

## Reality unbound: The politics of fragmentation in the experimental productions of *kinema ikon*

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### ABSTRACT

The article analyses the experimental films produced by a semi-professional workshop, *kinema ikon*, in Arad, Romania between 1970 and 1989. Employing a socially contextualized reading of the film workshop as an informal institution, the author argues that the workshop's members were interested in intermedia art as a means of producing unconventional representations and autonomous aesthetic objects. At the same time, the workshop focused on the incorporation and expansion of the vocabulary of avant-garde film through a strategic fragmentation of vision. Finally, the article advances a reading of *kinema ikon's* films as socially subversive practices, given that the notion of ideology critique is related not to their actual representational content, but rather to their particular modes of production and forms of visuality.

### KEYWORDS

Experimental art; informal public sphere; avant-garde; Romanian cinema; structural film; montage

### Introduction

In the middle of a barren field, a man moves his arms at an accelerated pace, runs and then jumps, as if in a derisory attempt to fly. His hasty and disjointed movements are highlighted by fast, violent scratches on the film, which result in luminescent effects that end up covering the human body, now reduced to a mere dynamic graphic sign. In a later sequence of the same film (Ioan Pleș's 1981 *Iluminări/Illuminations*) (Figure 1), a portion of the filmstrip framing a series of luminescent effects shows abstract compositions against a black background, accelerating and flickering on the screen. As exercises in visual abstraction, these fragments exemplify the anti-narrative propensity common to much of the experimental filmography produced by *kinema ikon* – a self-managed group of filmmakers, which existed as an informal cine-club in Arad, Romania between 1970 and 1989 and continues to exist to this day as a new media workshop.

Despite the well-documented archive of *kinema ikon's* experimental films, they have been scarcely analysed by film or visual arts scholars, and the few existing studies in Romanian (Cârnelci 2014; Selejan 2014; Serban 1997) are mainly descriptive. The present article aims to fill this gap and address the relation between aesthetic autonomy and political meaning in these productions. Considering the political to be embedded in visual



**Figure 1.** Ioan Ples – *Illuminari/Illuminations*, 1981, film still, courtesy of *kinema ikon*.

technologies and representational strategies, it explores the particular forms of visuality that are produced by exploiting the logic of autonomous fragments. It does this by drawing on, and establishing connections to, the aesthetics of structural film and that of international avant-gardes. It also investigates the films' material conditions of production from the perspective of a social history of art. Thus, Comolli and Narboni's (2004, 814) famous claim that all cinema is political since it is produced within a certain ideology remains a viable framework for interpreting not only mainstream cinema, but also experimental film that addresses smaller audiences, as well as the socialist context of cultural production. By 'experimental film', I understand both cinema produced and distributed outside the film industry proper (and thus independent from commercial pressures) and the productions interested in the very language of cinema, which are unconventional in relation to dominant aesthetic norms. In the historical context of state socialism in the former Eastern Bloc, and in Romania more specifically, experimental film does not merely transgress the conventions of narrative cinema and documentary. Instead, it simultaneously foregrounds and expands its means of production while maintaining an open structure, in this way engaging the ideological structures underpinning this field of cultural activity. While this essay focuses on the films made by *kinema ikon*, the fact that its members were predominantly visual artists justifies a discussion of experimental practices in Romanian visual art as well, which will occur in a subsequent section of the text.

### **From *Atelier 16* to *kinema ikon*: experimental film in Romania during communism**

The corpus of 62 experimental films produced by *kinema ikon* between 1970 and 1989 is unique in Romania, even while it shares many similarities with other such artistic studios belonging to the so-called 'parallel' (Fuchs 2010) or 'informal' public spheres

(Zdravomyslova and Voronkov 2002, 49–69) that existed in the countries of the former Socialist Eastern Europe where official control over cultural production was less stringent. According to Zdravomyslova and Voronkov, the ‘informal’ character of this nevertheless public sphere derives from its familiar constituency – family members, friends and colleagues. Among the famous studios that transgressed the rigid barrier between ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’, the Balázs Béla Studio in Hungary may be compared to *kinema ikon*’s institutional configuration, being open, from the 1970s onwards, to practitioners from various cultural fields.

*Kinema ikon* was founded by art theorist Gheorghe Săbău and existed between 1970 and 1975 under the name *Atelier 16* (*Workshop 16 mm*). It then changed its name into what became known as *kinema ikon*. Intended as a short statement, the very title of the group reveals the double interest of the filmmakers associated with its working principles: the analysis of the moving image, as well as the analysis of movement within the image itself, derived from the conjunction of the Greek words *kinema* (movement) and *ikon* (image). Săbău conceived *Atelier 16* as a Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in Cinematic Language in the framework of a Public Art School. However, the authorities tolerated it under the more popular and less ostentatious title of a cine-club. While the intended name implies an academic scope, the official title designated the group as a meeting place for cine-lovers dedicated to viewing and discussing films, and, in some cases, for producing amateur short films.

As Janevski (2010, 78–79) has noted, the development of amateur cine-clubs under the supervision of centralized institutional systems was commonplace in the region. In Yugoslavia, and, to a certain extent, also in Romania, authorities encouraged it, although the clubs received little support in terms of materials and other resources. In Yugoslavia, the promotion of cine-clubs may be explained by the logic of Tito’s policies of self-management (Vukovic 2010, 51–52), while in Romania, it may be related to the proliferation of other ‘amateur’ institutions (such as photography clubs or Popular Art Schools). These were populist responses to the ideological openness of socialist management towards all social classes, which, as a matter of cultural policy, were to be given access to the means of artistic production. There were many such amateur cine-clubs during communism in Romania, and their short films responded to the ideological expectations of the political regime. For instance, in 1976, in Timisoara alone, there were seven cine-clubs of this kind (Munteanu 1976, 10). Due to the dominant aesthetic doctrine of socialist realism, and the limited technical means of production and post-production available, conventional documentary shorts and reportage were the preferred genres. Despite their marginality in relation to the film industry proper, these were sometimes mentioned in the official film magazine, *Cinema*<sup>1</sup>. Reviewers emphasized the ideologically desirable focus of the films, and praised the films’ ability to truly represent everyday life, with most depicting social progress, as well as the films’ creative representation of labour (Suchianu 1976, 4). As institutions, these cine-clubs functioned as agents of normalization, which claimed to generate an emancipated class-consciousness by offering workers control over the means of self-representation while re-assuring them of the benefits of socialism.<sup>2</sup>

A remarkable difference from the other amateur clubs, whose members’ artistic education remained rather limited, is that the members of the Arad group reached a high level of conceptual self-awareness soon after the group’s founding. Topics of reflection included representational codes and other formal and technical aspects of filmmaking. After 1975,

the cine-club became a workshop of experimental artistic production, which used film as a support for a vast array of graphic interventions into film (gestural and geometric abstraction, chromatic alterations etc.). It is also worth noting that although the films were identified as the productions of an unofficial studio (whose logo was designed by graphic artist Iosif Stroia) and are usually discussed as a whole, they were individually produced. Individual filmmakers enjoyed total aesthetic freedom in terms of representational content, but conformed to a loose theoretical program, whose main conditions were the avoidance of visual stereotypes, the rejection of metaphors and an anti-narrative propensity (Sabău 2010). At the same time, counting close to 100 members, the cine-club was comprised of a significantly larger number of people than the film authors as such. Many of the participants contributed to the existence of an informal institution that had a shared aesthetic program by acting as technicians or simply as interlocutors.

The films were both black-and-white and colour, shot on reversible 16 mm film, and belonged to different categories of experimentation: direct interventions on the film strip, dynamical abstractions, chromatic processing, dream-like essays, special effect collages, non-narrative essays, *cinéma vérité* and lyrical documentaries (Sabău 2005, 9). Between 1970 and 1990, the collective produced 62 experimental short films that comprise the corpus with which this article is concerned, along with additional 62 documentaries that were more conventional from a stylistic and narrative standpoint (Sabău 2005, 12).

It is tempting to situate *kinema ikon's* activity in the field of what was known as *parallelno'e kino* in Soviet socialist culture, regarded by Yurchak (2008) as a 'suspension of the political' that produced aesthetically similar work. However, Yurchak considers the production of these films in the context of increased permissiveness in late Soviet culture. *Kinema ikon's* production, on the other hand, emerged at a moment when Romanian state authorities were once again claiming complete control over both artistic content and form. Between 1970 and 1989, professional cinema was produced under the strict supervision of the centralized state administration and was expected to conform to the normative socialist realist aesthetics stipulated by Nicolae Ceaușescu's so-called 'July thesis' of 1971. After Ceaușescu gained power in 1965, he made bold claims of political autonomy, which translated into anti-Soviet and pro-Western symptoms of cultural liberalization. This short period of tolerance lasted between 1965–1971 (though in the visual arts it extended until 1974) and was mostly associated with a de-coupling of the aesthetic from the political. Beginning with 1972, however, official cinema was completely re-politicized.<sup>3</sup> *Kinema ikon's* existence in this oppressive context may be explained by the cunning strategy the group developed for exhibiting its films. Being informally produced and rarely screened, experimental films seemed disconnected and singular, while their limited presentation at dedicated festivals ensured the appreciation of film critics, thus bypassing censorship (Sabău 2010). On the other hand, the primary production of documentaries covering conventional topics within socialist culture and using a rather uninspired visual language dispersed the attention of the authorities.

*Kinema ikon's* relation to the central authorities was one of compromise and duplicity: the documentary production (comprising ethnographic essays and historical overviews, but never political topics) by Sabău and some technicians allowed for the studio's official recognition. It also enabled them to save a part of the celluloid the studio received from the state-controlled film authorities for the production of documentaries, which was then appropriated for experimental purposes. Similarly, when it came to the conditions of

exhibition and reception, the films were only ever informally presented in the Arad studio and exhibition space. Nevertheless, early on the group took advantage of the short period of cultural tolerance in Romania, which enabled artists to participate in international exhibitions and festivals. Thus, *Scaunul/The Chair*, a film produced in 1972 by Demian Șandru and Gheorghe Săbău, was awarded the special prize of the jury at the International Short Film Festival in Brno in 1973. This international recognition earned the filmmakers technical facilities and a large hall suited for visual art exhibitions. Between 1975 and 1980, the members of the group informally exhibited graphic works, paintings, collages and mail-art in that space. Outside Arad, early experimental films were officially presented in dedicated short-film festivals in Timișoara, Iași, Cluj and Bucharest. After 1980, however, the group's more poetical visual essays left the domain of cinema and were shown in visual art exhibitions exclusively, and never internationally due to state censorship.

As Șerban (1997, 441) notes, the particular position of *kinema ikon* in the field of Romanian film during communism stemmed, on the one hand, from the almost complete subordination of fictional feature films to the state apparatus of production, with rare allegorical exercises and aesthetic experimentation attempted by directors within narrative filmmaking, such as Lucian Pintilie's 1968 film *Reconstituirea/Reconstruction*. On the other hand, in the sphere of documentary film, alternative approaches were even scarcer. Mirel Ilieșiu, Slavomir Popovici and Nicolae Cabel were among the few attempting to enrich the dull cinematic language of dominant realist documentaries (Sabău 2010, 23). Among them, Ilieșiu was notable for lyrically combining visual composition, literature (poetry), choreography and sound (Serban 1997, 441). Nevertheless, *kinema ikon* was the only studio to consistently and programmatically produce experimental work.

Finally, the heterogeneous constituency of the group is also singular in the Romanian neo-avant-gardes. It included no film professionals and no full-fledged visual artists (most of the filmmakers still being fine art students at that time). It also included intellectuals who worked outside the sphere of visual arts in literature, history, informatics or music (these included Ioan T. Morar, Liliana Trandabur, Roxana Cherecheș, Mircea Mihăieș, Romulus Bucur, Ovidiu Pecican and Viorel Marina). In this respect, the very openness of the group towards practitioners coming from other cultural fields may be regarded as an experiment in itself (Sabău 2010). The artistic production of this group is thus distinct from the conceptual, (neo)constructivist and performative experiments with the film camera that better known Romanian neo-avant-garde artists such as Ion Grigorescu, Geta Brătescu, Mihai Olos or Constantin Flondor exemplify. While the latter focused mainly on recording existing visual art pieces or performances on celluloid, members of *kinema ikon* were creating directly in the medium of film.

### **Experiment and intermediality: *Kinema Ikon* and Romanian visual art**

In an attempt to define the experimental in Romanian visual arts, Magda Cârnelci (2014, 77) restricts artistic experiments in Romanian art to the late 1960s and 1970s. They are regarded as efforts to overcome the limitations of traditional media as a response to the advancement of social media of communication (Cârnelci 2014, 77–78; Ujvarossy 2012, 35). According to Titu (1997, 11), however, the term 'experimental' designates an unconventional attitude rather than a set of stylistic features. In the isolated context of Romanian visual arts between 1945 and 1965, this approach, which was reinstated soon after

1974, expresses the anxiety to keep up with contemporary Western artistic values. Paradoxically, according to Titu, it is the relative isolation of Romania in the former Eastern bloc that drives the impulse towards experimental practice, although the country's restrictive cultural policies and more limited economic resources resulted in fewer manifestations of neo-avant-garde art. While constraining most of the artistic practice through excessive conventionalism, cultural isolation also allowed for creative freedom by relieving the burden of comparisons.

This particular view characterizes much of *kinema ikon*'s history as well. In his writings and interviews, Sabău has remained rather elusive on the exact extent of *kinema ikon*'s contact with and knowledge of foreign experimental practices, so an attribution of influences on the group requires some conjecture. In my opinion, films associated with the historical avant-gardes, which Sabău acknowledges having seen, along with more general structuralist aesthetics (which could be attributed to the dominance of structuralism in the cultural theories at that time) would have been, therefore, the most likely sources of influence to be considered.

Concerning the multi-media character of *kinema ikon*'s film experiments, the existing scholarly literature on experimental Romanian art does not make clear the extent to which *kinema ikon*'s aesthetics and filmic output featured a modernist impulse similar to the self-reflexive attitude associated with Clement Greenberg (1999, 755), or, on the contrary, to a post-modernist attitude, the latter habitually designating the free recycling of visual patterns and a hybridization of aesthetic forms. Features that can all be found in most *kinema ikon* films justify their insertion within the broader modernist experiment. These include the use of moving images in a search for compositional experiments; the marked interest in the structural elements of cinematic language; the focus on movement in film, as contrasted with painted, engraved, or photographic still images; as well as the employment of techniques such as montage and close-up that were already used politically by the historical avant-garde (Șerban 1997, 441). Nevertheless, the anti-narrative propensity and the inherent expansion of traditional visual media towards film as an 'intermedia' practice relates to the post-modern line of interpretation, as already noticed by Cârnelci (2014, 131–132), Titu (1997, 17) and Dan (1985, 35). The group members shared Romanian philosopher Constantin Noica's motto, that cinema is a syncretic form of art appealing to those who are unsatisfied with the limitations of other (traditional) media (Ghitta 1985, 2; Sabău 2011), which suggests an embrace of the 'post-medium condition' of contemporary art (Krauss 2006, 55–60). Several film theorists (Serban 1997, 441) and art critics share this opinion. For instance, Dan (1985, 35) discusses the reflexive combination of media (such as drawing, collage, photography and cinema) present in films such as Ioan Pleș's *Pantha Rhei* (1979) and *Efecte de imprimăvărare/Spring Effects* (1978), Emanuel Teț's *Poem dinamic/Dynamic Poem* (1978) and Alexandru Pecican's *Exercițiu Subliminal/Subliminal Exercise* (1979). He equates them with a sort of neo-modern artistic commentary on the practice of representation, remarking on the presence of visual quotation and *mise-en-abyme* in the latter's film. Dan also identifies several ways of expanding the cinematic image, comprising the combination of painted or engraved images with various cinematic techniques and mixed media of communication.

The apparent contradiction between the prevalent interest of *kinema ikon* in the 'language' of cinema (Sabău 1985) and the use of multiple media within a single experimental film may be resolved if we understand them together as a broader 'formalist' attitude

necessary for a withdrawal of the image from its dominant circuit of production and reception, reacting against mainstream feature films and documentaries, laden with socialist and nationalist ideologies.

## Fragmented visions

The importance of aesthetic autonomy as an apolitical attitude within the Eastern European neo-avant-gardes has been stressed on various occasions (Cârnelci 2014, 94–95; Nae 2011; Piotrowski 2012, 82–84; Serban 2013). Discussing the case of visual artist Geta Brătescu, Serban (2013, 159–162) noted the importance of the artist's studio as a secluded place where the self is at the same time imaginatively reflected and constructed, mirrored and transformed. Similarly, *kinema ikon*'s informal studio may be regarded not only as a response to existing socio-political conditions, symptoms of an oppressive cultural climate (Selejan 2014, 21), but also as a space for transforming this context by producing and securing an autonomous mental space, a heterotopic space of conflicting representations which first benefitted the studio's members and later their audience.

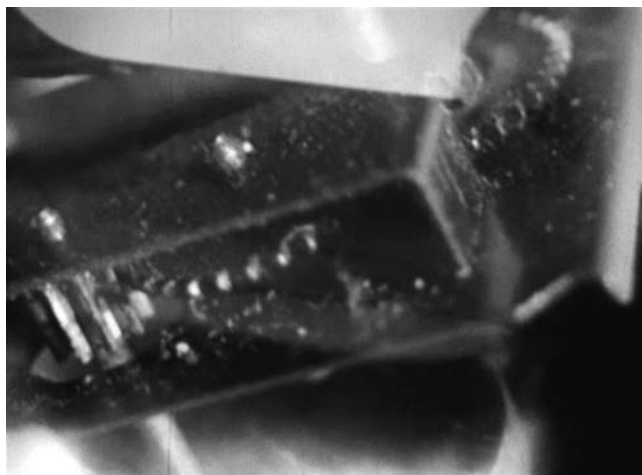
Moving to the film texts themselves, in exploring the visual and technological strategies of *kinema ikon* films, which contribute to revealing the materiality and, hence, the opacity of the screen, I propose to focus our attention on the group's embrace of visual fragmentation. Insisting on abstraction, but also highlighting the basic elements of cinema (framing, zooming and camera movement) and foregrounding the 'autonomous visual fragment', I explore how early experimental films of *kinema ikon* may be associated with structural film, which subordinated representation and narrative to the material and linguistic peculiarities of the medium itself (Leighton 2008, 21–22). In employing this formal strategy, they also creatively expanded the film practices of avant-garde film cultures interwar, most significantly through exploring montage and close-up and their corresponding theories. As Foster (1994, 5–32) has noted, the repressed potentialities of the avant-gardes (Constructivism, Dada and Surrealism) may be witnessed to return in the visual art of the late 1960s in a disguised manner. In the context of Romanian art, the imposition of socialist realist aesthetic between 1945 and 1965 and its resurgence after 1972 may be considered to play the part of the repressive agent in Foster's narrative. The aesthetic potential of montage and close-up, employed as disruptive, mass-transformative visual techniques by international avant-garde cinema, acquire in this novel social context a renewed relevance.

Historical avant-garde film presented a series of expressive uses of technology often associated with 'the modernist advocacy of fragmented and fractured ways of seeing and experiencing reality' (Cavendish 2013, 7). Among these techniques visual fragmentation through creative editing practices, producing seemingly disjointed montage sequences, was a foremost strategy. Alongside this, the frequent employment of close-ups, unsteady camera movements, and optical distortions combined in the 1920s avant-garde films to produce a shift from an objective to a subjective vision of a fractured self (Cavendish 2013, 7–8).

*Kinema ikon*'s experimental films employ all these expressive strategies of visual fragmentation. Fractured and fragmented images and off-centred camera compositions often combine to create a sense of dislocation in the viewer. The frequent use of montage and editing, add to this effect of displacement. In *kinema ikon*'s experimental films images are neither fully descriptive nor narrative, while contingency is assumed rather than evacuated through the metonymic accumulation of details. This effect is produced through

several strategies: the triviality of the situations presented; the illegible relations between them created through montage; the presence of often out-of-focus close-ups, which obliterate the specificity of images, suggesting exercises in abstraction. The prevalent choice of abstraction may be explained as a painterly practice that was for a long time banished from the normative, figurative language of socialist realism in Romania. But it is, at the same time, a technique that exploits the contingency of reality, rejecting any attempt to rationalize it.

Equally important are the effects of these experimental processes on the viewer. Ghitta (1985, 2) has noted their destabilizing function, remarking on the anguished, meaningless and depressive character of the autonomous fragment. Among the consequences of this assumed openness of structure, one may notice a focus on the very interval that holds together two shots – a disjunction that operates as a conjunction. These ‘constructive gaps’ generate spaces for reflection for the viewers, whose thoughts are, thus, not predetermined, as in narrative (documentary or fictional) cinema, but rather prompted by the cinematic articulation – an effect originated with Soviet montage (Malitsky 2010, 359–361). Thus, one may notice an insistence on the autonomous fragment of reality, which is decontextualized until it reaches the state of a seemingly meaningless *grapheme*. Such procedures may be found in George Sabău’s films such as *Fragmentarium* (1985–1990) (Figure 2), which consists of a series of abstracted close-ups of hard to identify surfaces revealing various shapes and textures, and *Decupaje/Cut-offs* (1980–1985), where commonplace fragments of recorded reality (a turning bicycle wheel, a chain of wheels inside an engine, a gridded lid covering a draining ditch) are stripped of their symbolic function and reduced to elementary units of cinematic language. They become signifiers, which can be re-contextualized at will and inserted in a new chain of signs. Such an approach to fragmentation is common to many other films such as Alexandru Pecican’s *Subliminal exercise* (1979), where the camera roams and records bits and pieces of everyday life which defy any narrative articulation. The camera travels quickly inside a communal apartment, recording women lazing about in suggestive erotic poses, then jumps to record the bustle of a group gathered at a visual arts exhibition, only to travel again and record in high-



**Figure 2.** Goerge Sabău — *Fragmentarium*, 1985–1990, film still, courtesy of *kinema ikon*.



speed casual passers-by in a park. The viewer is taken inside a world of fragments, which do not superimpose over or insert themselves into an existing symbolic system. These details of everyday life, often presented in close up, detached from their surroundings, construct their own possible associations. Intrusive montage often exposes spatial and temporal differences and incongruences rather than hiding them. In Ioan Pleș's *Emergență/Emergence* (1982), recorded reality is dismantled in frames which are then superimposed on each other, suggesting the fuzzy associations encountered in the symbolic work of dreams and memory: a group photograph which seems to be immersed in boiling water or in burning flames; a female portrait underneath which another female character dressed-up in nineteenth century clothes is projected.

It is important to highlight that in *kinema ikon*'s films, montage is used outside the dominant ideological framework. The films produced by *kinema ikon* were meant to interrupt meaningful associations, creating instead absurd, formally contingent, or trivial ones. Some artists were interested in constructing formal relations between disparate elements, often using and manipulating found footage. Others were embracing chance procedures, which allowed these iconographic elements to enter relationships of contiguity while obscuring any coherent narration. In certain films, movement is accelerated, like in Alexandru Pecican's *Subliminal Exercise* (1979) or in Ioan Pleș's *Pantha Rhei* (1979) and *Illuminations* (1981), producing a shaky and distorted image. In the latter's films, accelerated movement is enhanced and sometimes doubled by means of graphic interventions (scratches, engravings of the contours of people executing simple and fast movements) on the filmstrip. In most instances, movements executed by anonymous people are either reduced to elementary (walking, running, talking) or absurd actions (such as the aforementioned attempt to fly in Ioan Pleș's 1981 *Illuminations*), or the crucifixion of a book in Ioan T. Morar's 1977 *Autopsia uitării/The Autopsy of Oblivion* (Figure 3). In other instances, such as Gheorghe Sabău's *Fragmentarium*, movement is simply followed as it unfolds across different images, juxtaposing footage of moving machines with images of still objects shot in close-up.



**Figure 3.** Ioan T. Morar — *Autopsia Uitării/The Autopsy of Oblivion*, film still, courtesy of *kinema ikon*.

Last, but not least, the experimental films of *kinema ikon* also contain a suggestion of a ‘delirious vision’ (Cavendish 2013, 7), obtained by unsteady camerawork and frequent changes of focus, as well as by the destabilization of vision by means of close-up. The shaky images produced by hand-held cameras displace the viewer and highlight the symbolic elements of confinement, such as a female mannequin having her face wrapped-up in a transparent sac in the narrow space of an attic and the violent bright light pouring in through a window partially sealed with wooden bars in Alexandru Pecican’s *Fereastră deschisă spre .../Window open towards ...* (1984). Recalling cine-verité aesthetics, short films like Florin Hornoiu’s 1976 *Navetiștii/The Commuters*, unsteady camera work contests documentary truthfulness at the service of state sanctioned visual production, recording alienated workers sleeping and staring out the windows in a train in a dreamlike atmosphere. Handheld camerawork also enabled the use of close ups in order to deconstruct the alleged objectivity of the filmed material and foreground the materiality of the shots. These are often accompanied by ‘fixation’, as defined in the Croatian theory of ‘anti-film’: ‘fixation on the frame, on the camera movement, fixation on space-time, fixation on the face in the space and fixation onto itself, until self-destruction’ (Vuković 2010, 55). For instance, in Ioan Galea’s *Studiu/Study* (1984), one may notice a fixation on the filmmaker’s portrait, subjected to a patient yet relentless deconstruction. The portrait is, first of all, enlarged by photographic means, and then the image thus obtained (or the photographic negative) is re-filmed in close-up. The action is repeated several times until the artist’s self-portrait eventually completely loses its identity. A similar procedure may be found in Viorel Simulov’s *Manu-script* (1984) (Figure 4), where the camera focuses on a hand recorded in extreme close-up from different angles. The constant shifting of the viewing angles produces the impression of movement without identifying the partial object that is presented to the viewer. On the contrary, it presents the hand as a mere surface of inscription for light and texture, as an exercise in the economy of shadows. The skin becomes a mere support for the restless gaze travelling on the surface of the body. In Simulov’s 1985 film *Ocular*, a blinking eye is also recorded in slow motion at such a close range that it ends up obliterating the gaze of the represented subject. The patient recording of various surface textures is



**Figure 4.** Viorel Simulov – *Manu-script/Hand-writing*, 1984, film still, courtesy of *kinema ikon*.

also present in Sabău's *Fragmentarium* (1985–1989), where a fixed camera reveals in close-up what can barely be identified as a piece of wrinkled human skin, a spider's web, a striated leaf or a trace in the mud.

## Ideology, interpellation and fragmentation

The ideological effects of such fragmentation of visual language cannot be grasped immediately. In simplest terms, ideology may be defined as a coherent, inclusive worldview advancing a set of values pertaining to a dominant cultural group. If they have any, the ideological relevance of *kinema ikon's* films in the Romanian context lies not in the engagement with ideological content per se (that was subverted in mainstream narrative cinema), but rather with the forms and technologies through which such a world-view was reproduced.

The de-professionalized approach to the medium, due to the self-taught condition of experimental film authors with various visual backgrounds, also resulted in a high degree of ideological independence. It allowed the filmmakers to bypass the educational system of socialist realist cinema.

Jean-Louis Comolli's analysis of technology and its relation to visual representation, is particularly relevant to analysing the opposition between amateur and professional cinema. In his opinion, what he terms 'normal' vision is the result of reproductive technologies that aim to present an undistorted reality (Comolli 1986, 425–436). In material terms, this perceived vision is largely confined to 35 mm cameras used in professional filmmaking, and imposing aesthetic standards of technical representational accuracy, while the use of smaller, 16 and 8 mm equipment was standardized as amateur (Deren 1965). *Kinema ikon's* precarious conditions of production away from the official film industry undoubtedly informed the aesthetics of its films. By countering fundamental representational conventions such as depth of field through blurry, unfocused, shaky technical representations, *kinema ikon's* experimental films expose the inextricable relation between the film technology associated with professional filmmaking and the socially and ideologically constructed 'normalized vision' discussed by Comolli, which was also placed at the service of official modes of film production under the Ceaușescu regime.

The deconstruction of cinematic language thus also turned against the carefully trained gaze provided by the mainstream cinema. Precisely because *kinema ikon's* representational content was free of political symbols, it performed the two basic functions similar to that described by Piotr Piotrowski in relation to the experimental films produced in the renowned Polish Workshop of the Film Form in Łódź in the 1970s: the production of marginal films as an alternative to dominant filmography and the education of the viewer's gaze, subjected to manipulation and passive indoctrination by the official cinema (Piotrowski 2009, 339).

How would such an 'education of the gaze' occur within the context of socialist Romania specifically? Following Louis Althusser's notion of interpellation (2001, 110–127) key works in film theory have explored the relationship between dominant ideology and classical cinematic form. Drawing on Althusser, theorist like Baudry (1986, 299–319) and Metz (1986, 244–281) have famously explored how narrative cinematic form constitutes viewers as 'subjects of the ruling orthodoxy' (Gray 2010, 55). Narrative cinema under Ceaușescu retained key features of (Hollywood) mainstream cinema while propagating

socialist ideology and national cohesion, and therefore the effect of interpellation remains a useful concept to describe their overall effect.

It is against these operations and results that *kinema ikon*'s techniques of visual fragmentation, may be read. They generate partial and distorted visions and, as already remarked in relation to montage, may be considered to produce alienating reception effects, such as forcing the viewer to think across the shots. Accelerated movement, rapid shifts in focus and depth of field, close-up shooting and focus on details, the frustration of narrative, as well as other post-production procedures (solarisation, scratching and chromatic alteration) interrupt the chain of signifiers and frustrate the identification of the viewer with the imaginary reality projected on the screen. They expose the inherent opacity of the screen and make the viewer aware of the material means of representation. By objectifying the very operations, which construct the image (focus, framing, montage, etc.) and foregrounding the materiality of the celluloid strip, used as a background for graphic incisions, or exposing the film grain, the cinematic image is ultimately exposed as an unstable set of representational conventions. Such technical interventions may be read as a kind of 'meta-media' exercises (Vuković 2010, 63), as subjective commentaries, realized with the application of not only graphic, but also cinematic techniques specific to the medium of film such as travelling shots, close-ups, shifts in focus, speeding up of footage, and montage. Subjective marks are obvious in the graphic interventions on the film support explored by *kinema ikon* between 1970–1980. For instance, in *Pantha Rhei* (1979) and *Poluare/Pollution* (1977), Ioan Pleș doubles the images' narration with luminescent drawings (vertical or horizontal scratches, geometric signs, scattered small incisions and solarizations) that highlight certain details (a skull, an electric pole in a rural landscape). In *Dynamic Poem* (1978), Emanuel Teț equally intervenes in the recorded images by means of chromatic alterations and light effects. The recorded images featuring a male and female character engaging in physical gestures that suggest a sexual tension, is violently altered and frustrated by post-production, through recurrent abstract animated figures appearing on the surface of the celluloid, lifting the live action into a visually more dynamic space, deemphasizing a potential narrative context.

In conclusion, by exploiting the resources of fragmented and distorted representations against the 'normalized', 'objective' and coherent vision of the world promoted by mainstream cinema, *kinema ikon*'s films advanced an alternative view of (social) reality. Overall, they constructed an imaginary space where multiple, conflicting visions could coexist, disbelief was possible and the autonomy of a fractured self could be claimed against its subject position designated by the cinematic apparatus. While their analysis of the language of cinema expanded the political potentialities of avant-garde film, in search of aesthetic autonomy, it also resulted in a subversion of the monological discourse of official socialist cinema.

## Notes

1. Suchianu (1976, 4) mentions Emil Mateiaș's *Stropi de Soare/Sun Drops*, a metaphor for welding, and Lukavetski's *Firul/The Thread* depicting the production of consumer goods, both produced by Didactica cine-club in Reșița.
2. According to Geo Saizescu, the then president of cine-club commission of ACIN – Romanian Association of Filmmakers, the goal of these films are to enhance the patriotic, aesthetic, ethical and cultural education of the cine-lovers (Sârbu 1976, 4).

3. In no. 6/1976 of *Cinema*, famous screenwriter Mihnea Gheorghiu and director Sergiu Nicolaescu overtly declared their complete adhesion to realist-socialist doctrine – including the formation of the new man. Realist feature-films (Mircea Drăgan's 1972 *Explozia/The Explosion*), fictions portraying heroic workers (such as Francis Munteanu's 1985 *Vară Sentimentală/Sentimental Summer* or Alexandru Tatos's 1976 *Mere Roșii/Red Apples*) and historical megaproductions (such as Sergiu Nicolaescu's 1970 *Mihai Viteazu*) formed the core of mainstream cinema. They left some room for entertaining Hollywood-style films, including comedies such as *Nea Mărin Miliardar/Mr. Marin Billionaire* (1978), adaptations of American Westerns (such as the 1983 *Drumul Oaselor/Road of the Bones*) and historical action films (such as the 1981 *Iancu Jianu, haiducul*). Nevertheless, their content was either nationalist, or overtly critical towards capitalism and the bourgeoisie.

## Acknowledgments

This work was supported by The Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding – UEFISCDI [grant PN-II-RU-TE-2014-4-2194].

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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