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Excavating amateur films from the socialist Romania: making sense of cine-amateur history through oral histories and educational handbooks¹

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The amateur and private filmmaking practice during the socialist years in Romania (1945–1989) didn't become an extensively researched field, although the history of the non-professional use of the medium of film can disclose the intricate relationship between the socialist reality and the medium, but also between the totalitarian cultural project and the possibilities of the individuals living in its confines. The purpose of this is paper twofold: to delineate the history of amateur filmmaking in pre-1989 Romania, and to put under scrutiny the methodological possibilities and pitfalls of an endeavour like this.

The researcher of amateur films in a post-socialist country might encounter wide-ranging difficulties, such as the absence of audiovisual archives or of institutionalized image collections and the lack of technologies to produce a proper digital transfer of the analogue documents; sometimes the researcher has to acknowledge that large amounts of films have been thrown to garbage as institutions or people wanted to forget, and to discard the remnants of the communist era. Pre-1989 Romanian amateur filmmaking consists of a few relics, which have to be excavated: they exist as autobiographical stories or, rarely, as obsolete media objects in the homes of the former cineastes. Research has to work with fragments of films, pieces of obsolete technology, written documents and interviews. All these deficiencies make difficult to carry out a methodologically consistent research and analysis, thus they compel the researcher to resort to methodological tactics.

As suggested above, the history of amateur filmmaking is the easiest to grasp through life stories. Thus the interview and the concept of oral history becomes the most suitable methodology to render the

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individual memory into data for history. The first part of the article pursues this concept and the autobiographical narratives seemingly fulfil the role of the historical documents. Nevertheless, the second part of the article reveals these stories as partial truths by putting the oral history data in the context of other interviews and different types of documents.

Film amateurs in the socialist Romania: from the constraints of the historical timeframe to methodological possibilities

Although the domestication² of the film cameras destined for non-professional users in Romania is still a blank spot in the research of local media history and visual culture, yet the available data suggests that the history of amateur filmmaking³ in Romania didn't start with the instalment of socialism. As a few case studies have revealed (Blos 2015. 69–99, Tóth 2006), there existed attempts to use the medium of film as a home visual media⁴ in the interwar period, if only by a handful of people. As historical and quantitative data about the Romanian amateur film practice is not yet available, it is difficult to designate the exact point of emergence of different amateur film practices under socialism. In contrast, the end of this timeframe, the year 1989 is a widely known and theorized phenomenon with respect to Romanian image culture due to the work of Vilém Flusser (1990), Jean Baudrillard (1994) and Giorgio Agamben (2000), and also by virtue of the compilation film made by Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică: *Videograms of a Revolution* (*Videogramme einer Revolution*, 1992). This film ingeniously constructed a media analytical approach towards the 1989 Romanian revolution and the “image acts” provoked by the historical event by creating a collage of television footage and amateur video recordings.

² The researchers of media domestication study the process in which information and communication technologies become part of the intimate space of the home and household. As Roger Silverstone puts it, the interaction of humans and technologies has consequences for both sides: „wild animals then, wild technologies now, what's the difference? In both cases, unconstrained, they pose threats and challenges. In both cases, brought within the fold, they become sources of power and sustenance. Domestication is practice. It involves human agency. It requires effort and culture, and it leaves nothing as it is” (Silverstone 2006. 231).

³ In this article the term amateur film refers to a wide range of non-professional cinematic practice, from the family movies produced within the confines of the home to the semi-institutionalized amateur film production that occurred within clubs. The common denominator of this type of film production is its marginal status with respect to the more centralized film practice that served the ideological purposes of the state. Due to the specific technological-cultural landscape in this historical period in Romania, home movies and amateur fiction films cannot be treated as totally distinct categories (as suggested by Chalfen, 1987 and Odin, 2008 regarding other socio-historical contexts), but as the outcome of the same media domestication scenario that propelled filmmakers to use the same camera to different ends (as the following case study will hopefully demonstrate).

⁴ “Home visual media consist of mediated forms of audio-visual communication that are created in private, personal ways and meant for personal and private consumption. In this sense, *home* may be best understood as a metaphor – relieving us of the absolute necessity of always referring to home media as made or used literally in that moving target known as *home*” (Chalfen 2002, 143). In his approach home visual media consists of: snapshots, photograph albums, scrapbooks, home movies, home videos, framed photographs, videotaped letters etc.

In this article the timeframe spanning from 1945 to 1989 designates rather the socio-historical context of an amateur film culture that developed in it, and had its boom around the events of 1989, instead of drawing the contours of a non-professional film culture with an inherent logic. As the films made in this period are missing because they haven't been collected and archived, a media historical approach needs to recourse to other resources to create data and adjusted methods to interpret them.

Oral history can be seen as a solution to the problem, as a way to approach history through alternative means, to bring to the fore the repressed or "the missing picture". Although oral accounts of the personal experience of history seems to be an ideal substitute for the lacking historical information, still one has to remain critical when using oral history as historical data. The epistemology of the interview needs to be taken into account as it is shaped by memory, subjectivity and dialogue. On the uses of oral sources in history and social sciences Alessandro Portelli declared that: "the historian's oral sources are individual, informal, dialogic narratives created in the encounter between the historian and the narrator" (Portelli 2010).

Thus the genre of oral history opens up new views of the past (Shopes 2002. 4) that goes beyond the restoration of the factual, or the emphasis on finding the evidentiary. As Alessandro Portelli states: "Oral sources tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing and what they now think they did. As oral historians, we must do three jobs at the same time. We must do the historian's job of trying to understand what happened, the anthropologist's job of understanding how people tell their stories and then move back and forth between these two levels" (1991. 50).

In the case of the history of film amateurs, oral history interviews can be used either as a methodology to uncover new sources for facts unknown before, but in the meantime they are also relevant as a microhistorical approach for their subjective version of history. This approach is applicable to the history of amateur visual media, as amateur films, photos, home movies or videos are not constructed as stable texts⁵, but as products of the subjective gaze, they are all point of view shots in a way (cf. Blos-Jáni 2015. 153–157). Oral history becomes a tool to open up a phenomenological view on the ways moving pictures infiltrated into the lives of home movie makers. These media practices have not just influenced life-worlds; filming has also become part of the strategies of everyday life and this communicative posture has redefined attitude to the past and to time in general.

While researching home movies belonging to different media eras (cf. Blos-Jáni 2015), I found that the key to the emic perspective of everyday (media) history and to the understanding of film-making

⁵ In Roger Odin's approach, the images of a home movie do not operate as a representation, but rather as an index, which stimulates the process of memory. The home movie is not edited as a text; it is a fragment rather than a text (cf. Odin 2008).

practices lies in a concept which does not make a hierarchical distinction between the history of media and the study of socio-cultural contexts⁶. Our everyday media life⁷ (and our everyday home movie) bears the traces of social and technological history and, as such, refers to objects, knowledge, practices and attitudes inherited from a culture already past, and passed on by informal means. Thus a compound interpretative position is needed to understand the formula of a media practice characteristic to a certain period, to collect and organize data about it, but in the mean time also to reveal the hidden meaning that is unconsciously enclosed in this media culture and is deeply rooted in the social. In order to reconstruct a media practice from the past one can use oral history as a source of data, but in a different stance oral history can become an interpretive approach to media history that creates a critical, pluralist version of the past. The following subchapters follow this dual logic: in the first version of the amateur media history under socialism oral history is being used as a source in the reconstruction of a “history from below”, while the second version adopts a more critical stance towards the interviews, conflicting them with other interviews and written sources.

Amateur media history version 1: genealogical and subjective encounters with the medium of film during socialism

This subchapter is an attempt at unfolding the amateur filmmaking practices of a specific family, the Haáz family’s two generations while, in fact inquiring into how the filmmaking technologies of a given period (1945–1989) were built into a community’s living space both physically and metaphorically. The starting point of this subchapter is that amateur films are embedded not only in the life of the individual, but also in the time of everyday life, in the history of representational forms and in macro contexts. In order to uncover the way the historical leaves its imprint on the personal an extensive oral

⁶ While the practice of home movies was theorised in the age of the celluloid film and nuclear family, the refinement of these approaches occurred at the beginning of the 1990s, with the emergence of video technology, and respectively with the appearance of the new media age. Looking at the various technological, historical and social dimensions of amateur media, I proposed a methodological framework combining the theoretical frameworks of media genealogy, of media domestication, remediation in order to analyze and demarcate periods in amateur filmmaking from Transylvania (cf. Blos-Jáni 2013a).

⁷ Lev Manovich introduced this term paraphrasing de Certeau: the practice of everyday life was replaced by the practice of everyday media life. As a result of the explosive dissemination of participatory culture, we have turned from media to social media (Manovich 2009. 319).

history research was made with the members of a family and their social circle⁸ formed around a socialist cine club in Târgu Mureș, in the region of Transylvania, Romania.

Although this case may not be representative to Romanian amateur filmmaking in general, yet it is relevant as a microhistory project: it covers a type of media practice representative to no more than a city and a small collective, but the data available through the interviews gives an extra layer of depth to the data about filmmaking.

Through the history of the family and the history of the local film Club (and its leader, Ervin Schnedarek), we can explore the periods in the symbiosis of moving image and everyday life, and the changing domestication process of the medium of film. In the meantime attention will be paid to the impact of state regulation of amateur film collectives and equipment, on the fact that these domestication stories occurred in the socialist Romania. This case analysis may provide an anthropological/ethnographical perspective of the changes concerning the Romanian media landscape from the 1950s to the late 1980s.

The history of the Haáz Family. The home movie collection represents a connection between three generations of the family.⁹ The first generation had a short-term contact with filmmaking: Sándor Haáz Sen.¹⁰ studied fine arts in Cluj-Napoca and Budapest, where he obtained a degree as an art teacher and became acquainted with the folk dance movement. After the outbreak of World War II, he returned to Transylvania and became a teacher. Following the Second World War, he got married and had four children: Ferenc (b. 1951), Sándor Jr. (b. 1955), Katalin (b. 1957), and Judit (b. 1961).

The members of the second generation were born at the dawn of the socialist regime: they had different careers as demonstrated mostly by their attitudes towards the government in power. Two of them chose

⁸ The stories about filmmaking presented in this chapter are reconstructed by interviews made with several members of the family. In the August of 2011 I recorded an interview with Sándor Haáz Jr. (b. 1955), Ferenc Haáz (b. 1951), respectively in May 2002 and February 2011 with Vince Haáz (b. 1984). A genealogical tree of the family was made with the assistance of Judit Haáz (b. 1961). I initiated a conversation about the possibilities of the amateur filmmaker in socialism with the leader of the club, Ervin Schnedarek (1920–2008) in the February of 2007, and later on in February 2011 with his daughter, Erzsébet Evelyn Schnedarek (b. 1970) and with his former students and club members, Pál Keresztes (b. 1953) in August 2007 and Gyula Miholcsa (b. 1956) in July 2011. This attempt at reconstructing the media practices from the period of 1945–1989 was completed with an interview made in February 2011 with Márton Imecs (b. 1945), a connoisseur of amateur film techniques from Cluj Napoca.

⁹ The family is of Hungarian descent, after WWII the Hungarian community of Romania became ethnic minority. This ethnic background influenced their culture, with special emphasis on ethnography. However, this did not play an important role in their media domestication during the 1960s and 1970s. That is why in the following I will not further elaborate on the family's ethnic belonging any further.

¹⁰ For more details on Sándor Haáz Sr.'s autobiography, see the respective entry in the *Dictionary of Hungarian Literature in Romania*, Volume 2. (1991).

to live within the confines of the regime: while Sándor Jr.¹¹ became a music teacher and a children's choir organizer, Judit remained in her hometown and has been working as an engineer. Ferenc is an engineer, he immigrated to Hungary in 1979; Katalin became an architect, she fled abroad in 1987, and after living in several countries, she finally settled down in Germany. Three of the four siblings came into contact with filmmaking throughout their career: Sándor Jr., Ferenc, and Katalin. (this study focuses mostly on Sándor Jr., who became an amateur filmmaker in socialist Romania.)

The twelve children of the third generation were born and socialized in the country chosen as a residence by the members of the second generation. They also got into touch with amateur filmmaking in the 1990s.

The history of the media practices in the Haáz Family

The tradition of drawing is stronger than filmmaking in the Haáz family, but Sándor Haáz Sen. preferred to use the photographic medium in documenting his private life. He started to delve into photography as a dance researcher in the 1960s when the film camera also became his working tool. He used several types of movie cameras: 2x8 and normal 8mm cameras made in Russia.

For the purpose of a slow-motion playback of the dance moves, the films for the dance ensemble were taken at a speed of 64 frames/second. The choreographer could not really have been well-versed in movie camera technology as the home movies of his children were shot with the speed of the dance-recording's. He took so-called slow-motion pictures, thus wasting a lot of raw material for an everyday scene from the daily game sessions of his children.¹² Presumably, he recorded the family scene on an 8mm leftover from a dance shooting during the summer holidays, while the institution did not make use of the equipment. He must have kept his filming of the family secret from the institution as the film was not developed until many years later – they could not let it get into a state laboratory together with the dance-related recordings.

Filmmaking as such gained more ground in the life of the next generation. The story of the four siblings, who all settled down in different places, is all the more interesting because it gives us a picture not only of their voluntary filmmaking, but they also inform us of the social and ideological contexts that influenced the habitus of filmmaking as well as the media landscape that they personal living

¹¹ He gives several accounts of his course of life: http://www.fili.ro/index.php?menu_id=199. See the entry on him on the Wikipedia: http://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ha%C3%A1z_S%C3%A1ndor_%28karnagy%29.

¹²This home movie is not in a projectable condition and it hasn't been transposed to a digital format yet. According to Sándor Haáz Jr. the home movie consists of the following scene: 'we are sitting in our grandmother's garden, my mother is feeding my six-month-old sister, Jutka with bread and honey. I am sitting with my brother under a tree holding a stick and looking into the camera. Afterwards we run and jump over a cess pit. Then we are sitting on a long ladder, which is pulled around by our cousin, and we wave into the camera'.

spaces become part of. In other words, as cinematic technologies and the media become part of reality, so the individual's reality changes. Deliberately or not, we all become part of the media landscape and are implicitly faced with certain ideologies that structure our reality, that either make it accessible or simply exclude us from the institutions of representations. It so happened that while Sándor Jr. was getting acquainted with 8mm and super-8mm filmmaking in Târgu Mureş during the 1970s, Ferenc undertook filmmaking using the same technologies in the Budapest of the 1980s, and Katalin obtained a video camera, first, in Sweden during the 1990s, and then in Germany. While video technology was easily accessible in the western countries, in the Târgu Mureş of the seventies and the Budapest of the eighties, the chances of filmmaking were also a matter of people's social-capital and tactics (namely: the ability to acquire one on the black market).

Sándor Haáz Jr. as a 14-year-old amateur photographer got into the cartoonist group led by Ervin Schnedarek in the Pioneers' Palace. In 1971 helped by Ervin Schnedarek, he developed the film his father had made ten years earlier. Encouraged by the large success of the family screening, he purchased his own cine-projector. He bought his first film camera from his savings at the age of sixteen in 1971. It was a Russian-made Sport1 camera which used 8mm film, which he used until 1975. At Ervin Schnedarek's suggestion, he replaced the film cameras with more efficient ones: by 1987, he had already purchased three cameras in total and received one as a gift.

Buying film stock was a complicated process at the beginning of the 1970s: he was given some reels as a gift from his Canadian relative (1971). He also purchased some himself during his travels abroad (Hungary, Slovakia) in 1973 and 1977, respectively. He screened homemade films and cartoons he had purchased during his trips at home and for his classmates.

Sándor Haáz Jr. was appointed music teacher in Harghita County in 1978. He did not stop making films: he recorded customs and the festivities, the children's choir he conducted, and his growing family. In order to do this he acquired his own developing equipment. His sister, who settled abroad, passed down a video player to him in 1987, which proved to be more popular than the film camera and projector, as it formed a community of late-night VHS-watchers. In the early nineties, he stopped making moving pictures and ever since he has become the collector and archivist of the footage connected to his work.

The filmmaking habitus of Sándor Haáz Jr. was mostly determined by the film club and his friendship with its leader. The club and its activities will be presented as a relevant context.

Ervin Schnedarek's¹³ career represents the story of the self-educated filmmaker on the road towards becoming a professional. He had an interest in chemistry, photographic technique, mechanics, and electronics. After WW2 he was invited to teach¹⁴ at a school for projectionists and cameramen and at the Pioneers' Palace where he was charged with leading a film study group for school children. In the Pioneers' Palace, they produced both animated films¹⁵ and feature films.¹⁶ Together with friends interested in filmmaking, he founded a film club (*Cineclubul Mures*) in 1958¹⁷. Initially the club members' activities were limited to watching films and organizing further education courses. Later on, the community of filmgoers retrained itself to become a self-taught filmmaker community.

However, The Cultural Centre of the Syndicates did not provide full-scale support for the film club; the demand for propaganda films was the official reason for maintaining the club. On the club members' initiative, they produced documentaries, ethnographic films as well as artistic and experimental creations. These were screened on festivals of popular art and sometimes broadcasted on the Romanian National Television.

The activities of the club were closed down due to the events in December 1989. (Ervin Schnedarek had brought home a few films, but the materials stored in The Cultural Centre of the Syndicates were thrown to garbage.

Ervin Schnedarek and his club mates spoke about the film club as something that, first of all, gave access to a professional-technical environment, and in the meantime could serve as a framework for creativity and community regardless of age, ethnic, or social affiliation: "The film club was the remedy for communism. Now, what do I mean by this? My point is that I offered them an all-out recreation where everyone could forget about all the ideological study groups and turn to this wonderful thing, what cinematography is. So, they went there to relax, be invigorated, and be reborn".

¹³ I consider it important to make Ervin Schnedarek's career known as his story is, at the same time, one of an amateur filmmaker after the Second World War. When starting to write about his life, I made use of various sources: general articles on his works, texts written in his commemoration, and interviews I made with Ervin Schnedarek himself, his daughter, Evelin Schnedarek, and some of his students: Gyula Miholcsa, Sándor Haáz, and Pál Keresztes.

¹⁴ Ervin Schnedarek's former students even wrote a commemoration for him when he died: *Népijság*, Vol. LXI. 8. (17095.) January 13. 2009).

¹⁵ With time, some of the members of the cartoonist study group (Sarolta Puskai, Annamária Toró) became professional animators.

¹⁶ Such a production was the Bobó series, remembered by Ervin Schnedarek's daughter in the following way: "Usually these were about school-related mischief and follies, the recording of which was wildly enjoyed by the children. At the time they used rudimentary instruments. Bobó was always at the point of failing classes, and even in reality, he didn't have to pretend much. The subject was always Bobó being bored at classes, falling asleep and dreaming. Or he dreamt that the teacher was very beautiful and he wanted to kiss her, or he dreamt that he was running in a jungle, gnawing on a bone. So they went to the slaughterhouse, asked for a leg bone and convinced my reluctant mother to cook it" (Evelin Schnedarek).

¹⁷ The year of founding shows correspondence with the appearance of amateur film clubs in Soviet Russia around 1957 described by Maria Vinogradova (2010).

Interviews with former members reveal that Ervin Schnedarek was not solely a club leader; he was looked upon as an institution that was ready to give good advice and provide everyone with technical equipment.

The stories about acquiring the film camera are symptomatic of those times: they speak of the opportunities that presented themselves in the 1950s and 1960s. The wider context, the functioning of the regime may be caught on the hop through these tactics adopted to get hold of a camera. It appears that people who could lay their hands on a camera could do so partly because of the nature of their profession. The technical apparatus necessary for shooting, developing, and screening a film was highly centralized: certain institutions controlled them, even if they did not know how to use them. The centralization of technology did not affect the institutional framework alone but also resulted in setting up a hierarchy of localities: filmmaking and technological infrastructure was mostly centralized in Bucharest while people living in provincial areas had to carry out the acquisitions through their social network.

According to Sándor Haáz Jr., in the 1970s one could buy only second-hand cameras and the transaction had to be kept secret: Mr. Schnedarek functioned as a sort of central commission shop for selling these used cameras on commission. Upon returning from an overseas delegation, people (for example, doctors or diplomats) would often sell their movie cameras to Mr. Schnedarek so that possessing a recording device at home would not call any unwanted attention to themselves on the part of the regime.

Ordinary people's possession of film cameras – just like of any other type of communication technologies – was considered a subversive act and as such, suspicious in the eyes of those in power: Sándor Haáz Jr. related other examples of suspected subversion: 'Well, back then, anyone making a film was suspicious. The cine camera and the typewriter! They went crazy about typewriters. If someone had a typewriter at home, house searches were carried out, teeth were knocked out, and who knows what else. Video (players), colour TVs, etc. were confiscated between 1985 and 1990.'

By the end of the 1970s, film cameras had become a commodity as they became available in the shops: mostly Soviet-made Quartz cameras were brought in. Until the beginning of the 1980s, raw materials were available although developing films was still a problem: there were no commercial places to take film. Instead, processing was done by certain state institutions equipped with laboratories and developing chemicals. Private individuals could only get into these facilities through the help of personal contacts: Ervin Schnedarek would fulfil such a role until 1989.¹⁸

¹⁸ Márton Imecs, as the employee of the Museum, fulfilled a similar role as a laboratory technician in Cluj-Napoca.

Thus, the films of the Haáz family's first generation (just as Ervin Schnedarek's story) represent a script for media domestication that was possible in Târgu Mureș in the two decades following the Second World War. The camera got into the family home through the intervention of the head of the family, and it worked its way into the lives of the next two generations. Characteristic to the period is how they had access to a movie camera through their occupational obligations and different professions (ethnographer, projectionist, instructor, and painter), as well as the assistance of certain relationships.

Although the dance instructor's act of recording his children in 1962 was an isolated incidence, it is still representative of the media users' stories that speak of actions taken despite the supervision of the public institutions. Sándor Haáz Sr.'s and his contemporaries' filmmaking habitus is inseparable from the stories of centralization and supervision that accompany the communication technologies in the 1950s and 1960s of Romania. The stories of the film cameras his son acquired give us a further insight into the 1970s as a sequel to its previous episodes. Behind the vicissitudes of obtaining the second-hand cameras and hard-to-get film stock, we can recognize the story of an even more intensive supervision exerted over the communication technologies, which must have compelled individuals to an increased use of manoeuvring/tactics. His attitude is not that of a consumption-oriented individual: he did not acquire technology by purchasing it in shops but through the support of his social connections.

Through Sándor Haáz Jr.'s and Ervin Schnedarek's stories, we are introduced to a further chapter in the era of the Romanian socialist regime while its internal division also gets into the limelight. The cartoonist group, as well as the Cineclub provided a formal framework for filmmaking until 1990, one that could meet the promotional objectives of the regime's ideas of education and popular art in the same way as the amateur film festivals organized nation-wide. However, the club members' commitment and gradual professionalization were shaped by the informal relationships and not the production of knowledge imposed from above.

Recording family life as well as using the medium of moving images for creative purposes are all modalities that follow up pre-existing media practices. However, media use amidst the strict supervisory conditions and the domestication of film may be considered a specificity of the age. After all, the stories about the troublesome ways of acquiring movie cameras and film stock give us an insight into the identity and prestige attached to the medium. In addition, the prestige of the medium was also amplified by the prevailing system of power as well as the semi-professional activities of those committed to creating the right conditions for filmmaking. Thus in this case the medium of film constitutes a part of reality: practising it and gaining access to being worth every risk and effort. It is a force that can create and sustain communities, shape people's relationships, and influence individual careers and the process of professionalization.

Amateur media history version 2. Institutionalised encounters with filmmaking

Hopefully the previous chapter demonstrated how a personal experience can represent something deeply social and historical. While the value of these autobiographical accounts is indisputable as a resource for a phenomenological approach to the past, still there are problems with using them as historical sources. There is always the question of bias which arises from this method, but what is more important to take into consideration in the case of ‘amateur film history from below’ is the fact that the highly subjective perspective of the interview tends to exaggerate the individual agency and conceals the functioning of political and cultural power. Thus, interviews foreground a historical consciousness developed as a result of life experiences, and construct the identity of the speaker as an active entity within the circumstances of history.

All the while the stories about manoeuvring and tactics recount the success of the individual facing the obstructions of a suppressive social system, paradoxically, the workings of the dominant political and cultural powers get obscured. In order to dissolve this paradoxical situation, research interested in the excavation of a historical past must consider the question of bias when using oral history interviews to fill in the gaps of the historical narrative. In this reasoning the acknowledgement of bias does not happen in order to undermine the truth claim of the previously discussed interviews, but rather with the purpose of understanding the past as a plethora of discourses that coexisted at a certain moment in time. It is not a sense of insufficiency with the first version that legitimates this second approach, but rather a development in the process of the research: while finding the case of the Haáz family and of Ervin Schnedarek a very satisfactory story in understanding the identity of a medium in a historical period, new research has been made in order to extend the database about the Târgu Mureş cineclub and pioneer film club with information about other Romanian cities and amateur movements. New interviews were made with amateur filmmakers from Cluj-Napoca and Baia Mare, and new documents came to the fore with respect to the cineamateurs from Oţelul Roşu and Arad.

Competing versions? – making sense of contradictory interviews

The new interviews challenged some of the statements made by the former members of the Târgu Mureş cineclub. The stories about acquiring the film camera were mainly similar: both interviewees remembered that Russian technology was available in shops selling photographic equipment and it was more or less affordable (a super8 camera cost as much as a month salary), one of them bought a new one, and the other person procured a Braun camera made in Germany from the black Market. These

amateurs didn't emphasize as much the restrictions of the socialist system on the amateurs or the hidden censorship regarding the use of technologies.

Mária Tóth, the amateur filmmaker from Cluj-Napoca, worked as a school teacher, and gained knowledge about the basics of filmmaking by attending a course, however she didn't become a member of a cineclub (according to her the amateur film movement wasn't too popular in the city), but rather worked alone. Most of her films immortalized touristic experiences, but a few short fiction films were made as well, which participated with success in the Romanian amateur film festival circuit, winning prizes. As this was her only connection with the institutionalized amateurs, her account depicts a relative freedom that a film camera owner might have enjoyed. Her interest in filmmaking dropped with the advent of video cameras, as the super8 technology became obsolete, and more difficult to process.

The cineamateur from Baia Mare, Tibor Schneider was in fact a self-taught filmmaker: besides getting some advice from a schoolmate's father, he learned how to use the camera from how-to-do-it educational books. According to this account in the city of Baia Mare there was a cineclub that functioned in the institutional framework of the House of Youth (which was conceived as a recreational and training center specialized in arts and crafts) and a club operated by a university which hosted a student film festival as well. In the early 1980s, after returning home from the compulsory military service, this self-taught filmmaker found out that the cineclub from the House of Youth was left unattended, as the former leader of the film club became a TV professional in Cluj-Napoca. Resorting to ingenious tactics the independent amateur restarted the film club: together with his friends he organized a fake film society consisting of seven people in order to convince the institution that cine-amateurism has revived. After gaining access to the infrastructure, he remained the solo member of the club until 1990, when the building was vandalized first, then the institution privatized. Later on he became a professional television collaborator as well.

Although his strategical, tactical behaviour is reminiscent of the accounts from Târgu Mureş, this person also didn't remember filmmaking as a highly controlled, surveyed activity. According to him, filming around sites with specific state interest was indeed prohibited or at least stirred suspicion, but using the film camera within the confines of the private sphere or in nature during hiking was not an issue.

In order to understand the correspondences and contradictions of these different amateur cineaste stories, one must perform a critique, or discourse analysis of oral history interviews. Comparing the stories of Haáz, Tóth and Schneider, the differences bring to the fore the following variable: the

adherence to a film club of an institution, or any kind of collective versus acting alone as an independent filmmaker; being educated within the confines of an institution versus being a self-taught filmmaker. It seems that the attitudes toward filmmaking are similar, the medium of film is surrounded by excitement and devotion, but the ways these persons contextualize their experiences differ. Those who were active participants of a filmclub within an institution, tended to project their experiences about the oppressive nature of institutions or state control. In these stories the successfully finished and screened films are considered to be stories about success in overcoming the obstructions of those times, or confer a sense of belonging to a friendly group. Meanwhile, those who didn't really become members of a collective tend to present themselves as apolitical filmmakers, who managed to remain invisible in the culture of surveillance precisely through this neutrality. Thus, there is an implicit bias in each of the stories: either as an intention to state the sense of discontent and triumph of the individual challenged by the circumstances of the past, or as an intention to express the autonomy of the individual in a controlled world (but, of course, only by playing according to the rules).

From the individual perspectives to handbooks and institutions

As the topic of the individuals collaborating within institutions rises, new types of source-materials can be used to complement the “big picture”.

How-to-do-it manuals can be considered as an important type of source-material, which was widely available in the bookshops of the country. As we have seen it, these books could be used as a substitute for institutional education, but they could also be used by club activists. We don't know precisely how these books were used, or how seriously their advice was followed, even so these texts can be regarded as the official versions of how a piece of technology should be used, or how a film should be constructed. Research may even consider these texts as institutions in themselves, as they define a set of rules, adjusted to the aesthetic norms of those times.

By scrutinizing 11 volumes¹⁹ written for amateurs between 1967 and 1984, an interesting common feature comes to the fore: the books containing 120–250 pages are mostly about the techniques, optics and chemistry related to different stages of film production. There is a huge space dedicated to cameras and elements of film language, and just a few pages about the recommended topics to be filmed, as if these handbooks were designed for engineers or a reader trained in formal sciences. As part of the subchapter discussing the different subgenres of the amateur films, Bălțatu writes the following: “the documentary needs time and patience, ingenuity and creativity. The filmmaker should know the subject

¹⁹ The books are the following: Bălțatu 1967; Boyer–Galceran–Hemardinquer et alii 1970 (5 volumes); Pop–Codăuș 1976 (2 volumes); Musculeanu 1982 and 1984 (3 volumes).

well, and know how to animate it to make it interesting. As film subject anything could be chosen: the activity of a large construction site, the turmoil of a big city, the description of a region, the course of a river, of a local industry, the intimacy of a musician or a painter, the conjuring of the past of the city where the amateur spends his holiday, or of a day from the life of his village beginning with the song of the rooster, until sunset. In order to obtain a lively, interesting film, it needs to be well prepared and executed, on the basis of a detailed script” (Bălțatu 1967. 61).

Although most of the books enumerate reportage films, home movies, tourist films and documentaries as the most frequent genres of the amateurs, these are not described with the notions of authenticity and contingency that we know today. The term authenticity is often used in these educational descriptions, meaning the filming of live events or the spontaneity of the subjects. But each author emphasizes the importance of editing and directing of documentaries, and in order avoid boredom, these films don't suppose to expose accidental scenes from life: “the fact shouldn't be forgotten that even an amateur film is film, that is, art. Neither type of documentary should settle for a superficial, declarative registration of reality, instead it should stir emotions with artistic means, avoiding boredom and annoyance” (Pop–Codăuș 1976. 28).

Behind sentences as this the workings of the ideology can be felt, even if disguised as a presentation of an artistic discourse. In these handbooks ‘real’ is defined as a highly constructed artistic vision, but also as a series of don'ts. The long take, the presentation of raw reality, the interest in the contingent are forms that should be avoided, thus a certain potential of the filmic medium is reduced, or *tamed* as Simina Bădică suggests, with respect to the lack of documentary photographs in Socialist Romania (Bădică 2012. 59). With the subtle guidance towards artistic endeavours, the documentary films (and the cinematic medium as well) is deprived of its power, at least in these institutionalized ways of how to use the medium.

Information about the institutions that acted as hosts of the photo-cineclubs can also shed new light on the history of the amateur film movement in Romania. Surprisingly, one of the handbooks has a short chapter on the Romanian amateur movement, and according to this the first cineclub emerged in 1957 in the Student's House of Culture in Bucharest (Pop–Codăuș 1976. 103). Other online sources²⁰ also mention 1957 as the year when the first film clubs in Brașov and Timișoara were founded within a tractor factory and respectively, in the cultural centre of the Romanian Railway company. Based on the available information, the amateur photo- and the cineclubs functioned within cultural institutions,

²⁰ This data appears on the website of a mayor's office from Bucharest: http://www.ps2.ro/www/ps2/stiri/1002/index.php?action=results&poll_ident=9 (last accessed on 5th of April 2016).

schools and universities and factories. In factories the technical equipment was procured by the workers syndicate. Curiously, the cineclub-life was recently picked up by Romanian filmmakers: the story of a recent Romanian feature film entitled *Adalbert's Dream* (*Visul lui Adalbert*, 2011, dir. by Gabriel Achim) revolves around the making and screening of an amateur film for the workers of a factory.

Among the factory clubs, the one founded in 1960 in Oțelul Roșu (jud. Timiș) proved to be the most enduring.²¹ Although the hosting factory doesn't exist anymore, the club members are still active, they organize screenings and run a website (<http://ancin.ro>, last accessed on the 5th of April 2016). On their webpage next to photographs documenting the club's life, a document is uploaded containing the list of the cineclubs participating in the first national festival for amateur cineastes that took place in Bucharest 1969. As reported by this document, a total of 143 films were presented, made by 47 cineclubs from 38 localities. Among these clubs 29 worked under the aegis of a factory, 9 were frequented by students and 11 were part of a cultural institution. There are also indications of other local film festivals that took place throughout the years. What is rather outstanding about this data is the fact that the Romanian amateur film movement appears to be a really popular movement, an activity pursued by masses. All the while the previously analyzed interviews suggested that amateur filmmaking wasn't a widespread practice, nor highly institutionalised, these written documents suggest otherwise.

A valuable addition to the list of cineclubs is a sociological survey made between 1973 and 1974, presented briefly at the end of a handbook (Pop-Codăuș 1976. 104–107). The survey was conducted on 90 people activating within 8 different filmmaker collectives in Bucharest. According to this, amateur filmmaking was a gendered affair (70% male and 30% female), most of the cineastes were aged between 19 and 30 years (70,02%), and were students (36,6%) who generally spent 6 hours/week in the cineclub. Most of them became film amateurs in order to have an artistic preoccupation (35,5%) or just to be educated in the cinematic culture (35,3%). A fun fact brought to light by this survey is, that a large number of them didn't go to the cinema, didn't watch movies (33,3%).

The photos recently uploaded to the website of this surviving club reveal new information about the international relations that his members enjoyed thanks to the amateur film movement during the socialist years. It seems that the club from Oțelul Roșu was a very active one, and soon its members became visitors at the festivals organized by UNICA.²² On self-funded journeys, the amateurs form

²¹ The owner of the website is in fact the National Association of Romanian Cineclubs (Asociația Națională a Cinecluburilor din România), which in fact works as an association of the former clubs in the county of Timiș.

²² The organization Union Internationale du Cinéma d'Amateur was founded in 1937. Romania wasn't a member of this organization, but the amateur cineastes were longing for a possibility to participate in it.

Oțelul Roșu visited the festivals in the following countries: Dubrovnik (Yugoslavia) in 1965, Mariánske Lázně (Czechoslovakia) in 1966, Sant Feliu de Guixols (Spain) in 1967, Luxembourg (Luxemburg) in 1969, Baden (Switzerland) in 1980, Siófok (Hungary) in 1981, Aachen (Germany) in 1982, Saint Nazaire (France) in 1983, Karl-Marx Stadt (GDR) in 1984. During one of the excursions to Aachen, one of the founding members of club, Emil Mateiaș decided not to return home. Thus the amateur film movement indirectly gave him the opportunity to immigrate to Germany with his family. Others benefitted from these international excursions as well: the photographs show the people exploring the cityscapes, and women are often represented while shopping.

Conclusions

All the difficulties of historicizing the Romanian amateur film movement probably cannot be answered/resolved by this article alone. The research conducted for this article tried to tell the story of the socialist cineclubs, by putting together bits and pieces, by discovering where to look when there are no films to look at. The fragments of the story were excavated with different methods, that is why the process of sewing together the pieces demanded reflection. Another purpose for the reflexive use of methodologies was to dissolve the slightly contradicting stories about filmmaking and to combine them as adhering to different epistemological stances.

Beyond the epistemological questions, the purpose of this analysis was to present the significance of the media practices of the people who were engaged in using and domesticating moving images in the period between 1945 and 1989. All the data presented in the article seem to nuance the big historical tableau, and certain differences come to the surface. The source materials suggest many things: that amateur filmmaking in Romania was an uneven practice, and certain clubs or cities excelled in their activity more than others; there were different degrees of institutionalization: there were highly collaborative projects within factories and cultural institutions, but independent filmmakers sometimes worked alone. More research is needed to have a clearer picture about the coexisting types of filmmaking, but in spite of the different versions one thing seems to be constant in these stories: the admiration and excitement when talking about the medium of film. This “respectful” identity of the cinematic medium is already a thing of the past, but it seems to be the common denominator of the amateurs making films during communism.

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