An invitation to look: the role of vernacular photography in scrutinising and understanding Romania's communist past in the context of everyday life

Um convite a olhar: o papel da fotografia vernacular no escrutínio e compreensão do passado comunista da Roménia no contexto da vida quotidiana

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Abstract

Photographs are more than visual representations of society and culture or evidence of historical documents and events. In their ubiquity, they reveal, illuminate or suggest ideas, mindsets and attitudes; they circulate on- and offline and influence and disrupt expected narratives. Photographs help reconstruct the everyday material culture of the past, tell stories of ordinary people's lives and shape the interpretation of history. Using a close reading of photographs, this paper examines vernacular photography's complexity in everyday life during Romania's communist era (1947-1989).

Just over thirty years after the fall of the Soviet bloc, when we see the return of oppressive policy-making in Eastern European countries like Hungary and Poland, and an aggressive war in Ukraine, photography research on everyday life during Romania's communist past remains an

underexplored subject area. Contextualised within the broader understanding of decolonising the Western photography canon, this paper understands vernacular photography not through visual content in a semiotic setting alone but as an ongoing event entangled in webs of power, dialogue, resistance and agency. It involves mnemonic abilities, choices and participants.

This paper is divided into two sections. The first describes how communism manifested in Romania. This offers readers the context of people's everyday lives under the tight grip of the communist regime. The second section explores photography during Romania's communist era, first in a general sense to provide an overview of Romania's photographic landscape, followed by an analysis of vernacular photography and its function as a collective memory of resistance. This article aims to extend dialogues of untold narratives, repressed histories and changing interpretations of the past, locating them in the present and orienting them towards the future.

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Keywords

vernacular photography | communist Romania | cultural resistance | collective memory | everyday life

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Resumo

As fotografias são mais do que representações visuais da sociedade e da cultura ou evidências de documentos e acontecimentos históricos. Na sua ubiquidade, revelam, iluminam ou sugerem ideias, mentalidades e atitudes; circulam on-line e off-line, e influenciam e interrompem as narrativas esperadas. As fotografias ajudam a reconstruir a cultura material quotidiana do passado, contam histórias da vida das pessoas comuns e moldam a interpretação da história. Usando uma leitura atenta das fotografias, este artigo examina a complexidade da fotografia vernacular no contexto da vida quotidiana durante a era comunista da Roménia (1947-1989).

Pouco mais de trinta anos após a queda do bloco soviético, numa época em que vemos o retorno da política opressiva em países do Leste Europeu como a Hungria e a Polónia, e uma guerra agressiva na Ucrânia, a pesquisa fotográfica sobre a vida quotidiana durante o passado comunista da Roménia permanece uma área temática pouco explorada. Este artigo, situado no contexto mais amplo

da descolonização do cânone da fotografia ocidental, entende a fotografia vernacular não apenas através do seu conteúdo visual e apenas numa abordagem semiótica, mas como um acontecimento contínuo que está enredado em teias de poder, diálogo, resistência e ação, e envolve habilidades mnemônicas, escolhas e participantes. Este artigo divide-se em duas partes. A primeira descreve como o comunismo se manifestou na Roménia para oferecer aos leitores o contexto da vida quotidiana das pessoas sob o domínio do regime comunista. A segunda parte explora a fotografia durante a era comunista da Roménia; primeiro num sentido geral, para fornecer uma visão ampla da paisagem fotográfica da Roménia, depois, através de uma análise da fotografia vernacular e da sua função como forma de memória coletiva de resistência. O objetivo deste artigo é ampliar os diálogos sobre narrativas não contadas, histórias reprimidas e interpretações do passado que se vão alterando, localizando-as no presente e orientando-as para o futuro.

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Palavras–chave   fotografia vernacular | Roménia comunista | resistência cultural | memória coletiva | vida quotidiana

Introduction

Throughout its 42 years of rule, the Communist Party in Romania upheld direct power over society by establishing repressive mechanisms and enforcing aberrant decrees and strict regulations that affected people's everyday lives in various ways. This paper focuses on vernacular photography during Romania's communist era (1947-1989). Many people used photography to record and visualise their experiences during that time. In recognising that vernacular photographs require "affective responses, attentive engagements, active listening and ongoing critical interrogation" (Wallis 2020, 19), this paper investigates what vernacular photographs reveal within the context of people's everyday life during Romania's communist past.

Communism in Romania has been researched widely over the past three decades. For example, there is an extensive scholarship introducing the history of communism in Romania, including studies on the Revolution in 1989 (Almond 1992; Bogdan 2017; Boia 2001; Bottoni 2018; Dánél 2017; Deletant 2015, 2019; Grama 2019; Hitchins 2014; Kaplan 2016; Massino 2019; Szöczi 2015; Stanciu 2013; Tismăneanu 2003; Tismăneanu

and Stan 2018). There are also accounts on the importance of culture during Romania's communist past, including culture as a form of resistance to the repressive regime (Asavei 2020, 2021; Georgescu 2012; Leustean 2009; Manea 1994; Mitroiu 2018; Plesu 1995; Poenaru 2013; Preda 2012, 2015, 2017a, 2017b; Preda 2013; Pusca 2017). The research area on cultural resistance is complemented by a small but growing literature that explores other resistance movements during the communist era (McDermott and Stibbe 2006; Petrescu 2004, 2013).

Cristina Petrescu provides a comprehensive account of opposition and resistance movements in Romania during the twentieth century. She cautions that "these movements must not be measured in comparison to the developments in other Central European countries, but in comparison to the extent of the oppositional activities ... in Romania" (2004, 142). Dennis Deletant similarly refrains from any comparisons to other Eastern or Central European countries' resistance movements and claims, "an absence of challenge to the Communist regime in Romania ... is precisely a measure of the success of the *Securitate* in suppressing information about resistance to the regime" (2015, xv). While some scholars write about photography during this period (Asavei 2021; Bădică 2012; Miklós 2019; Nae 2019), it remains an underexplored research field. This article seeks to contribute to this area.

Considering photography's ability to disturb and disrupt (Edwards 2022), this paper examines what photographs do to history, specifically Romania's communist past. Drawing on photographs taken in Romania during this era, this paper argues that vernacular photography provides a means of "listening to images" (Campt 2017, 9), contributing to collective memories of resistance and extending discussions of untold narratives and repressed histories. In doing so, it understands photographs beyond their visual contents alone and conceptualises vernacular photography as both an image and a material object that communicates, evokes memories, tells stories of the past and perhaps predicts futures (Burke 2001; Edwards 2012, 2022; Guerin and Hallas 2007).

Due to its democratic and omnipresent nature, vernacular photography is commonly understood as boring or mundane and linked to ordinary life (Batchen 2002). Vernacular photography discussed in this paper constitutes a larger body that includes domestic or family pictures, everyday photography, architecture photography and photographs of material objects. Instead of aligning vernacular photography with the ordinary, it can be described as functional, or more aptly, as an invitation to look and examine the world by disentangling questions that reflect on what photographs do in the context of ordinary life (Chéroux 2020). That view foregrounds the complexity of vernacular photography.

Discussing the limitations and possibilities of vernacular photography, Ariella Azoulay addresses its problematic nature, namely its etymological relation to slavery and colonialism. She claims that "[w]e cannot disassociate the images from the conditions under which they are produced and circulated. Rather than using the category to

qualify photographs, I would like to reactivate photographs in their original contexts" (2020, 62). This approach connects the photographic image with the environment in which it was produced. Similarly, in his examination of vernacular photography, Brian Wallis (2020, 18) explains,

> The concept of vernacular photography is a dynamic and shifting one ... viewed less as an aesthetic subgenre than an interdisciplinary matrix of affective signifiers and performative communications — sometimes in conformity with societal norms but often pushing firmly against them.

It is the dynamic, performative, functional and interdisciplinary nature of vernacular photography that is central to this paper, providing a constructive way of thinking about pictures to explore the conditions in which they were created and disseminated and through which they reveal untold narratives from people's everyday lives during Romania's communist times. Understanding vernacular photography in this way, images validate multifaceted social functions, and as material objects, they participate in historical events (Edwards 2022; Guerin and Hallas 2007). They are not merely representations of people and events but act as vehicles for subjects and viewers to affirm or scrutinise class status, identity, national affinity or community membership (Wallis 2020).

In the context of this paper, the photographs visually narrate collective experiences during years of control by the communist regime, which, as Simona Mitroiu describes, "left visible scars on the collective narrative and personal life histories" (2018, 91). In interpreting these images, the paper draws on Wallis, who argues that the significance of understanding images is not merely "what we can read into these images, but what we can read out of them" (2020, 19). What can we learn from these photographs? Suppose core characteristics of everyday life involve familiarity. In that case, repeated actions, routine and boredom, as Ben Highmore (2002a) describes, then what does everydayness involve and look like in communist Romania, and what are the implications of the existence of photographs that depict people's everyday lives?

Everyday life is an ambiguous and elusive notion. The notion of everyday life is a critical lens through which individuals negotiate the essentially political decisions that govern their daily lives and their critique or conformity to political systems and social behaviours (de Certeau 1980; Highmore 2002a; Lefebvre 1991). As Highmore emphasises, everyday life is not simply "out there" as a tangible reality to be "gathered up and described" (2002b, 1). This raises important questions: whose everyday life is it? Moreover, in turn, where is it located? In communist Romania, everyday life was not self-evident and readily accessible (Massino 2019; Poenaru 2013). As a result of the state's frequent intervention and pervasive surveillance through the omnipresent *Securitate*, the country's powerful secret police apparatus, people's lives and relationships were affected, for police intrusion and coercion became part of ordinary life (Boia 2001; Deletant 2015; Petrescu 2004).

This article connects the ordinariness of everyday life, as Lefebvre (1991) described, to the production of vernacular photography that is deeply embedded in social narratives and functions (Bourdieu 1990; Hirsch 1997). Narrative signifies a particular mode of knowledge. It does not simply mirror or recount an event, but it sheds light on individual or group fate, the lived experience of self and the nature of a community. This links the narrative to history, memory and photography (Barthes 2000; Berger 1989; Guerin and Hallas 2007; Hirsch 1997, 2012; Sontag 2004). Mediated memory in the context of photography is especially relevant to this paper, and so is the multitude of memories following the collapse of the Soviet bloc (Mitroiu 2018). Linking memory to culture, Astrid Erll writes, "Without eyewitnesses to history, societies are dependent on media-supported forms of remembrance (such as historiography, monuments, or movies). This marks the transition to 'Cultural Memory'" (Erll 2011, 4). Mnemonic media, artefacts and technologies constitute the material dimension of memory culture; as a mnemonic medium, photography arguably bears witness to or records the past, but it can also stage or construct events like in, for example, documentary or press photography (Erll 2011; Sontag 2004). This emphasises photographs' role as vehicles of collective (cultural) memory and their link to everyday material culture.

In what follows, this paper will first describe how communism was manifested in Romania to provide the context and understanding of everyday life during that time. The subsequent section will focus on photography during Romania's communist era, first in a more general sense to provide an overview of what the photographic landscape looked like during the communist past, followed by a more focused discussion of vernacular photography's ability to reveal untold stories and hidden narratives and function as a form of a collective memory of resistance.

Communist Romania

The communist experiment evolved differently in Romania compared to other states of the Soviet bloc, such as former Czechoslovakia, Hungary or Poland. As Lucian Boia puts it, "Romania stood out as a country to which Communism was particularly foreign" (2001, 112). As a largely agrarian nation without a long and robust left-wing political tradition, Romania had no interest in anything coming from Moscow. It was quite unprepared for communism and its ideology (Boia 2001). Although the Communist Party in Romania was established before World War II, it remained largely underground for over two decades, and its member base was still small, with "less than 1000 members strong in 1944" (Gallagher 2005, 560). It was only after the forced abdication of King Michael in December 1947 that the Socialists merged with the Communist Party to become the Romanian Workers' Party in 1948 (renamed the Romanian Communist Party in 1965). Shortly after, the Romanian People's Republic was proclaimed. A new political elite and intelligentsia, made up of workers and peasants, were formed almost overnight, and work to industrialise the country began in the late 1940s. The

first post-war communist leader of the Romanian People's Republic was Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, who was appointed by Stalin and remained the leader until his death in March 1965.

It was ironic that for a nation that only slowly warmed to the idea of communism, no other communist country in Eastern and Central Europe ended up mirroring the Soviet Union as faithfully and detailed as Romania did; it was a carbon copy of the USSR. According to Boia, "[t]he Soviet model was not only applied to the concrete structures of political power, society and the economy; it also had to permeate the minds of the Romanians. The single historical and cultural reference point remained Russia" (2001, 122). For a decade starting in 1947, for example, there was only one textbook on Romanian history in circulation, which saw history rewritten. What remained from the Romanian past and national culture was ideologically presented. As Boia further explains, "some of the great names were missing while others were presented in a distorted manner, cast — against their will — in the role of supporters of Communist ideology" (ibid.). In intellectual and cultural life, the Communist Party aimed to reinterpret cultural tradition to meet new dogmas and obliterate any form of genuine creativity: art, history, literature and philosophy were to be ideologically subordinated to the political realm (Tismăneanu 2003).

Some writers argue that under Gheorghiu-dej's rule, the 1950s were marked by years of violent repression, terror and Stalinisation, especially concerning intellectual life and culture (Boia 2001; Deletant 2019; Tismăneanu 2003). According to Vladimir Tismăneanu, one of the main goals of Stalinisation "sought the destruction of civil society and the regimenting of intellectual life and culture. To destroy human bonds, a universal sense of fear was instilled in individuals" (2003, 109). Coercion, fear and acts of random terror are intrinsic mechanisms of totalitarianism (Arendt 2017). These mechanisms were frequently used as forceful weapons by the Communist Party and the *Securitate* (Deletant 2015). They never let go of their control and coercion over society; they may have relaxed laws and rules occasionally, mainly for tactical motifs, but they never abandoned their terror, nor did they intend to cease their control (Deletant 2015).

When Gheorghiu-Dej died in 1965, Nicolae Ceauşescu succeeded him as leader of the Communist Party (Almond 1992; Boia 2001; Deletant 2015; Stanciu 2013; Tismăneanu 2003). While the early years of Ceauşescu's leadership were marked by the "[r]elaxation of the terror instituted by Dej" (Deletant 2015, 70), he also continued many of his predecessor's policies, such as the industrialisation and collectivisation programmes, the latter centralised agriculture in Romania (Boia 2001; Deletant 2015; Stanciu 2013; Tismăneanu 2003). These early years of his rule between 1965 and 1971 were the best in the history of communist Romania, also referred to as 'Cultural Liberalisation' (Stanciu 2013). At this juncture, it must be emphasised that 'best' should be understood as good concerning the other years and decades of terror, surveillance and control, especially the violent and repressive 1950s of the Gheorghiu-Dej regime or the deprived 1980s of Ceauşescu's era.

The short period of de-Stalinisation at the beginning of Ceauşescu's regime witnessed a rise in living standards as people experienced more freedoms, the possibility to travel to the West (though it was never easy to get an exit visa), and overall, it was a period which saw better domestic policies and politics too. Contacts with the West were established (Almond 1992; Deletant 2015). Consumer goods appeared to dominate a more important place in the Romanian economy because some Western credit, mainly used for the development of heavy industry, started to filter down to the level of everyday life. People could eat and dress much better than before and watch foreign movies at the cinema, although the regime still carefully selected all the films (Massino 2019; Stanciu 2013). For artists and writers, this period was marked by the abandonment of Socialist Realism as the Party's "aesthetic creed" (Deletant 2015, 172).

Censorship (and self-censorship) continued during those years. People were not free to think and to express themselves as they pleased, though the risk of ending up in prison for expressing one's view was substantially reduced, partially because people had learned to be more careful; it was common for people not to trust their own families or neighbours for fear they could be informants for the *Securitate* (Deletant 2015, 2019; Tismăneanu 2003). Nevertheless, as time progressed, it became apparent that Ceauşescu was not a communist leader like any other. As Boia writes, under Ceauşescu's leadership, Romanian communism "took a surreal turn" (2001, 126). This manifested in his "cult of personality, xenophobic nationalism, and delirious programs of urban and rural reconstructions" (Petrescu 2004, 155).

As the 1970s began, life in Romania changed, and people experienced a drop in living standards. Moreover, the state increasingly ruled by decree, creating unpredictability and secrecy (Arendt 2017). As Hannah Arendt argues, "[p]eople ruled by decree never know what rules them because of the impossibility of understanding decrees in themselves and their practical significance in which all administrators keep their subjects" (2017, 318).

The year 1971 was an unexpected turning point and saw the launch of a programme that was elevated to the status of a "cultural mini-revolution" (Stanciu 2001, 1065). Although the cause of such a radical turn is still debated by researchers today, it is likely linked to Ceauşescu's extended visit to China and North Korea in June 1971 (Boia 2001; Deletant 2015; Stanciu 2013). In the wake of his visit, Ceauşescu announced the end of ideological and cultural relaxation in his infamous July Theses, seventeen proposals for the "political-ideological activity [and] the Marxist-Leninist education of Party members and all the working people" (Deletant 2015, 184). In short, Ceauşescu called for increased political education (more aptly, propaganda) and party control, which resembled the Stalinist practices of the 1950s (Deletant 1995). As Boia explains, "[n]o more concessions would be made; deviations and bourgeois influence in society and culture would no longer be accepted" (2001, 138).

Given that the July Theses only affected domestic policies (Ceauşescu's foreign policy remained unchanged), people's relations and engagements with foreigners, which had never been viewed favourably, began to be controlled and regulated by the *Securitate* with greater caution (Stanciu 2013). Any Romanian who interacted with a foreigner had to report it to the *Securitate* within 24 hours (this was more heavily restricted through a new decree in 1986) (Preda 2017). Moreover, the liberalisation of arts, culture and social life was severely limited, which showed the return to the Party's aesthetic of Socialist Realism, an endorsement of an ideological basis for art and literature (Pusca 2017).

Censorship became stricter despite being officially abandoned in 1977 (Deletant 2015). Those working in radio, television, the press, editors, and anyone else accountable for publications had to take their task as 'unofficial' censors very seriously and "increase their contribution to ideological education and propaganda through their editorial content" (Stanciu 2013, 1068). As for artists and writers, Ceauşescu cautioned that the party required them "to play an active role in 'building socialism'" (ibid.) and "shape [e] the new man's Socialist consciousness" (Deletant 2015, 174). Through Ceauşescu's reinforced party control and domination, Romania was slowly becoming a closed and atomised society with a demand for total loyalty from the individual member (Arendt 2017; Preda 2017; Stanciu 2013).

From around 1981, things started to get much worse. Essential food items like bread, flour, milk and sugar started to be in short supply and increasingly difficult to find, as crops produced in Romania, such as wheat and maise, were either exported, or there was not enough to feed the nation without additional imports. As Boia writes, "nothing seemed to work anymore, and the situation worsened from one year to the next" (2001, 140). The Romanian industries had cost the state more to run than they were producing, and foreign debt rose (Deletant 2015). As a result, and fuelled by his pride, Ceauşescu decided to repay Romania's foreign debt down to the last dollar by 1990. In order to achieve that, he announced a series of strict austerity measures for the population that was unmatched elsewhere in the Soviet bloc. Exports of industry and agricultural products drastically increased, while imports were cut, leaving people without petrol and gas, amongst other essential things. Food shops had empty shelves, turning the hunt for food into people's primary concern. Although the population did not die of hunger, people suffered the consequences of malnutrition. When a delivery arrived, regardless of what it was, long queues formed quickly. There were also queues in front of empty shops anticipating a delivery. People started queueing in the evenings and throughout the night, turning queuing into a phenomenon. Identifying queues as social spaces, Boia (2001, 141) writes,

> A fascinating queue culture developed in Romania. The queue was a space for sociability (something which otherwise tended not to exit in Romanian culture), where people — many of them pensioners, who had more time — met day by day and spent long hours together. ...

> As in the Middle Ages, barter was practised: produce for product or services. You had to pay somehow, even for things that were supposed to be free. Medical care, for example.

Not only was food scarce and rationed during the 1980s. Other essential aspects were also restricted following draconian measures, severely affecting people's everyday lives, especially those in larger towns and major cities. For example, the electricity supply was regularly interrupted for hours (including in hospitals, which led to many preventable deaths), and the gas pressure was reduced during the days forcing people to cook their meals at night (Deletant 2015). Similarly, television programming was reduced to two hours daily, filled with Ceaușescu's propaganda news of the country's 'achievements'. People living near the borders of former Yugoslavia or Hungary were luckier since they could pick up foreign television and radio stations, including *Voice of America*, *BBC World Service* and *Radio Free Europe*. These stations provided a wealth of information about what was happening across Romania, which was heavily obscured by the state's information and propaganda apparatus (Preda 2017), leaving people oblivious to what was happening.

Despite the many austerity measurements and restrictions that were implemented during one of the most severe totalitarian dictatorships of the former Soviet bloc, the regime did not experience any large-scale opposition from society (at least not until the Revolution in 1989), as was the case with the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, the Prague Spring in 1968 or the solidarity movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s in Poland. Few brave individuals or groups across Romania risked voicing their criticism against the regime's draconian measures and authoritarian policies (Asavei 2020; Deletant 2015; Petrescu 2004; Preda 2017). In the end, however, Ceaușescu's regime could not resist the accumulated tensions and frustrations of the people. After 42 years, the communist experiment ended in a bloodbath; it collapsed following the violent December Revolution and subsequent execution of the dictatorial couple Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu at Christmas 1989 (Almond 1992; Szöczi 2015). Photography played its part in resisting the regime and mediating a collective memory of the period. The rushed but theatrical trial was of symbolic importance, broadcast live by the news media worldwide. The trial was grotesque, but some argue that no other end for the Ceaușescu couple would have been fitting. To quote Boia one more time, "[t]he real miracle was not the collapse of Communism but the fact that it was able to go on so long! It deserved to disappear the moment it was born" (2001, 112).

The following section provides an overview of Romania's photographic movement, followed by a more focused discussion and analysis of vernacular photography.

Photography during Romania's Communist Rule

Photography had an exciting status in communist Romania. On the one hand, people were allowed to own a camera. According to Simina Bădică, "[p]hotography was officially praised by communist propaganda as the trustworthy document of social reality ... and [was] even encouraged as a benign 'national hobby'" (2012, 40). On the other hand, that did not mean people were free to photograph whatever they wanted. Although the regime did not strictly impose the Socialist Realism aesthetic, photographic image production was restricted indirectly. Moreover, the communist regime dominated the use and perception of photography, for it "had a largely enforceable monopoly over what could be transformed into a public image" (Bădică 2012, 45). As will become apparent in this section, this complicated the relationship with and the status of photography.

The relationship between photography and everyday life was controlled and censored by communist regimes in the Soviet bloc, including Romania. As mentioned earlier in this article, the Communist Party came to power relatively quickly and unprepared in Romania, and as Anca Pusca writes, "the communist state and ideology needed to be built quickly and emerge in a way that would completely control the visibility of 'change'" (2017, 233). This rapid political change was dominated by terror and aggression and filtered through all strata of society, including the arts and cultural sector. It was not long after the Communist Party took over that photography's status was subject to change. Private photography studios that had flourished before the war were suddenly nationalised. As Adrian-Silvan Ionescu, Ulla Fischer Westhauser and Uwe Schögl (2020, 7) describe,

> After the communists took power in Romania in the last days of December 1947, all the private photo studios, which had flourished in the interbellum period, were nationalised.... Any photographic activity, except portraiture and wedding pictures, was kept under the vigilant eye of the censors. It was only safe to take landscape and cityscape pictures, and most amateur photographers focused on scenes of this kind.

It was not merely photography that was appropriated and nationalised; art and culture more generally came under strict scrutiny, and private art collections became subordinate to political interests (Grama 2019). As Pusca writes, "artists gained a special status, often perceived as inherently dangerous" (2017, 236). Thus, the idea of what was 'safe' to photograph, as mentioned by Ionescu et al. in the quote above, alludes to the official doctrine regarding the production of art and culture, which was aligned with the state's political ideology, Socialist Realism.

When it comes to photographers, both amateur and professional, they were seemingly being perceived as less dangerous, for it appears the regime was more afraid of words than images (Bădică 2012). Unlike the strict regulations of owning a typewriter, for which a person required police authorisation, followed by an annual

registration process at the local police station, which included providing a writing sample as a precaution against the spread of secret texts and manifestos, owning a camera was not prohibited under the communist rule. If the ownership of a camera was uncomplicated, taking pictures was not. Bădică argues that a "photographer with sensitivity for the social issues would not only be discouraged and marginalised by the regime but would risk major discomforts" (2012, 56). This suggests that image production was not a neutral or apolitical act but rather (self-)censored to some extent. There was some degree of freedom attached to photography, seeing that photographing everyday life and people at work or in their homes was permitted as long as these photographs "made life in Communist Romania seem nice and happy" (ibid.). It was, then, a question of courage to take photographs that were arguably outside the sphere of what was deemed safe.

There was another way of categorising photography: it sat between a safe and an unsafe place; it was incongruous (Hirsch and Spitzer 2009). This was down to the regime dominating how photography was perceived and practised. Framed not as art but in artistic terms, Bădică suggests the regime "defined [photography] by its lack of reference to contemporary phenomena [and] social and political issues" (2012, 42). This seems to suggest that the state acknowledged photography's documentary, social and political power and its potential danger to the regime, using various, sometimes subtle, ways to censor the practice and circulation of photography. For example, the lack of quality equipment and training available during the communist era (including the inability to study photography at the university level until 1990) constrained photographers from creating work. This could be understood as a subtle way of limiting the practice of photography whilst also complicating the status of photography.

Although the photographic movement in Romania did not produce a photographic canon matching that of Western Europe and the USA during the same period, photography was not what Bădică called "a politically benign/indifferent activity" either (2012, 40). Saying so diminishes the work of the artist photographers who were members of the *Association of Artist Photographers in Romania* (AAFR). Despite the regime's domination over relations with Western artists, artist photographers strived to establish and maintain international affiliations, dialogues and collaborations during the communist years by participating in international photographic art salons (Negrea 2020). This gave the illusion of moving in photographic circles beyond the Iron Curtain.

The AAFR was first established for amateur photographers in 1934 but was suspended during the war years and revived in 1956, this time with a focus on artist photographers. Based in Bucharest and financially supported by the state, the AAFR was privileged for it was the only officially endorsed photographic movement during the communist era. To receive the subsidy was not without problems, especially during the latter years of the Ceaușescu regime, when, as the current director of the Association, Eugen Negrea, writes, "artists had to praise the achievements of the communist regime and were compelled to

suspend all connections with Western 'decadent art'" (2020, 97-98). The regime required loyalty from all registered AAFR members and expelled those not registered with the AAFR (Bădică 2012). In other words, one was not an artist-photographer without being a registered AAFR member. However, here is the paradox: state-sanctioned or official artists were required to join the Romanian Artists Union but were discouraged from using photography in their artistic practices. It was, therefore, ironic that one could not be an artist-photographer without being a member of the AAFR. In contrast, professional photojournalists had a lower status and were merely seen as employees of the state's authorised mass media; they did not enjoy the same prestige as professional photojournalists or documentary photographers from the West.

Between 1968 and 1989, the AAFR also published its bimonthly magazine, *Fotografia*. Negrea said the publication was "the only source of information for the AAF members with respect to the evolution of worldwide photography" (2020, 96). The magazine included AAFR members' own artistic photographs and debates on theoretical views and technical issues related to photography equipment, especially in the context of photographic art. A more detailed account of the magazine's content exceeds the scope of this article, but both Bădică (2012) and Negrea (2020) offer further exciting insights into the publication. However, it is worth noting that the publication was also affected by the sudden political developments introduced in the aforementioned July Theses in 1971. As artistic connections and collaborations with the West were adjourned, Maria Alina Asavei highlights that "*Fotografia* ... started to have ... fewer references to Western photographic trends"(2021, 5).

Moreover, some years during the 1970s saw the promotion of propaganda on the magazine's pages, but documentary or vernacular photography was rarely discussed. If photography's social or documentary value was mentioned, it was often linked to questions of reality and truth (Bădică 2012). The reason for this lacuna might be explained by the Party's seemingly deliberate attempt to mystify photography's status. As Bădică writes, "[the regime's] double talk ... drove photographers away from documentary photography; the concept had been so much abused by the regime that no one took it seriously into consideration anymore" (2012, 56). Consequently, the focus largely remained on photographic art.

The infrequency of discussing or reviewing documentary and vernacular photography in *Fotografia* or the regime's intentional misinterpretation of photography does not mean people were not using the camera to document their everyday lives and personal stories. Of course, they did. Evidence of that can be seen in a growing number of online archives that display thousands of digitalised photographs that, as Geoffrey Batchen writes, "preoccupy the home and the heart but rarely the museum of the academy ... [and] represent the troublesome field of vernacular photography" (2001, 57). This raises two questions: in what way did vernacular photography function as a form of resistance to Romania's repressive regime? Moreover, what stories and narratives can

those photographs reveal about everyday life in communist Romania? The remainder of this article will seek to disentangle and explore these questions.

Resisting the Communist Regime through Vernacular Photography

As a cultural form and practice, photography is not an inherent resistance medium or practice, but it can be perceived as one when it is used in specific times and spaces. Teasing out the political reconfiguration of photography, Azoulay emphasises its complex and participating nature and underlines that photography is not merely an interaction between the photographer and the sitter/subject in the photograph but comprises multiple players. Azoulay calls this "the civil contract of photography" (2008, 19) and turns from "an ethics of seeing … to an ethics of the spectator that begins to sketch out the contours of the spectator's responsibility of what is visible [in the picture]" (2008, 130). By including the photograph's viewer, multiple actors are entering a dialogical space through which they can encourage others to pursue political agency and resistance through photography. This frames photography as an ongoing event interwoven in webs of power, dialogue, resistance and agency and includes many choices, meanings and social actors (Azoulay 2008, 2012; Fairey and Orton 2019). To investigate resistance through photography, this article draws on Stephen Duncombe's (2002) definition of cultural resistance as "culture that is used, consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist and change the dominant political, economic and social structure … cultural resistance can provide a sort of 'free space' for developing ideas and practices" (2002, 5). Cultural resistance is understood as opposition and survival, regardless of how small these acts of resistance are. This approach to cultural resistance is beneficial in Romania's communist past, where large-scale resistance movements were missing or quickly halted by the regime and its secret police. Instead, cultural forms and practices were used by people in more subtle ways of survival and dissent.

Despite being one of the most widely used practices of photography since the medium's democratisation process through the invention of the Box Brownie in the late 19th Century, making up the vast bulk of photographs ever taken, consumed and circulated, vernacular photography has only received academic attention for the past two decades. According to Geoffrey Batchen, this late interest is because "vernacular practices … are presumed to have few intellectual or aesthetic qualities beyond sentimental kitsch, and therefore apparently do not deserve the spotlight of historical attention or critical analysis" (2004, 33). This essay does not trace this history, for that many writers on photography have already contributed to this area, but rather seeks to emphasise the importance of including unauthored or vernacular photographs in the literature on photography. They may not offer rich aesthetic values, but they enter "the domain of everyday, immediate social existence and practical activity, with all its habitually, its crises, its vernacular and idiomatic character, its biographical peculiarities, its decisive events and indecisive strategies" (Jackson 1996, 7–8 in Long et al. 2008, 33). In

short, they depict the nuances of people's lives and provide social and cultural contexts.

The five black and white photographs discussed in this section are small acts of opposition and survival. These acts helped people create what Duncombe calls 'free spaces', using the camera to photograph something related to their everyday life. Each photograph tells a story of people's collective experiences and collective memories. The images were produced in the 1980s and depicted everyday routines or tasks of the citizens, such as queuing for food or fulfilling operational tasks merely to please Ceauşescu or fulfil his goals. Taken by two different people who most likely did not know each other, the photographs materialised and formalised people's ordinary, yet essential, proceedings during the communist time. They are discussed not in terms of their aesthetic or technical values but as events defined above. These photographs would have been typically stored in boxes and not displayed in people's homes, though the potential of showing and circulating them (especially to the West) was there. The fact that these photographs exist is not surprising, considering owning a camera was not prohibited. However, good quality film rolls were not widely available, which gives photographs a unique (sentimental) value. At first sight, they may not depict anything extraordinary, and it is helpful to draw on Tina Campt's intervention of "listening to images" (2017, 5).

One can imagine that listening to both images and people's experiences of communism only began a few years after the fall of the regime, not straight away when the country was suddenly faced with a new political system of democracy interlinked with capitalism. Thus slowly, people started to unveil and share their images with others, though perhaps only selectively. In so doing, people shared their collective memories of an era that may have ended over thirty years ago. However, it left many traces and layers behind that force citizens to interact with the past in the present and certainly in decades to come.

The Images

Figure 1

Timisoara, Febr. 1980. Un noroc nesperat! A reusit sa cumpere un covor. [Timisoara, Febr. 1980. An unhoped chance! He managed to buy a carpet.]

A crowd of people converge outside (Fig.1). It needs to be clarified how many individuals there are as they stand densely together on what seems to be a public space, likely a street, between tall buildings in a seemingly metropolitan area. From the caption, we know the picture was taken in Bucharest in February 1980, which explains why the people are wearing hats or scarves and coats since the scene occurred in the cold winter months. One man with a black hat seems to be particularly delighted, smiling widely, and others in the crowd are looking in his direction, also smiling. The man is carrying a medium-sized to the large, rolled-up rug and seems to be walking away from the crowd, suggesting (from the caption) that he had just bought the item and was ready to leave the scene. In that context, the people in the crowd were probably forming a queue, and the shared joy for the man's luck was part of the queue culture that developed amidst the struggles of everyday life, as mentioned above.

Two aspects of the photograph are particularly striking. Firstly, the rug size is big enough to be seen from afar and shows people the man's fortune in finding and buying

the rug when household items were increasingly difficult to find due to Ceauşescu's austerity measures. However, at the same time, the rug is not too large to be carried by one person without relying on a car to transport it, since petrol was also hard to find in the early 1980s. Secondly, the photographer's vantage point suggests he was amongst the crowd/queue, not to purchase anything but to observe the scene very closely. Since people were either facing the man or the shop in front of them, hoping to purchase something too, no one in the frame noticed the photographer, making this a very candid snapshot. As mentioned above, there was nevertheless a risk involved in taking photographs that depicted a "sensitivity for the social issues" (Bădică 2012, 56), given the possibility of being seen by the Securitate or one of its informants. Thus, taking a photograph was a small act of opposition.

Figure 2
Bucuresti, Galati str, April 1982. Coada la branza. Se "găsea"
doar odata pe luna... [Bucharest, Galati str, April 1982. Cheese
queue. It was "found" only once a month]

Another queue, but this one is different to the previous one (Fig.2). Around sixty people stand outside a shop, and we can infer from the caption that this is a cheese shop. The grey van and white boxes outside the door indicate a new cheese delivery. The photographer's vantage point is very different from the previous photograph, this time offering a birds-eye-view of the queue and the whole scene, and therefore turning the

photographer into a distant observer, an eyewitness, who views the scene (safely) from above. It is also noticeable that the street is partly damaged, suggesting that this photo was taken secretly. Not only did the regime prohibit photographing 'social issues' like long queues for food, but photographing damaged streets demonstrated the regime's negligence to fix the infrastructure (possibly due to the strict austerity measures). By the end of the regime, streets and roads were so severely damaged that it was impossible to drive fast due to the risk of deep holes, gaps and cracks that could damage the cars and cause serious accidents.

Figure 3
«Demolition of the Old Houses on the Long Street (Boulevard 1 December 1918)». Târgu Mureş. 1980. Photograph by Lóránd Bach. Azopan Photo archive. Permission was given to use the image.

Two men are directly facing the camera (and therefore the photographer and the viewer); both are slightly smiling while standing on and being surrounded by rubble (Fig.3). They seem to know each other since the taller man on the right is holding the slightly shorter man close to him to convey their familiarity. However, despite their smiles, it cannot be sure that the men are joyful. We know from the image caption that the rubble the two men are standing on is the outcome of the demolition of houses in the most prominent Hungarian city of Targu-Mures. From the date in the caption, we can extrapolate that this demolition was part of Ceauşescu's urban and rural planning

programme. In the background is a demolished house, and on the right of the frame, almost cropped out of the images, is another person, indicating that more people were involved in the demolition of this house.

Ceauşescu's programme was not popular amongst the population, especially in areas with ethnic Hungarian and German minorities in Transylvania and villages around Bucharest. Where plans were made to demolish villages to give way to newly constructed apartment buildings, people were forced out of their houses with limited time to pack their belongings. Ironically, they were given a choice to demolish their houses, which not everybody took up. As Petrescu (2004, 94) explains,

> Especially the Hungarian community in Romania, but to a certain extent, the German minority as well, believed that they represented the main target of the plan. For they were the most significant minority in the country, Hungarians took the systematisation of villages as a disguised attempt to erase the material forms of their cultural heritage in Transylvania.

Returning to the photograph, we cannot know whether these two men are of ethnic Hungarian origin, as the government could have hired them to demolish someone else's house in Targu-Mures, which may explain their smiles. There are many layers and complexities here, making this image more incongruous with a slight opposition to Ceauşescu's programme since very few would have ultimately benefitted from it without losing their homes in return.

Split into two parts, the photograph depicts two different but interconnected scenes (Fig.4). On the right, there is a woman directly facing the camera, holding what appears to be her handbag and sitting on an open trailer or some form of shelter. Despite looking up at the photographer, she does not seem to know him. Behind her in that space are bags and suitcases, with more bags and another suitcase positioned outside on the concrete pavement. The photograph's left side depicts nine men looking at a car, with only half of it visible to the viewer, as the other half is hidden behind the trailer/shelter. At first glance, the scenes are separate, with no men interacting with the woman, nor does the woman look at the men. Both scenes can be linked only through the caption and the date the photograph was taken. Reading "Future car owners came with gasoline in their suitcases", the caption suggests that the bags and suitcases near the woman contain canisters or bottles of petrol, most likely to fill the car. On the other hand, the men seem to be looking at the car with the intention of buying it, again drawing on the caption to make that connection.
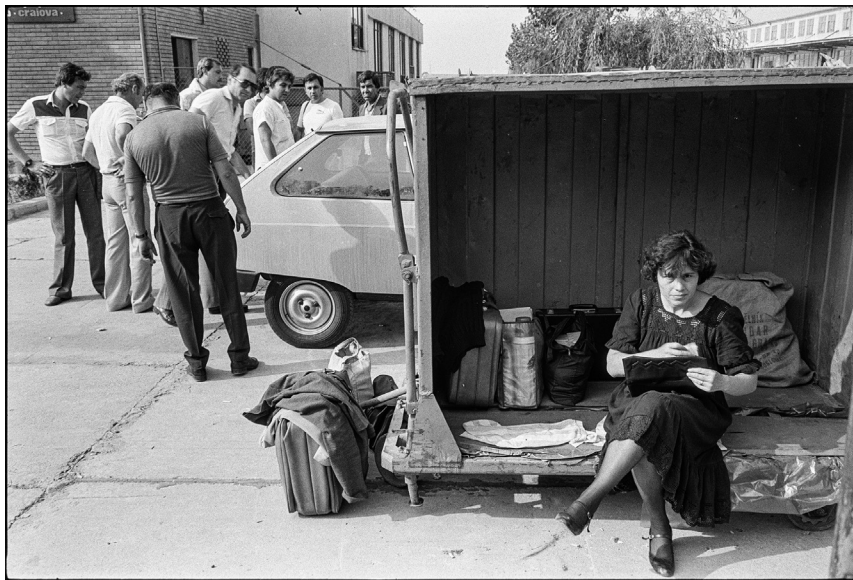
Figure 4
Craiova Iulie1984. In Romania gaseai doar 2 modele auto: Dacia (Renault 12) si Oltcit (Citroen Olt). Plateai integral masina, asteptai 1 an la Oltcit, 3 pentru Dacia, aveau defecte. Si o primeai cu 3-4 litri de benzina (oficial 5). Pana la Bucuresti sunt 242km. Iti trebuia o canistra de benzina. In tren nu aveai voie cu asa ceva. Canistra venea in valiza. Le puneau la umbra. Iar benzina se „dadea" cu ratie lunara... [Craiova July 1984. In Romania you could find only 2 car models: Dacia (Renault 12) and Oltcit (Citroen Olt). You paid in full for the car, waited 1 year for Oltcit, 3 for Dacia, they had defects. And you got it with 3-4 litres of petrol (officially 5). 242km from Craiova to Bucharest. You needed a can of petrol. In the train you weren't allowed to carry that. The can came in a suitcase. They put them in the shade. And petrol was "given" or rationed monthly]

As the photographer Andrei Pandele explained (personal communication, 21 September 2022), the petrol situation was complicated in Romania during the 1980s. It was further linked to another policy of the Ceaușescu era, which prohibited the use of personal cars in certain areas, especially in bigger cities like Craiova. At the same time, taking petrol canisters on trains or other public transport was forbidden, and people began to disguise petrol-filled water bottles in bags and suitcases and take them on public transport. Car owners wanting to use their cars in towns or rural areas, where petrol was often more challenging to obtain, would travel to nearby cities by train to fill up their bottles with petrol, store them in suitcases and bags, and return home where they could fill up their cars. This photograph suggests that the men are interested in buying the car and arrived with petrol to fill it up after they bought it since cars were also not sold with any petrol. In that sense, both parts of the image are interconnected. The photograph itself, however, was taken secretly, depicting another social issue controlled by the regime. However, by showing courage, the photographer pressed the shutter release immediately.

Figure 5
Bucuresti, bulevard 6 Martie, 29 Dec.1984. Toarna asfalt
fierbinte peste zapada. Nu rezista nici o saptamana, dar maine
tva rece El (NC) [Bucharest, 6 March Boulevard, 29 Dec.1984.
Pouring hot asphalt over snow. Doesn't last a week, but
tomorrow it's cold (NC)]

Another forbidden photograph taken during the last decade of the Ceauşescu era depicts five men with shovels and other tools, who seem to be working on the road while it is seemingly snowing (Fig. 5). A sixth man in the midground seems to have the task of controlling the car traffic. With no individuals looking in the photographer's direction, it reinforces the idea that it was forbidden to take this particular photograph, with the photographer taking his chance and acting quickly. It is not immediately clear what the five people in the foreground are doing, whether they are clearing the road or fixing it. Drawing on the caption to better understand the picture, we understand that the five men are throwing asphalt onto the snow to enable Ceauşescu's car to drive along the road without getting stuck in the snow the following day. Of course, hot asphalt on snow would not last, but the order needed to be obeyed.

It was also forbidden to drive personal cars in the areas where Ceauşescu lived or worked, meaning the heavy snow stayed on the roads for much longer. When Ceauşescu needed to drive somewhere, the roads were frequently cleared as much as possible, and in winter, that meant pouring hot asphalt on it. The forbidden photograph was an act of opposition, not only to the senseless idea of pouring asphalt onto the snow but to the regime altogether.

Conclusion

The idea of photography as an event and dialogue is essential for understanding the complexity of vernacular photography (Fairey and Orton 2019). An entangled medium, it moves the discussion of photographs beyond the visual content alone. It explores the material environment of the past whilst eliciting collective memories in the present and, as well as in the future. In other words, the image cannot be separated from the social environment in which it was created. In the context of one of the strictest totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe, where so much of one's daily life was controlled by the state, context in understanding the photographs is critical, for these photographs give access to other stories and information. They bear traces of the photographic event and their intertwining relationship and complicity with discourses of power and culture. Telling those stories is crucial, and in the context of communist Romania, they reveal many unwritten stories of everyday life under the totalitarian regime. Photography's interactive and participatory qualities were also productive for this paper. They invited the reader to understand vernacular photographs as embodied cultural objects within complex social relations and interactions during Romania's communist past. Drawing on the mnemonic value of photography, photography further helps create collective memory space for people's accounts of everyday lives affected by the harsh conditions during the "dark period in Romania's history" (Pohrib 2016, 724).

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Biographical note

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