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Irony and Catastrophe: The Environmental Crisis in Jan Svěrák's *Oil Gobblers*

Abstract: This case study examines Jan Svěrák's student film *Ropáci* (*Oil Gobblers*, 1988), highlighting the environmental destruction in Communist Czechoslovakia in the 1980s. Though initially low profile, Svěrák's mockumentary eventually became a significant symbol of the Czech environmental movement, maintaining its influence even after the Velvet Revolution of 1989 and the fall of Communism. This study situates *Oil Gobblers* within its environmental and cultural context, analysing how it reflected, critiqued, and shaped the ecological consciousness. The paper aims to explore the film's environmental themes, challenge anthropocentric assumptions, and link cultural production to broader ecological and cultural discourses. The study addresses two primary areas: first, broader environmental-cultural history, which, following Donald Worster, can be understood as the study of interactions between human societies and the nonhuman world (Worster 4). It will briefly overview the ecological devastation in northeastern Bohemia, the setting for *Oil Gobblers*. This analysis examines the creation and enduring significance of the mockumentary through the framework of intermedial ecocriticism, as developed by Jørgen Bruhn and Niklas Salmose (Inspired by but diverging in several ways from Bruhn and Salmose's approach, Intermedial Ecocriticism is a new MA-level course, taught for the first time at Masaryk University by Petr Bubeníček and Tereza Dědinová in spring semester 2025. It explores the role of culture in the climate crisis, focusing on environmental justice, the green transition, and future visions of the biosphere. Through literature, film, visual arts, and new media, students examine how cultural forms shape ecological awareness. The course takes an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on ecocriticism, cognitive science, environmental psychology, and discourse analysis. Special emphasis is placed on the role of individuals in promoting sustainability and critically engaging with media and misinformation). This theoretical approach explores how different media forms represent and communicate ecological issues across diverse contexts. The selected mockumentary employs satire as a central strategy to critique environmental degradation. By integrating various media elements—such as humorous dialogue, parodic imagery, and mock-serious

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EKPHRASIS, 1/2025

Ecological Emergencies Across Media
pp. 13–26

DOI: 10.24193/ekphrasis.33.2
Published First Online: July 16, 2025

narration—the film constructs a layered engagement with ecological themes. Transmediation plays a crucial role in this process: the mockumentary adapts and reinterprets real-world environmental concerns, particularly the total destruction of natural ecosystems, into a satirical narrative form. We analyse how this adaptation reframes serious subject matter to provoke reflection through irony. As a cinematic text, *Oil Gobblers* exemplifies the intermedial relationship between film and ecological discourse. Through its distinctive audiovisual and narrative techniques, it highlights environmental destruction while situating it within broader cultural and ecological debates, thus challenging conventional representations of environmental crises.

Keywords: Mockumentary, environmental destruction, Intermedial Ecocriticism, satire, transmediation, Czech Environmental Movement.

Environmental Devastation and Industrial Ambition in Communist Czechoslovakia

In Communist Czechoslovakia, centrally controlled industrial experiments that disregarded ecological standards led to catastrophic environmental degradation. The one party-state prioritised economic development, emphasising heavy industry following the Soviet model in particular, with little concern for environmental issues. The goals of centrally planned production—transforming the Communist state into a prosperous, industrially oriented nation capable of competing with the West—were often at odds with the natural environment. The 1950s, an era referred to as "the building of socialism," witnessed massive construction projects – such as the building of dams, steelworks, and other infrastructure – and the collectivisation of agriculture, both of which had profound, far-reaching effects on the environment and human settlements. However, the situation was not entirely black and white. In the following decades, grassroots environmental associations emerged, highlighting the state of the environment within the constraints of the regime. Organisations such as Tis: Union for Nature and Landscape Protection (Tis – Svaz pro ochranu přírody a krajiny), the Brontosaurus Movement, and the Czech Union of Nature Conservationists (Český svaz ochránců přírody) played a crucial role in shaping a distinct form of environmentalism behind the Iron Curtain (cf. Jehlička, Smith 101).

Although environmental degradation was widespread across the Eastern Bloc, conditions in Czechoslovakia during the 1970s and 1980s—a period known as Normalisation, following the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion and the suppression of the Prague Spring's liberal reforms—were particularly severe. This was especially true in northwestern Bohemia, near the border with East Germany, where industrial production, chemical plants, power generation, and large-scale lignite mining were concentrated in a relatively small area. The Communist government's shocking experiment in industrialisation devastated the landscape, leaving behind open-pit mines, smouldering coal piles, cratered terrain, waste dumps, and defunct

or abandoned settlements. One of the most striking examples of this devastation was the complete destruction of the old town of Most, with its Gothic and Renaissance monuments, from the 1960s to the 1980s to make way for coal mining. The historic town was replaced by a modern city designed to "[...] reflect the socialist, productivist and materialist values of the regime. The symbolism was obvious: decaying Old Most, the remnants of discredited capitalism and German domination, gave way to a modern, socialist city" (Glassheim, "Most" 465).

However, relocating residents to new flats did not address the underlying environmental issues, as locals continued to suffer from poor air quality. Air pollution was particularly severe in East Germany and Czechoslovakia, where low-quality brown coal (lignite) was used extensively for electricity and heat production: "In Czechoslovakia, coal provided 55 percent of energy needs in 1989 and 78 percent of electricity [...], while polluting brown coal accounted for 70–8 percent of coal used in the thermal production of electricity between 1970 and 1985." (Pavlínek, Pickles 45). Northwestern Bohemia, where two-thirds of the region's coal was consumed locally, recorded the highest levels of sulphur dioxide pollution in the country due to the lack of desulphurization technology in power plants (Vaněk 81).

The north Bohemian coal basin is located between the foothills of the Krušné hory Mountains and the Bohemian Central Uplands (České středohoří), which hinder airflow in the region. During inversions, health inspectors found that the amount of toxic sulphur dioxide in the air remained significantly above the permissible threshold of 150 milligrams per cubic metre, hovering at around 1,500 milligrams per cubic metre (Pavlínek, Pickles 59). Such high pollution levels caused health problems in the local population, most commonly, headaches and nosebleeds. The region's inhabitants began to flee the area, particularly doctors, who, despite the information blackout, realised that remaining in northwest Bohemia threatened their well-being. Consequently, the government instituted a system of subsidies to keep people in the region. Anyone who had lived in the area was eligible for free trips for children to the mountains for clean air or a so-called loyalty grant (locals mockingly referred to it as a burial bonus; Glassheim, "Ethnic Cleansing" 65).

Although the environmental destruction was evident, its true extent was hidden. Precise data on pollution and its impacts on human health were only available to public health officials and senior members of the Communist Party. As Miroslav Vaněk has documented, reports of ecological disasters, which peaked in the first half of the 1980s, were kept from the public. In 1983, an official report detailing the environmental conditions in Czechoslovakia, titled "An Analysis of the Environmental Situation in Czechoslovakia," was leaked, apparently thanks to one of the report's authors, Jaroslav Stoklasa, to representatives of the opposition civic initiative Charter 77, and Western European media picked it up (*Le Monde*, Radio Free Europe, The Voice of America; Vaněk 121). This report,

commissioned by Czechoslovak Prime Minister Lubomír Štrougal, highlighted the dire state of the environment in Czechoslovakia and warned of the health implications for the population. Although the report's publication was not well received by those in power, they could no longer shirk their responsibility for the state of the environment. Gradually, pressure from Western countries and the Czech public intensified, and attempts were made to cooperate with Eastern Bloc countries to mitigate environmental disasters, notably river pollution (e.g., Poland; see Pavelčíková 81). Environmental issues eventually became catalysts for political change, as demonstrations began in the northwest Bohemian city of Teplice just before the Velvet Revolution, with participants chanting slogans such as "We want to breathe clean air!"

The formerly carefully managed landscape for agriculture, habitation, or even aesthetic purposes of northwest Bohemia was transformed into inhospitable environment with polluted air, polluted waterways (waste from industrial plants was discharged into rivers), and devasted mountain forests especially in 1970s and 1980s: "Forest damage in some mountainous regions such as Krušné hory (Ore Mountains) in northwestern Bohemia and Jizerské hory in northern Bohemia reached catastrophic proportions. Large areas of these mountains located above the elevation of approximately 800 metres have been completely deforested by air pollution. Other forested regions such as Krkonoše in northeastern Bohemia have also been severely damaged. The pace of forest destruction has accelerated" (Pavlínek, Pickles 59).

Although I have not lived in northwest Bohemia, where the situation was most extreme, I have firsthand experience of this context. My childhood was shaped by the cumulative impacts of human activity on the ecosystems of the Jeseníky Mountains, located in the northeastern Czech Republic. I have regularly spent holidays there in the late 1970s and 1980s, as my family has a cottage there. My experiences there—including living and playing in nature, working in the forest during a bark beetle infestation, and talking to foresters steeped in the wisdom of woodcraft—have significantly influenced my environmental outlook. I was confronted with tangible evidence of the negative transformations occurring in the mountain forests, which was mainly due to two factors: the lucrative but environmentally damaging logging operations that were a financial boon to socialist Czechoslovakia and widespread forest dieback caused by acid rain driven by sulphur oxide emissions (Kubelka 1992). In response to the acidification of forest soils, extensive liming (the aerial application of limestone or dolomitic fertilizers to neutralize soil acidity) was implemented in the affected areas, demonstrating human attempts to remedy the environmental disruption caused. While this intervention was necessary, it also highlights the complex relationship between human activity, the environment, and biodiversity.

The Birth of *Oil Gobblers*: Jan Svěrák's Playful Critique of Environmental Devastation

One year before the fall of the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia, Jan Svěrák created a short mockumentary titled *Oil Gobblers* (*Ropáci* 1988) as his graduation project at the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU), where he majored in documentary film. *Oil Gobblers* achieved remarkable success, winning an Oscar (Student Academy Award in the Foreign Student Film category) and awards at festivals in Cracow (1988), Parma (1989), and Odense (1991). It continues to attract attention for its playfulness and hoax and its use of humour, irony, and experimentation to challenge traditional notions about the relationship between humanity and nature[1]. Svěrák subsequently became a major Czech filmmaker, directing successful feature films that shaped post-Communist Czech cinema. His 1996 film *Kolya* earned him an Oscar, a Golden Globe, and other awards. Svěrák's films, particularly the children's film *Kooky* (*Kuky se vrací*, 2010), engender a sense of joy and wonder, reminding audiences of the inherent creativity and boundless possibilities within artistic expression. The playfulness in *Kooky* is rooted in its embrace of imagination and childlike wonder. Svěrák deliberately chose traditional puppet animation over digital techniques, infusing the film with a tangible, handcrafted quality that invites viewers into a world where the boundaries of reality and fantasy blur.

As the political climate in 1980s Czechoslovakia began to evolve under the influence of Soviet reforms such as perestroika and glasnost, the cultural environment became increasingly amenable to more critical and innovative forms of filmmaking, providing the necessary conditions for the creation of Svěrák's *Oil Gobblers*. At this point in time, the Communist Party had already included ecology in its agenda, and thus, Svěrák could present his idea for an environmentally critical film. The result was a thought-provoking film that blurs the lines between reality and fiction, inviting viewers to participate actively in creating meaning. The narrative, built on hints, implications, and subtle cues, centres around a fictional scientific expedition searching for an unknown creature called the oil gobbler (*ropák* in Czech). The concept of an animal named after oil challenges conventional notions of life and nature, as extracting oil from the earth involves drilling, leading to habitat destruction, soil and water contamination, and oil spills. These activities disrupt ecosystems and harm wildlife.

Svěrák initially aimed for a film hoax. Such artistic endeavour would be based on a non-committal, playful search for an animal intrinsically linked to its environment. The original

1 Ecocriticism has become an interdisciplinary approach within the environmental humanities, drawing on insights from fields such as literature, ecology, philosophy, history, gender theory, visual culture, media studies, and political science to explore how human societies understand, represent, and interact with the natural world.

idea was to focus on a mudskipper (bahňák), an animal that thrives in muddy habitats. However, this light-hearted concept took a more serious turn when Svěrák drew upon his experiences with the devastated landscape of northwest Bohemia. In his homeland, Communist Czechoslovakia, he "discovered" a devastated landscape that was "exotic" to him, with inhospitable mountains, deep ravines, and smoke from burning coal. And this encounter prompted him to develop an ecological idea (Svěrák "U Ropáků"). Artist Barbara Šalamounová, while studying animation at the Academy of Arts, Architecture, and Design in Prague, created oil gobbler puppets that resembled sea lions or small hippos. Czech animator Lubomír Beneš then animated the figures. The production also relied on improvisation with everyday tools. As Beneš, who also played one of the scientists in the documentary, explained, "We can't control them like Spielberg, so we have to take the Czech approach." (Smyčková, Lenka "Tajemní ropáci nevymřeli")

Are we on the right track?

In his foundational work on literary ecology,[2] *The Comedy of Survival* (1972), Joseph Meeker considers how classical literary practices may or may not promote environmentally friendly human behaviour. He aptly characterises his approach to the study of literature and nature as follows:

> Human beings are the earth's only literary creatures... If the creation of literature is an important characteristic of the human species, it should be examined carefully and honestly to discover its influence upon human behavior and the natural environment – to determine what role, if any, it plays in the welfare and survival of mankind and what insight it offers into human relationships with other species and with the world around us. Is it an activity which adapts us better to the world or one which estranges us from it? From the unforgiving perspective of evolution and natural selection, does literature contribute more to our survival than it does to our extinction? (Meeker 3–4)

2 The concept of "literary ecology" in Meeker's work directly conveys the specific exploration of the relationship between literature and the environment. This term captures his interest in how literary texts interact with and represent natural settings. Meeker needed a way to express his scholarly interests before a standardised term was widely recognised. Only later did the term ecocriticism come into common use, most notably with William Rueckert's essay, "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (1978), which introduced a formal conceptual framework for this field.

Meeker's central thesis revolves around human ecological behaviour and motivation. He writes about the "tragic" and "comic" modes of human behaviour. He then delineates the tragic mentality prevalent in Western cultures, characterised by a sense of superiority over nature, an interest in metaphysical absolutes, and a critical outlook. According to Meeker, the tragic mode has contributed to environmental degradation in modern times. In contrast, Meeker advocates a "comic" mode that recognises humanity's place within biological survival and evolution: "Comedy is careless of morality, goodness, truth, beauty, heroism, and all such abstract values men say they live by. Its only concern is to affirm man's capacity for survival and to celebrate the continuity of life itself" (Meeker 24).

Daniel E. Noble, in his review of *The Comedy of Survival* (1976), agrees that literature is an influential cultural force, contending that its impact is relatively minor compared to scientific knowledge, technology, and social development. Noble challenged Meeker's assertion that literature significantly influences social development and ecological degradation, arguing that technological advances and lifestyle changes, rather than literature, have driven significant shifts: "I believe that literature serves more as an interpreter rather than as a major activator of the patterns of human behavior and that the development of muscle-extension and brain-extension systems has been of far more profound influence" (Noble 250). In his response to Noble, Meeker acknowledged that literature does not directly cause ecological crises but reflects social values. He emphasised the importance of human thought and imagination in using the natural environment, suggesting that literature serves as a record of the thought processes that have led to humanity's detrimental treatment of the Earth. However, Meeker also argued that literature has the potential to guide the imagination towards a more responsible and harmonious relationship with nature. He expressed dissatisfaction with Noble's focus solely on environmental issues, feeling that Noble overlooked his exploration of alternative images and concepts that could foster a more symbiotic relationship between humans and the Earth. Finally, Meeker argued that his book emphasises the use of comedy as a tool: "Comedy is a mode of thought and action designed for the reconciliation of opposites and for the harmonious integration of human and other forms of life" (Meeker 352). Meeker's emphasis on imaginative strategies—especially comedy—aligns with contemporary ecocritical thinking, which sees intellectual work as a form of activism: "[...] committed to the argument that a change in cultural values can lead to less destructive forms of life." (Clark 4).

Making generalised statements is inherently problematic, particularly when considering the divergent views of tragedy and comedy in art as expressions of societal development. While different works should not be judged through the same lens, Meeker provides a useful point of intersection. Such debate between Noble and Meeker prompts questions about the actual influence of literature (or film, although the author focuses only marginally on artistic media other than literature) on human behaviour and attitudes towards the

environment[3], the importance of artistic expression in shaping human behaviour and ecological impacts, the underlying influences behind human actions and their environmental consequences[4], and the potential influence of different cultural modes on societal attitudes towards nature and the environment.

Jan Svěrák's film exemplifies the comic mode through its use of hoax and caricature. This approach hinges on the stark contrast between appearances—such as a mysterious animal or an "exotic" landscape—and their underlying realities, which reveal a senseless creature and a devastated environment. Svěrák employs familiar elements, fully aware that the audience recognizes the falsity of his portrayal. This juxtaposition between the audience's real-world knowledge and the film's depiction generates humor through the incongruity between reality and representation. The fact that the oil gobbler depends on what humans are trying to eliminate, namely pollution, adds a layer of irony and absurdity to the film's critique of human environmental practices. In this sense, the film can be seen as a commentary on the paradoxical relationship between humans and the environment and the unintended consequences of our actions.

The mockumentary *Oil Gobblers* tries to present a seemingly coherent and objective portrayal of reality, including scientific reality (hoax is understood here as a playful camouflage of reality). During a scientific expedition, researchers search for, discover, and meticulously describe a creature that exists solely in fiction – a fantastical being absent from the real world. The film's irony lies in its focus on the oil gobbler, an animal uniquely adapted to thrive in polluted environments, subsisting on oil, coal, and plastic. Paradoxically, this creature becomes the object of human interest and concern despite being a direct consequence of pollution and the catastrophic destruction of the landscape of northwest Bohemia. The expedition, led by zoologist Ivo Soukup, biochemist Lubomír Bauer, and cameraman Jiří Mráz, embarks on a journey late in the summer of 1987. The expedition's unnamed narrator documents their remarkable quest like a contemporary scientific reporter or journalist.

From the opening scenes, the film *Oil Gobblers* gives off the impression that it is presenting true, scientifically grounded information. The audience is subtly misled by the conventional elements of documentary style often seen in science documentaries – expert interviews, scientific jargon, and chronological, factual narration. The opening shot of a black-and-white photograph from a 1985 expedition featuring participants alongside a

3 Among more recent works, see for example studies that seek answers to such questions within empirical ecocriticism: Schneider-Mayerson, Matthew, Alexa Weik von Mossner, Wojciech P. Malecki, and Frank Hakemulder. *Empirical Ecocriticism: Environmental Narratives for Social Change*. University of Minnesota Press, 2023.

4 See Marshall, George. *Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change*. Bloomsbury, 2014.

plaster cast of an unknown animal's footprint immediately imbues the film with a sense of scientific authenticity. Despite previous setbacks, such as the initial discovery of the footprint failing to gain traction within the scientific community, the expedition participants remain resolute. They believe that uncovering this new species could provide valuable insights into evolutionary processes and the relationships between different organisms, and they are convinced that they are on the right track. However, this narrative is complicated by elements that subtly undermine their confidence. Early in the film, zoologist Soukup remarks to biochemist Bauer that something might take root in his body, leading him to "die of cancer." While this conversation does not directly advance the plot, it significantly contributes to the film's overall tone. The moment the word *cancer* is uttered, the film cuts to a shot of a car driving into a landscape dominated by tall chimneys emitting smoke and steam. This juxtaposition implicitly conveys to the audience environmental degradation's serious impacts on human health, delivering the message in a subtle yet powerful manner. The oil gobbler's scientific name, *Petroleus mostensis*, reflects the geographical delineation of this species' range in the isolated area of the Most coal basin. Although the researchers' discussions about this creature's possible evolutionary history appear to be focused inquiries, suggestions that the field hare or river otter is the ancestor of this species raises doubts. The serious tone of the expedition is further disrupted by the presence of the local guide, an eccentric older man known for his storytelling. In the film, he claims to have previously spotted the oil gobblers and ultimately identifies the location where the creatures are discovered. His peculiar manner of speaking is particularly evident during a scene where the expedition members attempt to revive a cameraman who has inhaled toxic fumes. The guide remarks, "The poor guy is breathing, so it's okay. Let's give him some quinine, and you'll see how that gets it out of him." This scene alludes to the grotesque humour found in Jaroslav Hašek's renowned Czech satirical antiwar novel *The Good Soldier Švejk* (*Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války*, 1921–1923). While Švejk satirises the absurdity of war and the society that perpetuates it, *Oil Gobblers* highlights the absurdity of a society that is systematically destroying its environment. In both works, the irony is palpable: just as Švejk absurdly extols the virtues of warfare, the narrator of *Oil Gobblers* similarly lauds the devastation of the landscape. In both works, absurdity exposes human vanity, pride, the quest for power or material gain, and the ruthlessness it requires.

The opening scene of Oil Gobblers invites interpretation within the broader context of 1970s and 1980s science fiction cinema. The use of electronic music, the evocation and subtle parody of the cosmic unknown and alienness, and the careful construction of the shots all contribute to this framing. Importantly, the film constructs a documentary plane that is simultaneously fictionalized: reality is presented through the lens of a sci-fi dystopia, despite being materially identical to the world outside the film. As previously noted, while the film retains a documentary indexicality—showing real places and objects—it simultaneously shifts them onto an indexical-symbolic plane, generating a more fictionalized atmosphere. Thus,

Oil Gobblers captures an unaltered physical reality but transforms its affective resonance into a dystopian, post-apocalyptic mood through specific artistic practices. The irony produced by the film functions on multiple levels: it carries not only extra-artistic, moral-ecological messages, but also intra-artistic and intermedial references, including evocations, parodies, and shifts characteristic of sci-fi and post-apocalyptic genres. The electronic music, reminiscent of contemporaneous Western composers like Vangelis, further heightens this atmosphere, making the film's soundscape contemporary and transnational.

At least initially, *Oil Gobblers* cultivates an aura of credibility akin to a genuine documentary. Lars Elleström delves into the defining characteristics of this type of media product, asserting that documentaries primarily serve to faithfully depict the intricate connections between specific individuals and events – whether from the past or the present: "There is also a multitude of media types that overtly function to educate, inform, instruct, train, provide wisdom and the like – media types that can be circumscribed in terms of various forms of expected truthfulness" (Elleström 77). Elleström highlights the conventional perception of documentary films as reliable knowledge repositories, particularly when they delve into scientific discoveries. Audiences implicitly assume that documentaries adhere to factual accuracy. Paradoxically, *Oil Gobblers* perpetuate the illusion of authenticity, gradually amplifying the hoax they present (the oil gobbler's existence is scientifically implausible because it violates fundamental principles of biology). Although I analyse the film within the context of Czechoslovakia's Normalisation period, it inevitably raises broader questions. In this way, the film unmasks the stereotypes that influence the perception of environmental problems. By initially adhering to the norms of documentary filmmaking, the film gains the trust of its audience, only to subvert that trust as the fictional nature of the oil gobbler becomes evident. This subversion exposes how environmental problems can be perceived through stereotypical lenses that can distort reality, focusing on sensational aspects rather than complex and often less visible ecological issues.

Similarly, as the film encourages viewers to question and critically engage with environmental narratives, Jan Svěrák understands that ecological action requires more than simply addressing the visible symptoms of pollution; it necessitates a deeper examination and confrontation of the underlying causes. Nearly forty years after the creation of *Oil Gobblers*, Svěrák, in an internet podcast interview, revisits the film's ecological themes and reflects on everyday actions like picking up plastic bottles or cleaning up litter in the woods. He remarks, "And then I think to myself, I'm actually cleaning my room. It's not ecology, I just want to keep the place clean. But it's going to go somewhere else, the thing's not going to go away. So, I'm trying to approach ecology more broadly. [...] I'm not just trying to sweep things under the rug so they're not visible" (Svěrák "U Ropáků"). Svěrák's reflection emphasises that basic cleaning is insufficient, as ecological responsibility encompasses a broader dimension. His commentary draws attention to the displacement of environmental damage—how waste never truly "goes away"—and, much like his film, underscores the need

for a more holistic engagement with ecological thinking. Svěrák's observations resonate with Timothy Morton's notion of hyperobjects, vast entities like the biosphere or climate change that defy traditional ideas of separation and locality. As Morton argues, the waste persists within the tangled, viscous mesh of existence from which nothing can be fully detached: "Now we know better: instead of the mythical land Away, we know the waste goes to the Pacific Ocean or the wastewater treatment facility. Knowledge of the hyperobject Earth, and of the hyperobject biosphere, presents us with viscous surfaces from which nothing can be forcibly peeled. There is no Away on this surface, no here and no there. " (Morton 31).

The irony that humans are both the creators and victims of pollution is a central theme in *Oil Gobblers*, underscoring the urgent need to address the root causes of environmental degradation.[5] This irony is poignantly illustrated in the film's conclusion, where scientists recover a live specimen of an oil gobbler only to discover that it is an abandoned cub. The scientists feed it with petrol and plastic gloves and attempt to cure its cough—ironically caused by exposure to fresh air—with car exhaust fumes. They intend to transport the oil gobbler to Prague for further study. Still, they are hindered by a stretch of land where the ecological balance is not yet sufficiently disturbed, and the air lacks the necessary concentration of emissions. Consequently, the scientists release the oil gobbler back into the environment, concluding the film with the hope that, in time, this area will also become polluted enough to support the animal's relocation to Prague, where emissions are already "adequate". As the narrator of the film remarks, "the living conditions of the oil gobblers will only improve." The visual imagery that accompanies this narration—depicting devastated nature, with withered trees, blackened water, and barren landscapes—highlights the stark contradiction at play: the oil gobbler can only thrive in a toxic environment, one that is paradoxically deemed "ideal" by the expert naturalists. This situation, simultaneously absurd and disturbing, critiques the prioritisation of a single species' survival at the expense of broader ecological considerations.[6] The film thus conveys a counterpoint to ecological thinking, suggesting that the preservation of one species has been elevated above all else, rendering other environmental concerns incidental. This humorously rendered "quasi-documentary," though not primarily motivated by environmental concerns, effectively demonstrates that humour and hyperbole can significantly enhance the viewer's ecological awareness. These elements may have a more profound impact than more serious artistic works that deliberately emphasise the tragic consequences of environmental neglect. By utilising humour, the film makes its message

5 Proponents of the Anthropocene concept (Paul Crutzen, Eugene Stoermer, Will Steffen, Johan Rockström) argue that the impact of human activities on the nonhuman world is so significant that it marks the beginning of a new geological era.

6 How humans conceptualize and respond to the loss of species is a central concern of extinction studies. See Ursula Heise's *Imagining Extinction: The Cultural Meanings of Endangered Species*.

more accessible, as viewers are likely to find even the gravest issues more engaging and easier to digest when presented in this comic, subtextual manner.

For *Oil Gobblers*, Jan Svěrák drew inspiration from theatrical plays by his father, Zdeněk Svěrák, and Ladislav Smoljak, particularly those featuring hoax elements centred on the fictional character Jára Cimrman—a disgraced artist and scientist from the Austro-Hungarian era—and their comic parodies of scientific discourse.[7] Cimrman's audience does not mistake these "scientific seminars" for genuine academic presentations; instead, they recognise them as deliberate performances that parody the language and authority of science. From the outset, there is an expectation of deception designed for entertainment, not enlightenment. As a result, the audience is not misled but instead finds pleasure in the playful artifice. Any educational impact these performances might have is incidental and secondary to their comic effect. Jan Svěrák employs a comparable strategy in *Oil Gobblers*, blending pseudo-scientific framing with absurdity to engage viewers. These absurd elements may prompt the audience to reflect on their experiences, potentially reinforcing or reshaping their attitudes, and may even have an educational impact.

The mockumentary *Oil Gobblers* can be conceived as a commentary on the paradoxical relationship between humans and the environment, serving as a reminder of the causes of environmental degradation. These include anthropocentrism, which the film reflects through an inverted human-centred logic (i.e., if the environment becomes suitable for oil gobblers, it becomes uninhabitable for humans), and the commodification of nature, whereby natural resources are treated as limitless commodities for human exploitation, ultimately resulting in their exhaustion.[8] The comic mode in film, as articulated by Joseph Meeker, embraces a nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in human reality,

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7 Jan Svěrák also drew from Karel Zeman's *Journey to the Beginning ot Time* (*Cesta do pravěku*, 1954) and the works of Jules Verne. Like Verne, Jan Svěrák explores the idea of environmental determinism, where the environment shapes the appearance and characteristics of strange creatures. There are also traces of Karel Čapek's dystopian novel *War with the* Newts (*Válka s mloky*, 1936) in Svěrák's mockumentary. Čapek's novel features intelligent newts and the humans attempting to dominate them, leading to a violent conflict. Although Čapek's novel represents a particular ideology or anti-war message, ecology was not the primary focus.

8 Material ecocriticism understands nature and matter as "complex, interconnected and surprising networks of things, each with its own agency, always liable to interact with human plans in surprising and disconcerting ways" (Clark 114). See Clark, Timothy. *The Value of Ecocriticism*. Cambridge UP, 2019. Material ecocriticism focuses on the agency of matter and how substances and natural forces shape human stories—countering the view of the natural world as passive, disconnected resources awaiting human use—see Iovino, Serenella, and Serpil Oppermann. "Introduction: Stories Come to Matter." *Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency, and Models of Narrativity*, edited by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, Indiana UP, 2014, pp. 1–17.

including a multifaceted reflection on the intricacies of ecological systems. (Meeker 49). In Jan Svěrák's approach, this complexity is presented through a grotesque, mirror-reversed perspective. In this inverted view, the presence of pollutants and the reduction of oxygen levels in the atmosphere become prerequisites for the emergence and survival of a unique endangered species—the oil gobblers. To ensure the conservation of this species, the environment must be modified to suit its needs, paradoxically requiring a space contaminated by human-made pollutants. The future appears promising for the oil gobblers as the reckless trajectory of civilisation continues to facilitate the creation of an optimal habitat for them. In this context, the needs of human and nonhuman animals become irrelevant; what matters is the preservation of the oil gobblers. Allegorically, this narrative highlights a broader truth: in the real world, by prioritising the material gains of one species (homo sapiens), humanity loses sight of the needs of all species, reducing the complex web of life's needs to a singular, self-serving perspective. The "mirror of complexity," which reflects the contrast between the ideal state and the grim reality, is effectively deployed using humour and satire, making the film's message both accessible and impactful. Even viewers with little environmental concern may be unsettled by the stark portrayal of an inhospitable world, where the prosperity of the oil gobbler ironically relies on the continued devastation of the Czech landscape – a setting mythicised as a pastoral idyll of cottages, forests, and fields.[9] This contrast underscores the complexity and fragility of ecosystems, highlighting that all components, including human culture, are ultimately vulnerable to ruin.

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9 Oil Globbers has transcended the confines of cinema and infiltrated the daily lives of people in the Czech Republic. The Oil Globber of the Year was an anti-ecological award presented annually from 1992 to 2021 by Children of the Earth, a civic organisation, to recognise the most egregious anti-ecological act of the year. Richard Brabec, the former minister of environment for the Czech Republic, is the last individual to receive this award. He was bestowed with this "honour" for "failing to defend the public interest during negotiations regarding the new construction law" and for "the ministry's soft-handed approach in confirming the permitted exemptions from air pollutant limits for the Počerady and Chvaletice coal-fired power plants in September 2021 and November 2021, the legality of which is now being addressed by the courts" (Děti země 2022)

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