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Siberian permafrost: natural archive of human violence and its semantization in GULAG-literature

To think nature and man as completely apart, to understand nature as an object under man's sovereign control are undisputed characteristics of modernism. The narrative of man's emancipation from nature and of man mastering nature is one of the main narratives of this époque. Soviet projects of a total change of the natural conditions of climate and soil are a quite significant example in this context: In the Stalinist 1930ies the man-nature, man-environment-relationship was defined as an antagonism of two hostile to each other forces, an antagonism that in the long (or shorter) run had to be dissolved by the final victory of man over nature. One of the symbolically most weighty exemplifications of this relationship was the Soviet Arctic. To completely change the natural conditions, to transform the Arctic from an uninhabitable zone of threatening cold into a friendly zone of human settlement and to make it the front-line and thereby a paradigmatic region of the Soviet world was the plan, and great efforts were made to realize it: fictionally and essentially. Literary visions of this process showed human heroism in the Arctic as either completely independent of environmental conditions or as able to overcome them – e.g. by means of technical devices. In the context of Stalinism and its aftermath texts that conceptualize Arctic ice and permafrost soil not as an environmental condition that has to be extinct, are a great exception. But they exist: Not unexpectedly they prevail in the context of GULAG-writers. These texts eventually concern the Soviet project of modernism as a whole. Instead of being an object of extinction and instead of symbolizing dehumanization in perpetual pain, death without redemption, as it was the case with earlier Siberian banishment literature, in the literary works of Pavel Florenskij and Varlam Šalamov ice and permafrost become a kind of “memory medium”, a kind of natural archive that has to be preserved. Furthermore this archive is ascribed a certain agency that enables it to help the excluded to withstand their fate.