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**Reflections of/on nature in late socialist
Romanian press and amateur film production:
absorption, marginalization, experimentation**

Abstract: The present article has two main aims: on the one hand it intends to chart the emergence and the installation of an official ecological discourse in late socialist Romania – a discourse that is representative both for the growing wave of environmental concern that propagated across the Eastern Bloc and for the discursive strategies the socialist nations adopted in order to disculpate their civilizational stances and create an appropriate ideological frame for environmental preservation measures. After studying messages vehiculated principally through official press organs and defining the general cultural atmosphere that surrounded the fledgling national ecological consciousness, it will be argued that the production of the numerous amateur film clubs in activity in late socialist Romania offers an original vantage point to the issue of the type of imagery that was developed to echo the state-sanctioned ecological discourse. This will converge with the second aim of this article, which is to push amateur production into the sphere of interest of ecocritical media studies, while advocating for the necessity to adapt its methodologies to a type of material that

is often poorly preserved, deprived of contextual information or even of parts of its content, and thus sometimes radically opaque. After focusing on a corpus of film club productions considered relevant for broad issues relating to representational paradigms of nature in the socialist context, the article will also scrutinize the early creations of materialist experimental film collective Kinema Ikon.

Keywords: late socialism, state-controlled ecological discourse, amateur film production, materialist experimental cinema.

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Introduction

The term “polycrisis” – which was initially conceptualized by Edgar Morin and Anne-Brigitte Kern in their 1993 book *Terre Patrie* – has gained substantial traction in the last few years. For contemporary ears, it has an ominous ring, which evokes a multilayered eschatology, an enormous domino effect that would see the most evolved and most complex systems developed by our civilization(s) drag each other in their conjoint fall. From an ecological perspective, it may embody Gaïa’s revenge, insofar as it is a reminder of catastrophic proportions of the intricacies of the biosphere with all the non-living conglomerates that account for the habitability of our planet, as well as of the radical codependence of living organisms, despite their case-by-case antagonism over some of the same resources. According to those narratives that position climate change as the understructure of the polycrisis phenomenon, present and past (Büntgen et al. 2011, Frankopan 2023), the belated acknowledgement of human non-exceptionality will emerge from the smoking ruins of our most towering achievements, thus exposing the frailty of the hypercomplex social, economic and cultural structures we have built in opposition to the alleged chaos of nature.

Such readings of the notion of polycrisis can strike one as being slightly mythicizing; yet they should not obscure its usefulness as an eminently interdisciplinary conceptual tool for social sciences, provided that the term be put through a thorough process of disambiguation. Since its employment has generalized in journalistic (Homer-Dixon 2023, Lähde 2023), academic (Hoyer et al. 2023; Albert 2024; Lawrence et al. 2024) and policymaking (Juncker 2018; World Economic Forum 2023; European Environment Agency 2024) writings and parlance, various attempts to define its contours and mechanisms and to establish its specificity in regards to contemporary times have emerged. The current situation is considered exceptional first because of the unparalleled level of rhizomatic development and interlacing of our social, economic, transportation and communication systems, thus putting “the interlinked architecture of our global systems [...] at the heart of the current polycrisis” (Lawrence et al. 2024, Chapter 3). Secondly, as initially stated, the damage inflicted to our planetary environment is now often put forward as the low-clouded horizon that hangs over the whirlwind of intersecting geopolitical, sanitary, financial, ethical and representational crises, according to the new rallying cry of “All is ecological,” which has replaced, or rather expanded, the previous “Everything is political.” In a way, the ecocide perpetrated by the most recent civilizational configurations has become, metaphorically speaking, the very environment – man-made if there ever was one – of all other possible collapses we face.

But our recent past reveals a different state of affairs: there was a prevalent tendency to push the ecological emergency into the shadow of the countless 20th century polycrises, thus attesting to the limits not of the phenomenon itself, which is infinitely encompassing, but

of humankind's representational resources and intellectual economy. The latter demands the hierarchization of the dangers with which it is confronted and of the responses it is supposed to bring to them. In the present article, I will aim to retrace some of the intricacies that surround the emergence of ecological awareness when discourses on nature protection are embedded in rigid ideological framings already polarized by other social and economical issues, which compete rather than converge with the fledgling ecological rhetoric. I will anchor my argument in the extended polycrisis that constituted the background of late socialism in Romania and which culminated in the overthrow of the regime in 1989: a polycrisis which has been the matrix and the more or less explicit point of reference for all ensuing major national crises to this day, and not least for the country's painful transition to market democracy which came with a heavy ecological price. I will try to turn over its head the question of the instantiation of nature's wrecking by looking instead at the lack of such explicit representations. Alongside the analysis of the emergence and deployment in written mass media of a sanctioned ecological discourse emanating from a centralized authority, I will also discuss various audiovisual representational strategies of nature and the hierarchies they tacitly establish between the emergency constituted by the accelerating degradation of the environment and other manifestations of the ongoing polycrisis. This issues will lead to reflecting on the methodological toolbox available to researchers who attempt to look into the absence of a certain kind of rhetoric rather than into its manifestations, as well as on the necessity to develop a theoretical framework within ecomedia studies that takes into consideration not only media specificity, but also the crumbling of this specificity in certain contexts of improper preservation and access.

I will use an eclectic corpus made of various non-theatrical productions which will expand the traditional scope of analysis of film ecocriticism. While taking into account the continuous methodological, formal and thematic diversification of the field, it is still safe to claim that most of its specialized literature has focused thus far on dominant media forms, so mostly theatrical cinema and television¹. Noélie Martin and Jacopo Rasmi (2024) identify and propose respectively two taxonomic categories that distribute ecocritical approaches to media along the lines of their foci of inquiry. On the one hand, the authors distinguish three relational modes that bind media and environment: "mediation as an environment; (2) mediation in an environment; and (3) mediation of the environment"; on the other hand, for the specific case of cinematographic objects, they advance a temporal division "based on the different phases of the film's existence: (1) before the film; (2) within the film; (3) and

1 There is one notable exception, which is however relativized by the obvious place it occupies in the mediatization of the non-human world, namely natural science films: they often – but not always – fall into the category of non-theatrical production.

after the film”, this is to say

an *ecology of creation and production* [...], [a second ecology concerning] the films themselves, considered as formal and semantic objects, [which] could be named an *ecological esthetics*, [and a third] ecology that describes how publics get access to films: [i]t is an *ecology of distribution and of reception*. (272)

Yet, these three branches are far from being evenly spread. If ecologies of distribution and reception are now more likely to feed the sub-field of digital media studies, eco-conscious film studies proper often fall into one of the two other divisions identified by Martin and Rasmi. Leaving aside the investigations on the ecological impact of the film industry (Corbett and Turco 2006; Kucuk Dogan and Dalkilic 2023) – which have experienced a surge of interest in recent years and have even contributed to or assisted the introduction of virtuous practices in the film industry –, as well as the growing corpus of academic production on the proclivities of experimental cinema for materialist approaches that touch upon environmental concerns (Catanese and Parrika 2018; MacKenzie and Marchessault 2019; Knowles 2021), many of the ecocritical inquiries into audiovisual material belong to Martin and Rasmi’s ecological esthetics and display a high degree of homogeneity in terms of their objects of research. Mainstream production is considered worthy of analysis chiefly by virtue of a shared belief in the effects of its representational tactics on the audience’s adoption of certain civilizational stances, viewed as appropriate in the context of the Anthropocene. This shared belief is cultivated despite otherwise conflicting or incompatible intellectual traditions and methodological approaches, such as Althusserian subject positioning theory, psycho-semiotics or cognitivist film theory (“Rethinking Eco-Film Studies”).

Between the lines of the reasons informing the constitution of most corpuses of ecocritical film studies, one can read the assumption that non-theatrical production is culturally marginal, addressing a narrow or specialized public whose reaction is hardly representative for the global community concerned by the climate emergency. If such a preconception may hold true for a portion of this production, such as the one destined for closed circuit viewing within particular knowledge or occupational communities like scientific, instructional or surveillance audiovisual material, it must nevertheless be stated that, on the one hand, the reappropriation and wide dissemination of historical audiovisual content initially destined to a confidential audience has become current practice in the digital paradigm. On the other hand, a large portion of contemporary non-theatrical audiovisual material is now situated much higher in terms of audience consumption practices than its theatrical counterpart, whether we refer to advertising, videogames or online content creation. Given this situation, it is only natural to interrogate the types of imaginary that ‘minor’ (at least in terms of the recognition traditional film studies have been willing to grant them) audiovisual formulas have vehiculated even before the digital turn and their resulting positioning at the forefront

of the media stage, while keeping in mind that this imaginaries are at once indebted and complementary to the ones generated by the dominant theatrical film production.

The Late Socialist Polycrisis: Nature by the People and for the People

When looking at post-1989 attempts to evaluate the impact of state socialisms on regional and global natural environments, one is bound to acknowledge the disequilibrium between negative assessments and, if not positive, at least partially favorable ones. Most specialized literature seems to align with the dominant imagery of a post-socialist twilight zone of ecological destruction, scarred by excessive industrialization propelled by ideologically sanctified techno-fetishism and by a life-or-death competition with the capitalist bloc. The years immediately following the collapse of most socialist states saw a first cascade of thoroughly denunciatory studies written by foreign as well as local commentators (Feshbach and Friendly 1992; Peterson 1993; Mazurski 1991; Iablokov and Edberg 1991), which sometimes displayed an unapologetically positive bias towards the Western nations' manner of dealing with the ecological emergency, grossly neglecting the capitalist bloc's responsibility both as initiator of the civilizational paradigm which ushered in the environmental crisis and as most significant polluter, all times and all calculation methods considered². Since then, the picture has been slightly nuanced and efforts have been made to advance the narrative that the ecological crisis was acknowledged by state socialist systems, a situation which triggered various responses which impacted theoretical thinking as well as praxis, although with mitigated concrete results (Engel-Di Mauro 2021; Foster 2015; Brain 2011).

Romanian policies during the nation's over four decades of socialist rule have been generally consistent with the widespread atmosphere of ecological concern, yet also of denial of the need for a systemic change in industrial production practices and rates in order to curb environmental destruction, which prevailed in the Eastern Bloc. If only because of its representativeness, the case of socialist Romania, and especially of late socialist Romania, deserves attention. Moreover, it can also be affirmed that the polycrisis which marred the

2 For example, Krwyswtof Mawurski (1991) compares the efforts made in Western Europe to reverse some of the destruction caused to the environment starting with the 1960s with the alleged continuous devastation willfully perpetrated by state socialist Eastern European nations, making no mention of the historically greater responsibility of long-industrialized capitalist nations to the situation inherited by socialist governments as early as 1917 and which has been worsening ever since (39). Today, there is a clear consensus that the United States has been the biggest cumulative polluter from the mid-19th century to the present day (Evans 2021).

socialist regime's rule at least starting with the Second Oil Crisis in 1979 and along its ensuing downward economic spiral, was particularized in Romania by leader Nicolae Ceaușescu's attempt to integrally repay the country's external debt. The consequent restrictions imposed on all areas of consumption arguably fueled the civil uprising of December 1989. Thus, late socialist Romania's polycrisis was more acutely and more corporeally experienced by the population than in other parts of Eastern Europe – this is also particularly important in understanding the logic behind a certain type of rhetoric which will flourish during the country's transition period towards capitalism and which will abusively pit social conditions against ecological reforms.³

As Ferencz-Flatz and Hîncu note (forthcoming), within the larger frame of Marxist-Leninist ideology, ecology was not incompatible, but it was an incongruous object which raised two main issues. On the one hand, the necessarily international management of the ecological crisis was clashing with the nationalist withdrawal of many socialist states which had finally wrested their autonomy from the Soviet Union. Despite attempts by international organization like the United Nations to call for global environmental governance at events such as the Stockholm 1972 Conference on the Human Environment (“Report of the United Nations Conference”), the antagonism between the two dominant ideological blocs was as high as ever, and climate protection was a useful springboard from which to launch accusations and to point responsibility, as demonstrates the insistence of socialist commentators to link ecological destruction not to a set of identifiable and possibly correctible production practices, but to the capitalist system, whichever shape it took. On the other hand, the reveal of the extent of the ecological degradation caused by industrial civilization was a challenge thrown down directly at the reliance of socialist regimes on intensive, resource-hungry production processes powered by the techno-scientific revolution – but to overcome that challenge would have required the implementation of deep structural changes to the ideological, economic, industrial and legislative tissue of state socialist nations. Despite the fact that “[c]rises were seen as an opportunity for conceptual change and socio-economic transformation, as a turning point in Marxist-Leninist theorizing as well as in the practice of socialism” (Ferencz-Flatz and Hîncu), the accumulation of multiple perils looming over the stability of the socialist regimes in the late 70s and in the 80s hardly constituted a favorable context for the revision of their fundamental tenets.

3 This artificial and destructive opposition will conserve its influence well after the country's integration to the capitalist system, whose completion is evidenced by its admission to the European Union in 2007, and will play a significant role for instance in the promotion of the Canadian company Gabriel Resources' intensely contested project to exploit precious metal mines in the Roșia Montană region.

It is generally acknowledged that, in the context of the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment and the precedents of a few other international treaties focused on some of the burning geopolitical issues of the time⁴, the late 1960s and the early 1970s saw the increase of international awareness regarding the ongoing ecological crisis and constituted the backdrop of a wave of national as well as transnational regulatory measures to limit environmentally harmful human activities (Koivurova 30–39). Socialist Romania inscribed itself in this tendency, by issuing the 1973 law on the protection of the environment, which itself expanded and refined the 1953 Decree no. 237 on the safeguard of the monuments of nature – a denomination which lays bare, however, the existence of a tacit hierarchy between man-made achievements and natural environments. The 1973 law established priorities, defined obligations and the terms of punishment for their non-observance, ranging from economic sanctions to prison terms, and laid the foundations of the institution in charge of supervising the implementation of the devised measures, namely the National Council for the Protection of the Environment.

Despite harsh recent assessments of socialist Romania's (lack of) environmental protection measures (Țiu 2014, Petrișor and Tîrzman 2019), the initial policies were praised at the time of their issue by international actors such as the Deputy Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme Mustafa Kamal Tolba (Ralea 1976) – naturally, this positive assessment was picked up and magnified by the national press. It cannot be denied that, in the early 1970s, ecology became a preoccupation that overflowed technocratic power circles and irrigated popular media, in a real effort to raise the awareness of the unfolding ecological crisis among the general audience. But while opinion pieces and debates could go as far as to address the questions of the extent to which the new environmental legislation was actually enforced by the main actors of the most polluting industries, or of the maybe already irreversible damage caused to air, water, and soil, not to mention to the working people's health (Păunescu et al. 1973), discussions on the protection of nature remained predominantly embedded in an ideological line of argument that aimed at affirming the systemic superiority of socialism over all other forms of resource management, understood as comprehensively as possible (Ferencz-Flatz and Hîncu). Moreover, as a short but revealing article on “the nature of nature” penned in 1985, which argued for the inseparability of the concepts of natural and technological environments in the given state of industrialized nations, serves to illustrate (Drăgănescu 1985), nature, even when it was seen as a distinguishable entity, was always subordinated to human progress and therefore, according to the economical and ideological profile of most versions of state socialisms, to the techno-scientific revolution.

4 Namely the 1963 Moscow Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and the 1967 Outer Space Treaty.

Mediatized nature in Romanian late socialism: the imagery of amateur production

The question now is how was the rhetoric of the primacy of man's development, which relegated nature to a (possibly dispensable) appendix of his well-being, deployed in the media ecologies of late socialist Romania? In order to offer a necessarily limited, yet relevant element of answer, I will look at the pool of representational strategies of nature generated but one particular register of audiovisual production practices of that time and place, namely amateur films. The main motivation for this choice of corpus has been the desire to inquire whether these films, which theoretically were a more direct audiovisual expression of the masses than professional production, could have been the carriers of an articulated and proactive ecological discourse, echoing in a more subdued manner the civil society protests that sparked in other parts of the Eastern Bloc in the 70s and intensified in the following decade especially in the wake of the Chernobyl disaster, contributing even, according to some voices, to the further fragilization of a crisis-ridden Soviet Union (Szulecki et al. 2022, Kirchoff and McNeill 2019). Secondly, amateur production is – as is the broader typology of nontheatrical production to which it belongs – a blind spot of eco-conscious media studies. Whether considered unrepresentative for general sociological tendencies due to their excessive anchoring in their makers' particular situations or, on the contrary, a pale reproduction of orientations which are much more vividly captured by the products generated by the dominant cultural industries, amateur materials are never addressed from an environmental perspective other than in the light of their contemporary ubiquity, in the context of the democratization of audiovisual expression and participatory online culture (Mörner 2017; Pera and Aiello 2024; Dubey et al. 2025). Yet pre-digital amateur production constitutes precious documentation concerning the pervasiveness of the ecological discourse and its grip (or lack thereof) on daily concerns and routines in situated temporal and spatial contexts. Moreover, the application of ecocritical methodologies to this category of objects may encourage reflections on the need to conceive of an environmentally sensitive frame of analysis of media objects which are, respectively or simultaneously, outside the canon, not explicitly concerned with ecological topics, and whose integrity is often affected by improper preservation and circulation.

Romanian socialist amateur films avoided the usual trajectory of production followed by commercial media objects, defined by constant supervision at each stage of their making and circulation, in a regime that largely controlled and strictly rationed access to the audiovisual infrastructure. Despite this laxer attitude that could be assimilated to a form of negligence, amateur films were in fact central to the socialist cultural democracy project, as they constituted the creative pillar of the endeavor to radically democratize moving image production as well as consumption – but this project entailed the establishment of

a decentralized network of small production centers that were organized by lower-echelon authoritative bodies such as local party or union organizations, in accordance with their cultural action plan (Goagă n.d.).

Thus, individual voices could more easily emerge; yet it would be an error to assume that these were necessarily dissident, or even merely original. Like in the Western world, where amateur cinema was often hopelessly trying to raise itself to the standards set by theatrical films, socialist cine-amateurism was under the domination of the imaginary of professional quality imposed by the most popular film genres of the day, at the two-folded level of content and form. Due to the systemic demand to address social reality placed on all forms of socialist representational art, amateur filmmakers were more influenced by professional documentary codes than their Western counterparts. At the practical level as well, amateur filmmaker units were sometimes used as substitutes for the professional services – available at higher costs – that were provided by the documentary film studio Alexandru Sahia, which would make industrial, instructional, promotional or touristic films, or by the studio Animafilm (in charge of animation cinema, but also of diafilms and slides). Both these studios worked within the circuit of planned production, devised each year and depending on the approval of the authorities that helmed the national audiovisual production, yet also increasingly responded to specific requirements for films formulated by various organizations (Szel forthcoming). In these conditions, many films made in the context of the amateur cineclub movement displayed a high degree of fidelity towards the representational strategies developed in professional nonfiction, aiming to prove their capacity to successfully emulate them rather than to propose alternative vantage points.

Put shortly, finding a coherent representational strategy of the natural environment in late socialist amateur films proves impossible. Despite the wide dissemination of an overall homogenous official discourse on the importance of preserving natural environments through the advancements made possible by the techno-scientific revolution, without hindering in any manner the industrial development of the country – as discussed in the preceding section –, no consistent amateur imagery seems to have emerged from these considerations. Yet, even if ecological discourse was nowhere explicit in amateur productions and most of them only modestly recycled themes and discursive structures already employed by professional films, these works still mirrored their makers' individual methods of absorbing the main tenets of the ideological system that framed their creative activity and dictated their sources of inspiration and cultural aspirations. Without yet delving into particular works or film categories, one can attempt to sketch some general observations concerning the representation of natural environments and their link with human activity in non-professional production, but not before having made two significant remarks.

First of all, one has to keep in mind that amateur films, more than any other typology of Romanian socialist media, is a continuously evolving corpus, which grows unevenly,

depending on a very limited number of collectors and researchers' efforts to trace down, contextualize and disseminate these works⁵; this means that any encompassing statement made about the films now known may be soon partially or more radically contradicted by future findings.

Secondly, the difficulty to access these materials and their frequent disconnectedness from any form of historical contextualization, in addition to their incompleteness (sound, credits or entire scenes may be missing) and to their upload to an environment – the internet – which deeply transforms the mediatic experience in which they are embedded, highlight the necessity to expand methodologies such as intermedial ecocriticism (Bruhn and Salmose 2023). The latter is an important step forward in transcending the chiefly thematic focus that marred many ecocritical investigations, due to its insistence on the concrete medial configurations that constitute the tongue – in its double material and metaphorical sense – that articulates the ecological discourse. However, its attachment to media specificity is untenable in the case of uncurated orphan films which lose a number of their original mediatic features while absorbing others belonging to the various mediatic surroundings in which they are placed. Knowing that one can hardly retrieve the original viewing conditions of these amateur films, the ecocritical analyst cannot depend on a narrow or rigid understanding of their mediatic essence, and must rely on comparisons with other elements of discourse as much in order to clarify the transmedial becomings of environmental concerns – which is one of the main aims of intermedial ecocriticism – as in order to use these comparisons as entryways in what are essentially opaque audiovisual materials.

Concerning possible patterns in the representation of nature in Romanian socialist amateur films, one can note that the place it occupies in cineclub creations seems to hinge on at least two aspects: on the one hand, it is determined by the geographical and organizational context within which the producing entities evolved. For example, workmen's film collectives predominantly choose to represent industrial processes, favoring either artificial environments such as the interiors of workshops, warehouses or offices, or exteriors that are heavily invested, and even transfigured, by human activities. Film clubs developed within rural cultural houses, however, helm the anthropological observation of daily life that most of these amateur films carry out, irrespective of their context of creation, towards a more conventional ethnographic and at times folklorizing direction. But even in this last category, nature is rarely picturesque or bucolic, and human contribution to the shaping of the

5 In the case of the present article, all materials have been collected from either the Facebook page or the YouTube channel of Muzeul Cineastului Amator (The Museum of the Amateur Filmmaker), a private initiative led by collector Andrei Bălbărașu who gathers, digitizes and makes publicly accessible films made by socialist cineclub collectives initially from the former industrial city of Reșița and its surroundings, and increasingly from the whole country.

landscape is praised to the same extent as nature's quality of being an endless resource pool that only needs good administration in order to yield its riches.

An interesting example for this last case is the film *Aurul ogoarelor* (*The Gold of the Fields*), made in 1986 by the cineclub of Sănnicolau Mare, a small agro-industrial town in the westernmost part of Romania. The film operates a convergence between aesthetic and pragmatic approaches to rural landscape, playing on the two distinct levels of sound and image. The voice-over, a particularly important conveyor of meaning and the supreme guide of spectatorial comprehension in much of nonfiction cinema and, consequently, in numerous amateur forays into documentary filmmaking as well, starts in a heavily pastoral vein, initially giving little practical information about the topic, namely the record-breaking workers of the agricultural cooperative of Narau, collectively decorated with the order of Hero of the New Agrarian Revolution. Around the fifth of the thirty minutes of this unusually lengthy film for amateur standards, the voiceover operates a U-turn and suddenly acknowledges the industrial mythology of socialist agrarian reforms, introducing the "taut buzzing of the tractors" in a previously ahistorical description. In the remaining time, the voiceover will keep swaying between these two registers. The images, on the other hand, depict from start to finish a human-dominated space, to the extent that, except for the very first one, there is no shot of "pure" nature. Far from being incoherent, the oscillation of the voice over represents the fusion of the imaginaries of nature as beautiful and nature as useful, as well as of nature as enclosed in human activity rather than the opposite.

The rhetorical strategy used in *The Gold of the Fields* seems to offer an audiovisual equivalent to some of Drăgănescu's previously mentioned meditations on the reconceptualization of nature in the age of the Anthropocene:

Is a wheat field a natural or a technological environment? Or are the soil and the air the sole remaining natural environments? But doesn't a soil impregnated with fertilizers and pesticides partly become technological as well? Then, where is the limit or where can we place the border between technological and natural environments? Between them, there exists not a border, but an intermediate area, where the natural and the technological mix in different proportions. All these prove that society has penetrated nature, that, for men, the environment is constituted of the environment of social relations, of the environment where the technological and the natural intersect, and only afterwards of the natural environment *per se*. Therefore, we can speak of four stratas of the environment from man's perspective, out of which two and a half are produced by society (they form the entire social environment) and only one and a half is produced by nature without man's intervention, that half reflecting the ambiguous position of technologized nature. (20)

Given the evident anthropocentric bias of Marxism, Drăgănescu doesn't sketch the least attempt to look beyond the human perspective when he lays out the interpenetrations of the different environments. The two typologies of socialist media discussed in this article, the written press and amateur cinema, converge to demonstrate that the protection of the environment is continuously subordinated to different imperatives, ranging from the socialist subject's general well-being – a situation which is best illustrated by tourist and travel films, to which we will come back shortly – to specific economic conditions which, in the context of the polycrisis that engulfed Romania after the 1979 oil price collapse and the increase of international interest rates, imposed austerity and thrift mentality indiscriminately, on industries of the highest national interest as well as on the most trivial daily activities.

What one also has to keep in mind if that topics currently inseparable from ecological discourse were not always connotated in this way, and, especially in the case of such opaque media objects such as amateur films that oftentimes reach us bereaved of their context (and first and foremost bereaved of their soundtrack, whether it was once laid directly on film or on tape and then irretrievably lost or whether it existed only under the form of a voiceover spoken during screenings and thus equally unrecoverable), researchers should avoid projecting on them their own anachronic sensibilities and curiosities. For example, the film *Biogaz II (Biogas II)*, produced by the film club Optic '76, which was affiliated to the Urban Management Service of the city of Reșița, is the only preserved film of a series titled *Unconventional Energies* which had two and possibly more installments. But its images alone, which switch between exterior views of the industrial infrastructure needed for the processing of biogas and explicative diagrams in the well-established tradition of didactic films, do not allow us to establish the prominence of the ecological argument in the promotion of this type of energy. Likewise, the film *Metamorfoze (Metamorphoses)*, made by members of the film club Zorii Noi (The New Dawns), attached to the Children's Palace of the same city of Reșița, follows a preadolescent girl who finds some metal caps in the grass outside her building. She collects more of them and ends up building a toy robot; the last shots show her reading the science vulgarization section of a magazine, and the film ends with a stop-motion animation of metal caps successively composing various vehicles. Once again, the themes of upcycling and environmental protection may stand out for contemporary sensibilities, helped by the muddled narrative development and by the lack of an orientative voiceover that would anchor the film into the preoccupations of its epoch. But there is a strong probability that environmental protection plays a minor or even no role whatsoever in the argument of the film and that techno-scientific creativity and resource maximization are the real discursive axes of the film. Yet another example is constituted by the film titled *Te iubim, Terra (We love you, planet Earth)*, made by Andrei Băloi and Mihai Botan for the miners' filmclub of the city of Anina. The title, which is often considered an essential indicator of the content or intention of a work, orients contemporary viewers

towards believing that the film will develop environmental topics; however, what one sees instead is a stop motion animation that presents a growing number of small metal balls – first a single one, then two, then a multitude – which gather in front of a paper cutout of a building. In the following scene, three of the same balls are placed at the margins of a two-dimensional train track seen from above. One of them follows the tracks until it disappears through a trapdoor that suddenly opens up between two sleepers. In the final sequence, a flame-shaped container breaks in half and from it emerges a shirtless young man, while the word “No” appears above him. Once again, either the filmmakers’ inability to compose a clear narrative, their reliance on now-missing elements (the existing soundtrack of the video is exclusively musical and there is a strong chance it is in fact the uploader’s addition) or the dependence of the film’s discourse upon codes or information that were widely known to its original target audience, but are now incomprehensible for most viewers, expose the message to a myriad possible contemporary interpretations. However, none of the visual elements supports the initial theory of the ecological subject matter; and indeed, one should be aware that the symbolism of humankind’s shared planet could very well pertain to internationalist or pacifist positions, which were more audible discourses in the socialist space than the environmental one. In all of these cases, it is not only the specific ensemble constituted by the “basic media aspects”⁶ of the films that is the purveyor of meaning for contemporary audiences, but first and foremost the cultural atmosphere of the times, which must be reconstituted from various sources and which will afterwards disclose the coordinates within which it is rational to assume that the amateur film discourse unfurls.

When it comes to travel films, nature hovers somewhere between the scenic and the pragmatic. On the one hand, it constitutes a significant attraction around which the entire excursion may be built; socialist amateur films converge once again with their Western counterparts, here in the collecting of “canned landscapes” which will compose the narrative of a successful holiday. On the other hand, the accessibilization for the working class of the typical bourgeois leisure environments, namely the seaside and the mountain, was a political objective, so these images act as proof of the democratization of the enjoyment of nature – when the latter was not altogether erased by sprawling architectural development (Maxim 2022). The case of mountain areas is however worth taking note of. While they feature quite heavily in amateur films, they also occasion some of the attitudes which come closest to contemplation or to awe, beyond their conventional use as background for collective sport

6 Basic media aspects are “configurations of sign systems: text or speech, images, organized sound, moving images, or gestures. All these basic media types can, in a multimodal analysis, be differentiated as constituting numerous different semiotic modes. These basic media types are not the smallest entities that can provide meaningful information, but they are basic, meaning that they are used and combined in many different kinds of media products.” (Bruhn and Salmose 23).

activities such as hiking and skiing. While considerable efforts were made under the socialist rule to connect mountainous regions to the mobility and industrial infrastructure of the country, and the forestry and mining sectors experienced a significant growth, these places still put a speck in the wheel of the project to collectivize agricultural land (Membretti and Iancu 2017). This unruliness in front of the sweeping modernizing ambitions of the regime may partially inspire the slight disquiet one feels mixing with the more traditional aesthetic pleasure animating the shots of towering peaks and immaculate snow-covered expanses, before the films veer more firmly towards the description of the leisure activities practiced in the area. Therefore, it is not through their belonging to what Bruhn and Salmose call “qualified media types” (the larger ensemble of media texts in which individual works are inscribed by virtue of sharing a number of distinguishable complex features; in this case, travelogues) that such films demonstrate a particular sensibility for the natural environment, but rather through unruly basic media elements, namely isolated shots that evade the travelogue format and its expected discourse in order to convey a portion of the irrational affects that connect man to nature. Considering our corpus of amateur films in its entirety, one can also think of Lars Elleström’s own take on the question of qualified media types, which introduces an additional nuance by dividing the qualifying aspects of media into the contextual and the operational one. While the first concentrates on the exterior characteristics and the second on the internal features that determine the belonging of a medial object to a certain medium, the two notions serve as reminders of the socio-historical determination of any such assignment (24–25). Most times, amateur films introduce a further element of randomness to what is already an unstable, historically situated effort to define (audiovisual) media types in accordance with the wider social, economic and cultural landscapes which they bridge. Their frequently flawed command of the established rules of the cinematic genres from which they nevertheless borrow various characteristics makes it hard to confer on them either conservative attitudes or subversive intentions in regards to established forms; this, in turn, forces the observer to view established imaginaries – imaginaries of nature, in our case – as less normative and coherent than they might appear, as long as they can be diffracted and eventually estranged⁷ by these imperfect media texts.

The second aspect that seems to bear an influence on the representation of nature in socialist amateur films is their inscription in the fiction or non-fiction categories. In fictions, the social and ideological role of nature is often overshadowed by its metaphorical uses, which spring from its assimilation to the Edenic space, separate from or antecedent to human corruption. One particularly telling example, which is in stark contrast with the films that celebrated rural modernization such as the previously discussed *The Gold of the*

7 I use the term ‘estrangement’ here in reference to Viktor Skhlovsky’s *ostranenie*, but without its intentional, self-reflexive and contestatory edge.

Fields, is *Dor* (roughly translatable as *Melancholy*, but closer to the portuguese *saudade*), by Constantin Armeanu and Geo Pestrea, members of the Amafilm Club. The latter was the amateur film production facility of the city of Lupeni, one of the settlements of the main coal basin in the country, the Jiu Valley, which experienced an exponential growth in economic and symbolic capital during the socialist rule. Nevertheless, various forms of resistance emerged, culminating with the miners' strike of 1977 – one of the very few major public struggles against Party leader Nicolae Ceaușescu's authority –, which attested to the dissatisfactions of a socially valorized portion of the proletariat who was nonetheless plagued by ravaging working conditions and early mortality (Friedman 2007). This status constitutes the never explicated backdrop of Armeanu and Pestrea's film, which describes the fantasized evasion of a man, dwelling in a dark and cramped attic room, who dreams of the preserved rural setting that his old parents still inhabit, whether in reality or illusion. The few trees he sees outside his window constitute the catalyst that activates the tactile memories of his interactions with an idealized nature, encapsulated by the trope of the field of grass and flowers as purveyor of aesthetically and physically pleasing sensations. He sets on a quest towards this desired space that will involve the confrontation with this time antagonistic natural elements, such as heavy rain, rocky and arid soil, and turbulent waters. He reaches his destination in a state of total exhaustion; the camera then lingers on the once again welcoming nature, where humans seem to live in symbiosis, frozen in timeless attitudes and clothing, with no traces of industrialized modernity in sight. As it happens during most polycrises, late socialism witnessed the chaotic mixing of value systems, as the criticality of the different situations prompted strong engagements for hardly compatible worldviews. A brand of nationalism bordering with and sometimes fully embracing protochronism had the task of reconciling folkloric essentializations of the countryside with the violent jolt into modernity the regime had exercised on rural landscapes and lifestyles since its coming to power. Amateur art was at the forefront of this not fully coherent "return to the roots", and the mammoth national festival Cântarea României (Song of Romania), launched in 1976, was conceived as an incentive for the creation of an authentically socialist folklore, where nature was torn between imaginaries of sacralization and resource exploitation. Concrete natural environments were profoundly affected by these divergent tendencies, which caused the proliferation of mutually cancelling policies – something which is reflected in the mitigated balance sheet of socialist countries' environmental impact, where, for instance, the preservation of large expanses of wilderness through the maintenance of natural parks created during the interwar period as well as through the establishment of new structures of nature protection (Depraz 2011) cohabited with extensive destruction of natural assets caused by overindustrialization.

The exception to the rule: the engagement with nature in the works of Kinema Ikon

One more type of amateur material that is worth exploring in relation to the audiovisual representation of the socialist subject's interactions with the natural environment is the production of the film club atelier16, which would later be known as Kinema Ikon – maybe the most coherent and consistent Romanian experimental film collective that bridged the socialist and postsocialist eras. If the amateur films mentioned in the article thus far were heavily reliant on different imaginaries borrowed from ideologically pervasive cultural forms – be it either the non-fictional production of the Alexandru Sahia Studio or the representational conventions of nature inherited from various literature and visual arts movements, and most significantly from romanticism –, the work of Kinema Ikon inscribes itself in the medium-specific paradigm of materialist experimental film. While this influence is also very pronounced, it is de-structured enough to let the authors' personal approaches as well as their context-determined preoccupations emerge clearly. atelier16 was founded by George Sabău in 1970 within the Art School of Arad, where he taught cinema and esthetics. Despite not being structurally different from other film clubs that activated in the same period, it aggregated young people interested in and professionals already working in various artistic fields and therefore displaying a more affirmed aesthetic sense and a keener taste for formal experimentation than most other film club members. Moreover, Sabău insisted on conducting theoretical courses alongside the practical exercises, and the latter were also carefully elaborated, following a trajectory of production close to that of professional films (Boto 2020). Kinema Ikon, as the group was later renamed, experienced artisanally with the cinematic language in the structural limits of the socialist film club culture. Namely, if amateur cinema was not particularly subjected to state control, as its circulation was very reduced, it remained materially dependent on the meagre quotas of film and limited technical resources provided by the patron organizations. Sabău and his team made various commissioned films which are now predominantly lost, and used the scraps to create more formally ambitious productions, mostly based on direct interventions on the film base, for the duration of what they identify as their first creative phase, lasting from 1970 to 1989 (“Kinema Ikon”).

Compared to the amateur productions discussed in the previous pages, the works of Kinema Ikon are much more easily analyzable with the approved tools of film ecocriticism. This is due to the fact that their contextualization, preservation and careful curation have been ensured by the remaining members of the group in post-socialist times, when the collective veered more decisively towards video and hypermedia art, but also developed a cohesive self-promotional strategy built around the narrative of their artistic opposition from within the socialist regime of production. The vantage point of media specificity

– namely the close analysis of the technical and aesthetic elements that are the constituting blocks of a given text – is not only possible, but absolutely necessary given the group's direct, material engagement with the medium of film. Yet, the qualified media type of experimental cinema to which Kinema Ikon's socialist-era production belongs must prevent rather than orient any kind of normative reading of the corpus, echoing in that the opacity one observed in conventional socialist film club production, albeit for different reasons.

When one watches their early and plentiful body of work, totalizing 62 experimental films for as many documentaries, in search of a coherent set of representational strategies of nature, one is immediately struck by one particular film titled *Poluare (Pollution)*. Despite the various metaphorical uses of the term one is tempted to suppose this title may refer to, given the very meager interest for nature protection discourses our corpus of amateur films has exhibited thus far, Ioan Pleș' film actually addresses industrial pollution and its impact on living organisms, albeit in a playful, anti-didactic vein. *Pollution* uses the scratch-on-film technique in order to materialize industrial emissions under the shape of a drawn rectangle that emerges from a factory chimney and starts chasing a group of young people loitering nearby. The confrontation between them is unequal, as the young men inhabit the diegetic world of the film (which also comprises a periurban natural environment), while the materialized effects of pollution belong to the film base itself, therefore to the container that frames, and thus dominates, the content. This disequilibrium is perfectly illustrated by a sequence where one of the pursued tries to defeat his geometrical pursuer by throwing stones at it. While the scratched rectangle disappears for a few moments, it suddenly reappears behind his back and strikes the young man unconscious: if the characters have agency only in the diegetic world they inhabit, the scratched figure is both within and beyond the represented content, layered over it as the emulsion is layered over the film base. Similarly, before and during the chase, images of trees and flying birds suddenly burst into flames, exposing their technical as well as representational nature. These visual tricks are not purely ludic; they operate a visual translation of the pervasive effect of pollution, which vitiates organic matter and decomposes it from within, becoming itself nature.

There is a significant worldwide tradition of ecologically-minded experimental cinema, with very vibrant contemporary manifestations such as the ones that emerge from the photochemical film resistance movement. Many present as well as past practitioners argue for the raised awareness to matter that is elicited by the direct contact with celluloid film, which reunites both inorganic and organic elements in its composition (Della Noce and Murari 2022, Knowles 2021). Whether or not aware of it, the members of Kinema Ikon connected to this international sensibility and explored in various works the convergence between the direct interventions that they performed upon their work material and the transformations of matter in the natural circuit, while maintaining a figurative approach that

never allowed their productions to fall over into sheer formal abstraction. While ascribing distinct discourses and intentions to such films is always a perilous exercise in interpretation, one can still venture to identify the interactions and sometimes the confrontation between man and nature as a potential theme in a number of films produced by Kinema Ikon in its experimental phase. Emanuel Tet's *Vânătoarea de păsări* (*Bird Hunting*) stages what may be seen, also based on the film's title, as a hunting game between men and birds, the latter being again scratched directly on film. While the drawn birds initially frolic in a predominantly natural environment, human intervention becomes progressively more visible in the landscape and human figures appear; the editing rhythm becomes more alert and various competing effects – of solarization, tinting, toning etc. – start to saturate the frame. Once again, one of the aims of the film is to provoke a reciprocal action between its different material layers: the representational content captured within the grains of the emulsion, the film base which emerges in the scratched areas and various layers of paint applied directly over the film strip. But here, the diegetic humans can dominate the scratched figures: a man throws a (scratched) spear towards the birds and sends them back to the intermediate layer of figurative representation, the images showing the overexposed corpse of a dove, and later some tamed pigeons in a city square.

Ioan Pleș' efforts following *Poluare*, such as *Efecte de imprimăvărare* (*Spring Effects*) and *Panta Rhei*, also formulate reflections on the essence of movement and the cycle of the transformation of matter in both nature and the artificial medium constituted by cinema in its physical as well as representational dimension. *Efecte de imprimăvărare* self-reflexively investigates the illusion of movement in film and the fundamental link between its historical pursuit and animal motion. Stop motion techniques and juxtaposed or superposed to “natural” cinematic movement, which underlines the fact that both are constructs of technology and of our minds. And, as the arbitrariness of our technologically-mediated perceptions and of conventional norms of visual legibility are questioned by the film's chaotic assemblage, the fact that many of the images one sees are of animals and plants leads one to take a philosophical leap and wonder not only: What is natural(ized)?, but also, more bluntly: What is nature?

Conclusions

If the analysis of a selection of Kinema Ikon's output may seem to offer solid proof that there existed an interest in late socialist Romania to put cinematic language in the service of the contestation of dominant, non-reflexive audiovisual representations of nature, it should be underlined that this type of preoccupations were definitely not widespread – even if the state of under-research in which Romanian amateur production is at the moment means that

its landscape may shift with the discovery of new films, it is still safe to assume that the sample of socialist film club production which we currently know of is probably representative for the submerged part of the iceberg as well. In all cases, the situation of these few films made by Kinema Ikon mirrors the treatment of the ecological question in the written press: while it was not absent, it was drowned in a mass of competing discourses which either seemed to emanate from it, but which actually diverted attention from its real stakes, or which diminished it by inscribing it in an overgeneralizing ideological battle between socialism and capitalism, drowning it in various other contemporary woes. In these conditions, ecology could hardly become an ideology of its own – and it arguably still hasn't found traction as an autonomous political program anywhere in the world, as proved by the modest scores of ecological parties ever since their multiplication in free election system countries in the 1970s, and by their failure to reach national government outside coalition agreements with other political forces. Similarly, in Romanian socialist amateur production – which was supposedly less constrained by rigid production plans and open to the various influences that could be introduced by individual film club members, who were a much more socially and culturally diverse group than professional filmmakers –, nature only occasionally escaped the two (sometimes contradictory) roles of material asset for the socialist advancement plan or of pool of conventional symbols predating the socialist imaginary. Yet, the corpus it constitutes and the readability issues it raises due to its production conditions and to its inadequate preservation invite researchers to rethink mediatic as well as mediated ecologies, and to consider expanding established ecocritical frameworks in order to address these non-traditional objects of study.

Even if the present handling of the ecological emergency in Romania as well as internationally seems very far from the historical situation I have attempted to describe in the previous pages, the relevance of forays into past instrumentalizations of the ecological question in order to lead ideological wars, as well as into various facets of the media construction of nature either as accessory to human advancement or as derealized resource for its metaphorical imagery, must be stressed again and again. The ecological crisis too easily invites projections into the future, while the past actually holds the keys to the understanding of the intellectual frameworks that shape and condition the environment as *social creation*. And if the rift between the environment as social creation and the environment as physical entity overflowing human categories is at the foundation of the present climate emergency, then no further argument must be brought forward in favour of the scrutiny through an eco-critical lens of as many historical socio-political contexts and media objects as possible, irrespective of their seeming distance or insignificance.

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