporary theory creates contrasting opinions, which cross the boundaries of aesthetics, poetics and ecocriticism since they reach out to the fields of metaphysics and antimetaphysics. Within the phenomenon of perception the other always appears, as Deleuze said in his *Logic of Sense*, as “a priori Other”. We have to deal, henceforth, with a kind of pre-reflexive level of consciousness and amplified sensory perception, which, as we know, is the basic condition of artistic creation. Thus, this paper – because it seeks to penetrate into the node of these questions – takes literary art as its starting point. In the spirit of the above-mentioned observations, I have attempted to investigate in ‘minority literature’ (female authors of contemporary Polish and Slovene literature) how this decentred attitude, which Jure Detela, a Slovene poet, poetically defined, corresponds to our thesis on a particular ecocritical stream, which can be defined as an ecofeminist aesthetics. The ‘minoritarian literature’ here is meant exclusively in the sense that was defined by Deleuze and Guattari’s books *Kafka* and *A Thousand Plateaus*.

**Keywords:** anthropocentrism; ecocriticism; ecofeminism; minoritarian literature; untimely; subversiveness.

We are saving the world.  
What do you mean, you are saving it? he asks.  
Because it is poorly made.

A work of art can be classified as subversive if it crosses the boundaries of what is generally accepted in a given cultural context: the accepted is, of course, time-limited, variable, and historically determined. But to establish such subversiveness we do not need subversive aesthetics. Furthermore, the syntagm itself appears pleonastic, since every new philosophy of art is supposedly subversive in some way regarding

the established norm. I am not talking about subversiveness in terms of a revolutionary reversal or carnivalesque transformation of hierarchies; I have in mind much else. With 'subversiveness', I denote a precise attitude towards life, both organic and inorganic, as it is thematized in some literary works that can be read as texts, primarily written for the readership yet to come or for minority readers, and only then for contemporaries. In light of this concept, launched by Deleuze and Guattari, I intend to present ecocriticism as subversive aesthetics, basing this on the opuses of two contemporary women writers. It is very likely that neither of the authors I have in mind, that is, Polish Olga Tokarczuk and Slovenian Breda Smolnikar, did not set their pens to paper for this purpose. This means that the effect of their creations far exceeds the intentions of the authors. However, both authors are very well aware of the ecological problems of the world.

### Minoritarian Literature

Writing for a future audience means entering minority literature, conceived as Deleuze and Guattari defined it in the books *Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure* (1975)<sup>1</sup> and *Milles Plateaux* (1980).<sup>2</sup> It should, therefore, be immediately clear that none of the above-mentioned writers are members of a national minority, using minority languages. The reason why I have declared their literature minoritarian is entirely elsewhere and quite complex in the context of this philosophy. As claimed by Deleuze and Guattari, it is not only about literary, linguistic and philosophical references, but also musical, legal and political ones, because the difference between a minority and a majority is by no means the decisive issue of quantity, but much else:

Let us suppose that the constant or standard is the average adult-white-heterosexual-European-male-speaking a standard language (Joyce's or Ezra Pound's Ulysses). It is obvious that 'man' holds the majority, even if he is less numerous than mosquitoes, children, women, blacks, peasants, homosexuals, etc. That is because he appears twice, once in the constant and again in the variable from which the constant is extracted. The majority assumes a state of power and domination, not the other way around. [...] A determination different from that of the constant will, therefore, be considered minoritarian, by nature and regardless of number [...]. This is evident in all the operations, electoral or otherwise, where you are given a choice, but on the condition that your choice conforms to the limits of the constant ("you mustn't choose to change society...").<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Theory of Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

This last statement, which is not without reason in quotation marks and parentheses, is of great import when considering ecocriticism as subversive aesthetics. Democracy, as Deleuze and Guattari observe, gives us a choice, but does not offer the possibility of a radical societal change. Developing this thought further, it can be said that those who oppose radical societal changes in society, the majority of democratic systems, often refer not only to the advantage or disadvantage of one or the other social order but also to two complete constructs: the so-called ‘natural order of things’ and ‘collective savvy.’ Hence, the concept of minority literature and some other related concepts, for example, becoming and untimely, are not only the most appropriate concepts to begin with in terms of a critique of representative democracy based on political representation, but also appropriate to form a critique of literature and art, and a critique of such criticism.

I intend to show by means of the two writers how and when the subversive ecocritical approach turns out as productive for dealing with literature, and what subversiveness has to do with Deleuzian concepts, such as untimely, becoming, and indirect speech. Ecocriticism can also be understood as a derivative of the post-constructive tradition and this is further affirmed by the decisiveness of the ethical and performative dimension of literary work in terms of ecocritical research. This implies the context and evocation of reality outside the text, or ‘the intervention of the real far into the depth of the text’<sup>4</sup>, and outright permeability of the boundary between text and context. In this regard, ecocriticism has a special position: nature, unlike other agents, such as those peoples formerly colonized, cannot articulate its truth, but it is true that it can ‘strike back’ so much more violently. The subversiveness of ecocriticism does not solely depend on its relationship with environmental problems, but above all on how it values the non-human. It is, therefore, meant to advocate a model of life not only about different social orders but also interrogate the so-called common sense manipulation and the ‘natural order of the world.’ Representatives of the majority in their texts, be these literary, scientific or other, like to refer to these two constructs. Consequently, subversive ecocriticism resulting from ecological awareness is the discipline which can reveal this feature in literary work, not only in terms of social involvement, but also in terms of how much they deviate from the models officially advocated in relation to ecology, models from the so-called ‘balanced’ view of the world, which seeks to ‘democratically’ account for the opinion and position of the majority. The prototype of literature that discusses the deviation from such a model has long been known in Slovene literature in the poetry and essayist work of Jure Detela (1951–1992). Long before him, Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919) wrote explicitly about this in her personal letters. These texts speak precisely about how “the world is poorly made”, and they express a uniquely unconventional attitude towards everything that exists: “[...] with every little fly that one carelessly swats and crushes, the entire world

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<sup>4</sup> David Ellison, *Ethics and Aesthetics in European Modernist Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 15.

comes to an end, in the refracting eye of the little fly it is the same as if the end of the world had destroyed all life.”<sup>5</sup>

This quote calls for comparison with the following excerpt from the novel *Drive Your Plough Over the Bones of the Dead* by Olga Tokarczuk, where the protagonist is shown by the entomologist the home of countless larvae under the spruce bark: “At that time, I thought that every wrong-handed death still deserves a kind of publicity. Even the death of an insect. The death that nobody noticed changes into a double scandal.” And a little further: “There are no useful or useless creatures from the point of view of nature. This is just an unwise distinction used by people.”<sup>6</sup> Very similar characteristic features for minority literature, such as controversy and subversion of accepted ideas and established concepts, are also noticeable in the poems of Polish poet Wisława Szymborska (1923–2012), and in the poetry and essays of some contemporary Slovene authors such as Iztok Geister, Barbara Korun and Iztok Osojnik.

In answer to the question of how is this attitude manifested in literary works, I would say it is primarily evidenced in the relationship between literary representation (the structured world of actuality) and becoming (immanent chaos of virtuality). This is reflected in native languages’ adoption of a foreign language. What is contrary to the law of imitation is the law of the molecular world, an indefinite, non-individualized world that allows entry into the zone of indeterminacy coming before representation and the principle of reason. In the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari, becoming denotes an endless process implying metamorphosis, not metaphors, and interaction of the virtual points characterizing every being and object. In this process, the interaction space opens, a space where new figures and intensities emerge, that is, a new literary force (fr. *puissance*), and this process, contrary to common sense, is not chronological, it does not rely on the subject as a condition of thought or the notion of historical determination. Therefore, such narratives primarily open up the world, and only then represent and consequently enable a variety of becoming; in terms of our two writers, becoming-minoritarian, becoming-woman and becoming-animal; Deleuze and Guattari specifically emphasize that becoming-man and becoming-majority is not possible.

## Untimely

Untimely in the everyday sense is usually a positively-valued indicator for works of art, but Deleuze and Gattari’s untimely (fr. *intempestif*) is another name for the virtuality that participates in each event. Deleuze defines this concept in *The Logic of Sense* as the extraction “from modernity of something that Nietzsche designated as untimely, which pertains to modernity, but which must also be turned against it

<sup>5</sup> Rosa Luxemburg, *Briefe aus dem Gefängnis* (Berlin: Karel Dietz Verlag, 2000), 91.

<sup>6</sup> Olga Tokarczuk, *Pelji svoj plug čez kosti mrtvih* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 2014), 143.

‘in favour, I hope, of a time to come.’<sup>7</sup> An untimely literary text is supposed to be an event produced by multifaceted, in some cases multi-voiced, narratives, bringing all involved into a new assembly (fr. *agencement*). A critique of such work should primarily focus on artistic creation, which invents new conditions, that is, literary work not reproducing rules, but constituting them, thus opening up texts to becoming. The implementation of such genre-subversive processes is seen both in the work of Olga Tokarczuk, especially in *Drive Your Plough Over the Bones of the Dead*,<sup>8</sup> which subverts the crime novel, in *Jacob's Scriptures*,<sup>9</sup> where the historical novel is subverted, and in the most of Breda Smolnikar's subversions of the folk story, where she introduces a new genre of artificial-adult-only narratives into Slovene literature.

## Two novelists

In an interview, Olga Tokarczuk stated that she wrote her novel *Drive Your Plough...* during a break between *The Flights*<sup>10</sup>, her most famous novel, and her most extensive novel thus far, *Jacob's Scriptures*, she also said it would have been a waste of paper and time to write a book just to finally reveal who the killer is, moreover she asserted that the ecological dimension in terms of animal rights is also included in the novel. The book consists of seventeen chapters, each introducing a motto from Blake's "Proverbs of Hell",<sup>11</sup> most of which relates to animals. In addition, the book, although a thriller in terms of literary genre, where illustration is the exception rather than the rule, is illustrated, from which one can infer the influence of Blake's 'composite' art.

The fact that a murderess escapes without penalty can be, on the one hand, understood as a subversion of the genre's laws, and on the other hand, in this aspect, it is impossible to overlook the similarity with the fate of Mr. Ripley, the killer in Patricia Highsmith's crime novels. But *Drive Your Plough...* differs in that it is written in such a way that readers who in principle reject murder as a means of achieving the goal, are always on the side of the killer. Whilst Mr. Ripley acts as a morally controversial hero, Ms Dušejko, the protagonist of *Drive Your Plough...*, is portrayed as an all-embracing person who, through a series of murders, crosses the civilization's line. But the implicit and, at the same time, the explicit presence of Blake's views in the novel, draws attention to the dubiousness of such rational explanation of phenomena. The text, by the way, impugns the entire humanistic tradition and its laws, while opening up the question of the relationship between good and evil, as well as the implausibility of the rights man has used existence at the expense of all other beings: "Winter mornings

<sup>7</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 165.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Olga Tokarczuk, *Pelji svoj plug čez kosti mrtvih [Drive Your Plough Over the Bones of the Dead]* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Olga Tokarczuk, *Jakobove bukve [Jacob's Scriptures]* (Ljubljana: Beletrina, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Olga Tokarczuk, *Beguni [The Flights]* (Ljubljana: Modrijan, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> William Blake, "Proverbs of Hell," in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), 35–38.

are made of steel, have a metallic taste and sharp edges. On Wednesday, at seven in the morning, in January, you can see that the world was not created for man, and especially not for his comfort and pleasure.”<sup>12</sup>

In the later author's novel *Jacob's Scriptures*, we find a unique constellation of all kinds of fragments, letters, documents, reports, biographies, and above all, recordings of events; it is not just about the history of Jacob Frank's followers, but also the history of events transpiring in Poland and Central and Eastern Europe at the time. But the novel is not only hybrid in terms of genre, but it is also polyphonically structured; its voices constantly intertwine, interrupt and sometimes overlap, but above all, they operate untimely and, therefore, in a minoritarian manner.

We discover something similar in Breda Smolnikar's literature, especially in the aforementioned *When the Birches Up There are Greening*,<sup>13</sup> but also in other texts that have yet to be translated into English. The role of the heterogeneous element as a fundamental condition of minoritarian literature, which in the texts of Olga Tokarczuk is mainly shown through more-or-less implicitly and explicitly thematized inter-textual elements, takes the theme from a specific feminist perspective and ecological orientation in the texts of Breda Smolnikar. The environment in which the events take place expands outward from Kamnik-Domžale's field in Slovenia to the Croatian coast then to the USA, and then contracts back to Kamnik-Domžale's field. Here, numerous descriptions and evocations call for an ecocritical approach: the narrative is an original critique of the former socialist and current neoliberal progressive orientation and it primarily focused on the narrower environment of Domžale and its environs. In recent times this area has become an inhospitable suburban settlement and, as such, embodies the tragedy of the former system as well as the current one, which has transformed the villages and small towns with a long tradition into ugly metropolitan suburbs. Praiseworthy old houses are now dilapidated, gardens derelict, century-old trees fallen, and water supplies dried up; in their place plastic department stores, housing blocks and warehouses grow.

Breda Smolnikar's all-female cast of protagonists are something so special that even from European literature's hinterland they emanate a subversive effect. Even though they move in completely different environments pursuing different goals, their exceptionality and magnitude are comparable to *Drive Your Plough...*'s protagonist. Wherever they find themselves, with their own pervasiveness, positive or negative, they make a considerable difference in the world, they leave their trace. They are supported by a narrator at the language level. Smolnikar's use of a free indirect style and its corresponding syntax alienates her own native language and brings it to a somewhat delirious state on the fringe. The consequence of this is a remarkable poetic effect. A typical example is seen in the closing sentences of *When the Birches...*, although they are in fact without conclusion:

<sup>12</sup> Olga Tokarczuk, *Pelji svoj plug čez kosti mrtvih* (Ljubljana: CZ, 2014), 107.

<sup>13</sup> Breda Smolnikar, *When the Birches Up There are Greening* (Depala vas: B. Smolnikar, 2005).

and Rozina screams, the tops of the trees rustle, moan, roar, and golden, golden liquid bursts from the groove, I want it I want it, Rozina is crying, lying close to the groove, it's pouring from all trees, from all grooves, from all trunks, from all branches, from all trees, from all roots, from birches and mountain maples and white maples, Rozina's body is turning golden, oh, Rozina, Rozina, and Brinovic is there right next to her, holding a bottle of cherry brandy in hand, look there is soil still on the bottle, girl, they're all gone, Rozina is surprised in his arms, there is one more, and it is golden says Mary, looking at them, o judi, moji judi, ča si lipa ...<sup>14</sup>

Deleuze and Guattari claim delirium a disease, but also a measure of health; it is language's other taken by the "witch line" escaping the dominant majoritarian system; it is about the invention of a new language within a language, using its own syntax, as evidenced in *When the Birches...* and other narratives of Breda Smolnikar. The novel takes the form of a single sentence, beginning in the middle of the phrase "those were Greek ships that were coming to the harbour, she was waiting [...]"<sup>15</sup>, ending mid-sentence, with three dots and a comma. Such sentences, untroubled by full stops, evoke the pure joy of life and narration, what E. T. A. Hoffmann called *die Lust zu Fabulieren*, a joy that passes into a passion purely physical in character, a characteristic of the writer's entire opus. The writer "writes on the edge constantly, goes beyond the boundaries of the generally accepted, thus putting the personal and writer integrity at risk."<sup>16</sup>

Rozina, *When the Birches Up There are Greening's* protagonist, is an example of such a markedly positive surplus. With her, the writer posits an emancipated and self-confident woman, not needing a man for protection but for much more, for love, sensuality and eroticism, areas in which she is equally as sovereign as she is in business. She stands in life's arena, completely attached, but not seeking to directly change the world. She operates indirectly and always successfully.

But let us return to untimely, also imprinted in Breda Smolnikar's work, here characterized more by its manifestation through bi-vocal free indirect speech, where, through one statement, the trail of different voices is preserved, than through thematization. It manifests itself in *When the Birches...*, "she did not care how and where she rode, she'd wash herself at home, she was never upset on the way back as long as those on the shore saw her neat and tidy, upright, with American jewelry, it really did not matter on the way back."<sup>17</sup> The narrative style's fundamental act is, according to Deleuze, not a metaphor but free indirect speech; it indicates the movement on the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>16</sup> Marko Juvan, "Pripovedni svet Brede Smolnikar," in *Si dekle ali si žena* (Depala vas: Self-publishing, 2016), 820.

<sup>17</sup> Breda Smolnikar, *When the Birches Up There are Greening* (Depala vas: B. Smolnikar, 2005), 8.

edge, which is the doubling of subjectivation. Such speech is characterized by the subject's inherent duality and heterogeneity, which can neither be merged into one nor split into two. It settles into an untimely space betwixt, addressing itself more to fantasy than to reason; the subject no longer the language's perfect master, even though she expresses her thoughts and desires through her language. The consequence of this is unique poetics, especially seen in films, as Deleuze observes, for example, in Pasolini, where "the camera does not simply give us the vision of the character and of his world; it imposes another vision in which the first is transformed and reflected. This subdivision is what Pasolini calls a 'free indirect subject.'"<sup>18</sup> Deleuze detects in Pasolini's films some poetic consciousness, which is neither aesthetic nor technicianist, but somewhere in between, prevalently mystical or 'sacralising'.

This 'sacralising' seems to be the most concise and best designation for Smolnikar's narrative style thus far, and this narrative is cinematic. It is, therefore, surprising that nobody has tried to shoot a film of *When the Birches Up There are Greening*, or of Smolnikar's other works. Agnieszka Holland directed *Spoor* (*Pokot*, 2017), based on Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plough Over the Bones of the Dead*.

## Conclusion

Facing such literary texts, ecocriticism in its subversive version is supposed to perceive them not only as acts of representation but as experiments trying to achieve untimely thought, which allows us to step out of dialectical thinking. We are thus no longer trapped between formalism and historicism. Rather than on the chronology of narration, attention should be paid to untimely virtual thinking inherent in the act of writing.

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<sup>18</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Podoba-gibanje* (Ljubljana: Studia humanitatis, 1991), 104.



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