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We Should Have Asked What Year We Were In! Wastelands and Wilderness in the Văcărești Park

Calin Cotoi 

*Facultatea de Sociologie și Asistență Socială, Universitatea din București, Bucharest, Romania;
calin.cotoi@sas.unibuc.ro*

Abstract: In Central and Eastern Europe, nature protected areas came into being in a dramatically changing society, economy, and culture. Formerly industrial and infrastructural landscapes have been both materially and semantically reshaped through practices of restoration and attempts to revitalise ruins of failed modernisation projects. Around a socialist-era empty lake, landowners, real estate developers, casino capitalism, displaced people, hopes, fantasies, wild and stray animals converged, creating a differentially ordered landscape in an antagonistically articulated coexistence of wastelands and nature. Văcărești Nature Park developed a specific historical and social trajectory, as it became closely related with local middle-class projects and anxieties. In it, socialist ruins came into direct, sensuous contact with both nature and the fractured history of post-1990s Bucharest capitalism, enacting a twin infrastructural and ecological inversion.

Keywords: Bucharest, infrastructural-ecological inversion, middle class, wilderness, wastelands

Introduction

From the mid-1700s to 2014, when it became an urban natural park, the Văcărești area known as the Văcărești Pit had been a mixture of wastelands and modernisation projects on the southern fringes of Bucharest. While always integrated in the productive and power circuits of the city, the area was also a spatial and temporal gap: a place of many superpositions and inversions.

At the beginning of the 18th century the Văcărești Pit was a peri-urban horticultural area, and between 1716 and 1736 Nicholas Mavrocordatos, the prince of Wallachia, built a huge monastery there, with large textile and pottery workshops attached (Bacalbașa 2014). In 1848, the monastery became a prison for local revolutionaries, in 1864 for insurgent peasants, and it remained a place of detention for both common criminals and political and cultural dissidents until 1977, when an earthquake damaged it. In the 1980s, as the monastery-prison was demolished, the place was deemed to become an artificial lake, as part of a large hydrological project that linked Bucharest to the River Danube (Stoican et al. 2013:6–7). During the 1990s and 2000s it became a postsocialist wasteland, and eventually, during the 2010s, an urban wilderness-wetland subjected to middle-class environmental activism and *flânerie*, only to revert, from time to time, to its wasteland identity.

In what follows, I see Văcărești as a case study for the larger wasteland / nature tensions inside the urban ruins of European modernity. Through both an infrastructural and ecological inversion, mediated by the active presence of ruins, a flickering image of a large, transnational urban wasteland substrate emerges.

During a visit in 2017, I spent a few hours with a small group of people inside Văcărești Nature Park (VNP). As we were uneasily climbing the steep concrete walls that surround the wetland, on our way out, we saw some people smoking and repairing an old car. A small neighbourhood provided a kind of buffer zone between the Park's protected nature and a busy and noisy roadway nearby. After we passed and greeted them, somebody from our group exclaimed: "We should have asked what year we were in!"

It unexpectedly made a lot of sense. After several long visits shadowed by the nagging sensation that something was missing, I had my Eureka moment. The way out of there had a post-apocalyptic movie feel to it. Rusty, galvanised iron signs, big concrete blocks of what seemed to be a former barrier covered with anti-government graffiti, slabs of concrete and debris, wildlife, soda cans and plastic bags were all framed by a bustling urban landscape. The futuristic looking Asmita Gardens skyscrapers, the huge car dealers' shops, a big hotel, a large shopping mall, dilapidated army buildings and ghostly watchtowers encircled the new wilderness. On the western side, vegetable patches, a recently built cottage, goats, stray dogs, and the construction site for two new apartment buildings formed a no-man's land resembling a scaled-down, spatialised Hollywoodesque version of a set portraying recent Romanian history. The historical debris and the contemporary buildings pointed to an assortment of developments and failures.¹

As I started to visit the Park regularly and talk to people—from ecologists, NGO activists, scientists, rangers and public administrators, to neighbours of the Park—my epiphany got foggy. The many small-scale figure-ground reversals overlapped and obscured each other into what was ultimately a flickering, forever blurred overall picture. The ways in which the "denial of coevalness" (Fabian 1983) that made "us", middle class inhabitants of the present and consumers of global pop culture, willing to inquire into the historic times of the "locals", was not able to metonymically create a clear-cut spatial and temporal object of research. The failure of my breakthrough moment opened up, eventually, the perspective of the twin inversion of infrastructure and urban ecology.

Infrastructure is the invisible, taken-for-granted substrate of our individual and collective lives that allows social and material practices to happen in predetermined ways (Star and Ruhleder 1996:113). The critical examination of infrastructure is deemed to perform an "infrastructural inversion" (Bowker and Star 1999), illuminating the obscure workings of the background. In the case of Văcărești, this inversion has been always already performed in a material and sensuous way. One does not need much analytical acumen to see the infrastructure through the "wild" nature. A simple walk will suffice.

There is also a parallel "ecological inversion"² at work: the wild nature is made possible, and can be glimpsed and understood only through ruined infrastructure. The infrastructure and the ecology point to, frame and constitute each other through the material and political medium of failed projects and debris. The



Figure 1: Bucharest, Văcărești Nature Park (source: Google Earth map, 2020) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

wilderness is a result of the failure of an urban ecology constantly fractured by the debris of failed infrastructure (Stoler 2016).

The space created by the large-scale ecological-infrastructure inversion constituted the spatial and temporal conditions for the park's existence. VNP hosts the material forms of a number of ongoing smaller or larger analytical inversions. The creation of a nature reserve and the framing of the Pit as a place inhabited by wild animals, birds and plants inadvertently caused various times and spaces to come into intimate and tense contact. The people living in or around the Park, the fish, the birds, the snakes, the foxes, the trees and the bushes are shifting denizens of both urban-modern (as pets, parasites or refugees) and nature ecologies (as wild flora and fauna).

Wilderness has been a strongly debated concept and practice at least since William Cronon (1996) famously argued that the excision of humans from "wild nature" is actually the human product of a specific time and cultural setting. The dispute on wilderness has shifted from the 1990s on, to new concepts and perspectives. Rewilding seems not to require human abandonment of landscapes (DeSilvey and Bartolini 2019; Prior and Brady 2017), although it still "obscures the reality that wild comes in all shapes and forms around us at this moment" (Jørgensen 2015:487).

The layered and palimpsest-like character of landscapes (Drenthen 2009; Hourdequin and Havlick 2016) offer a way out of this conundrum. This approach looks not only at the deeper ecological structures of "wildscapes" (Jørgensen and Keenan 2011) but frames the processes of natural succession inside a hybrid human and natural history. The layered landscapes presuppose the possibility of choosing among incompatible layers and enacting novel erasures of already half-erased historical strata. It brings to front the inevitability of surprise, lack of total

knowledge and need for an experimental approach to ecological restoration (Gross 2016). The Văcărești area can be seen as a layered wildscape, close to a “novel ecosystem”, a place of a new combination of species and occasional human agency (Hobbs et al. 2006), but it sits uneasily on a gradient between natural and wild ecosystems or on a continuum from wilderness to ordered spaces (Jorgensen and Keenan 2011).

There is no continuously layered cultural heritage and no deep nature in Văcărești. The mix that presses together ruins of failed modernising projects with “wild” vegetation and animals has no stability. The palimpsest is, admittedly, complex but does not create any long-lasting balance or harmony nor does it “deepen our sense of place” (Drenthen 2009:294–295). It is a forever fragmented series of inversions. The figure-ground ecological-infrastructure reversals elicited by Văcărești are not dissimilar to those described, in a different context, by Roy Wagner (1987:62–63), as “it consummates its denial by demonstrating ... that the inversion makes as much sense as the order it inverts” and its resulting power resembles that exerted by a “significant work of art”.

Văcărești is both a local multilayered wildscape and a part of large transnational urban wastelands. By mid and late 19th century, urban wild nature has become part of common scientific knowledge and aesthetic delight (Gandy 2013:1303). On the night of 23–24 May 1871, the French communards burnt down the *Conseil d'état* (State Council) on Quai d'Orsay. A wild forest grew on their ruins (Lizet 1989:256).³ In the early 1880s, naturalist writer J.K. Huysmans vocally opposed plans to create a museum of decorative arts on that site. The ruins and the fire, he claimed, had rescued the hideous architecture of the former State Council, and “instead of a horrible barrack, we have a crumbling palace of Rome, a Babelic fantasy, a Piranesi etching ...” A “miniature virgin forest” created a splendid dream-like architecture as it grew under the vaults of the ruins and completed the place (Huysmans 1908:162–163). These ruins were intensely vegetal and wild; they were seeded in the city by the revolutionary fires of 1871, and they were the only urban monuments where the “fantasy of the ground” (Huysmans 1908:164) persisted. The wasteland on the Quai d'Orsay stood against the perceived ugliness of the mercantile and hasty post-Hausmannian city, as it emerged inside the cracks created by the expanding streets.

In 1884, Joseph Vallot published an exhaustive description of the flora growing in the ruins of the *Conseil d'état*. There is a rhetorical and conceptual gap between Huysmans' and Vallot's texts, but both are part of a larger moment of curiosity in face of an almost invisible, difficult to recognise and name, frequently destroyed and reemerging part of the city (Vallot 1884:3). From the 1880s on, the urban wastelands entered a long hiatus punctured by scientific wanderings and gazes in the wake of terrific destructions. In 1940, during the war, Paul Jovet published a small text on the evolution of rubble's vegetation in Paris' ruined buildings. The troubling idea of the lack of stabilisation and closure suffuses the otherwise descriptive scientific text. Flora “often appears as a chaos in a mind guided by the desire for curious plants rather than by the search for plant groupings” and the botanical order is distorted by the human “reshuffling and trampling” (Jovet 1940:305).

The French post-revolutionary wastelands became one of the origins of ruderal urban ecologies (Lizet 1989) and of the complicated and unsettling relations between destruction, cultural and natural history, and the normalising logic of modernity. Herbert Sukopp (2003) continued and developed this kind of researches in Berlin, as rubble's ecology. Bettina Stoetzer (2018:298) has recently taken the ruderal perspective as an anthropological analytical framework for the "broader, unintentional ecologies of human-built structures and the multispecies worlds of which they become part".

While, in what follows, I use this perspective of nature—as neither wild nor domesticated—I look at one aspect of the ruderal that is usually mentioned only in passing, just as an example of its marginality. This kind of urban wasteland emerges mostly through a quick, decentred, never fully coherent gaze, through a glimpse out of the corner of the eye (Stoetzer 2018:309). The landscapes I am analysing here occur also out of corner of the eye visions, but they assemble into a central, even if fragmented, full sight.

In a text about photographing the metropolis, architect Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió (1995:119–120) claims that the enchantment of abandoned urban spaces started during the deindustrialising years of the 1970s as a fascination with urban wastelands (*terrains vagues*)—tracts of land "in a potentially exploitable space but already possessing some definitions to which we are external". These urban spaces are semantically related to "waves", "vacancies" and "vagueness". Movement and oscillation combine with absence of use and uncertainty.

At the same time distinct and stemming from the vacancies created by the eras of urban development and "improvement", the emptiness of the wasteland emerges in spaces left void by the modernist projects (Munn 2004). The unsettling presence/absence of the wasteland is linked to the resurgence of an underlying fond;⁴ this fond is not the "natural substrate", the natural infrastructure or the referent of the greening plans of urban development, it is instead the "disrupted stones, heteroclite materials, hazards of seed and germination flows, variety of geographical origins and extreme mobility of the population" (Lizet 1989:260)—an assemblage of nature, politics, aesthetics, and emotions. The Văcărești wasteland functions inside a logic of inversions, both analytical and material, both infrastructural and ecological.

In what follows, I look first at a major socialist hydrologic project plus a brief history of the Văcărești urban periphery before that. I then focus on the long "transition" of the 1990s and early 2000s with the (re)emergence of the "Pit" as a wasteland: physical place, memory object, and rhetorical topos for making sense of postsocialist changes. In the end, I discuss the emergence of an urban nature protected area and its different politics and aesthetics.

Socialist Hydrologic Engineering

Two rivers (Colentina and Dâmbovița) cross Bucharest, and a larger, third one (Argeș), flowing in the southwestern part of the city, provides drinking water. While they were all subject to systematisation projects as early as the late

eighteenth century, they became regulated in the interwar and mostly in the socialist period.

Beginning with the 1960s, the urban farmland of Văcărești gave way to major construction projects spurred by the city's industrialisation fever. At least since the end of the 19th century, several springs were observed on and off in the Văcărești area, typical of this constantly changing marshland, with water gathering in small, interconnected ponds. The activity of these springs has significantly intensified since the 1980s "because of the cuttings and underground excavations, made with the aim of expanding the residential neighbourhoods and the underground train lines" (Manea et al. 2016:85).

Communist urban planners included Văcărești in a large hydrologic project aimed to regulate the flow of the Dâmbovița River, to fight flooding, and establish leisure areas. Văcărești was initially designed as part of a huge complex of reservoirs for exceptional situations (regular and earthquake-related floods), for industrial use, as well as sports, tourism and leisure, as this was to be part of a larger area dedicated to the Bucharest youth (Zaharia et al. 2016). The Youth Park had already been built nearby, on the site of a former garbage dump known since late 19th century as the "Weeping Valley", and the construction of a massive multipurpose building was underway. This was a typical socialist high modernist project, unfolding within a homogeneous, linear-developmental time, with a utopian, youth-oriented spark to it.

The space where this modernist temporality was supposed to unfold was problematic. Văcărești Valley had existed as a short-lived leisure area cum waste-ridden



Figure 2: The Văcărești reservoir, 1989 (photo by Andrei Bîrsan; reproduced here with permission)

urban periphery under various names and spatial configurations, at least since the mid-eighteenth century. Slaughterhouses, tanneries, vegetable gardens and marshland occupied this sparsely inhabited land on the margins of one of Bucharest's few pre-industrial, manufacturing areas (Chelcea 2008:220).

In the early 1980s, the neighbourhood that straddled the projected water reservoir was demolished. As the new modern-socialist Bucharest was quickly expanding, engulfing and destroying the older neighbourhoods (*mahalale*), new blocks of flats were built near a large roadway. Urban planners envisaged Văcărești as a network of small reservoirs and embankments to reclaim the marshlands. Contrary to the engineers' advice, the lake was not dug out but erected as a major above ground urban structure. Bringing water from the nearby river proved too costly because of the difference in water level. Instead, a long channel (almost 25 km long) was partially constructed between Văcărești and another, larger lake, situated southwest of Bucharest.⁵ The construction of spectacularly large water surfaces was part of the new image of 1980s socialist Bucharest. Still, from an institutional, infrastructural and engineering point of view, Văcărești was more than that; it was part of a huge plan that created a vast geographical space around a large navigable channel connecting Bucharest, the Danube River and the Black Sea (Zaharia et al. 2016).

The Văcărești segment raised significant challenges. As the large channel meant to feed water into the lake proved impossible to complete in time, the lake was to be "festively" inaugurated by pumping water from the nearby river.⁶ In addition to haste, the use of substandard materials recycled from urban demolitions, coupled with disregard for the changing nature of underground springs and the groundwater level, caused the artificial lake to leak and flood the neighbouring blocks of flats and, farther down, Bucharest's greenhouse area. As I conducted interviews with former residents, one of them recalled the flooding quite vividly: "the basements of buildings were full of water and the destruction was widespread".⁷

On the other hand, one of the engineers in charge of the hydrological works of Institute Project Bucharest, Abduraim Sefcati,⁸ during a long interview on the hydrological past and present of the city, was quite sure that the lake had never been filled with water, and all the floods that the people remembered had happened in the early 1970s. Nevertheless, while the socialist engineers never managed to feed the lake, by building slurry walls around it, the water already there became captive, infiltrating the embankments that separated it from the nearby neighbourhoods. Văcărești Pit was never emptied or filled completely, its connections with its human and non-human neighbours, other rivers far or near, memories and political-economic regimes were thus constantly re-actualised into the shifting obduracy of this body of captive water.

The 18th and 19th century monastery and manufactures, the surrounding marshlands and pits were rural and urban areas articulated partially and intermittently with state and church projects, but had already become part of waste-ridden landscapes of development. The socialist plan cut deeper than the previous modernisation projects, as the area was included into the largest national

hydrologic plan and, at the same time, shrunken and clearly bounded, by impressive embankments, from the surrounding neighbourhoods.

The new spacing generated an assemblage of potentialities: the slurry walls kept the water in, creating the material of the ponds, in which wildlife could thrive. The 1980s vision of spectacular urban hydrological infrastructure made possible the re-created spectacularity and middle-class visual consumption of the difference between nature and the city in the 2010s. The demolition of the Văcărești monastery and the construction of blocks of flats and a massive Youth Centre provided the material conditions for the creation of both the shopping mall and the park-like wild nature.

The urban development, both socialist and postsocialist, shaped the place, making it possible for the ruins of the never realised socialist lake to straddle the differences between urban and wild nature. There are other wild natural landscapes dispersed along and interspersed with the ruins of the former Bucharest-Danube hydrologic project. Sefcati believes that there must be “many unknown ‘Văcărești natural parks’”. They have not become actual parks, mainly because they were not able to embody the aesthetic and political tensions and differences between newly build skyscrapers, socialist ruins and middle-class wild nature, and so never able to trigger the ecological-infrastructureal inversions.

The recent history of industrial ruination has disrupted the continuous adaptation and reuse of modern ruins, “naturally” replaced or caught up in the new industrial infrastructures or else the heritage industry. The 1980s and 1990s brought to light more ruinous ways of industrial dereliction, with ruins littering the landscape and/ or turning into wild nature (Lahusen 2006; Schwenkel 2015). Postsocialist, colonial/imperial and capitalist ruins have lately come together in a particularly interesting historical moment, not so much as a Benjaminian moment of truth,⁹ but as a way of coming to terms with the constant mirrorings, reframings, and inversions deployed by a new global ruin landscape.

The Wild Văcărești: The Empty Lake

In the wake of deindustrialisation, wastelands increasingly appeared everywhere in the vacancies created by the development projects of the modernising cities, but they did not emerge anymore as both the authentic and fantastic urban grounds (Farley and Roberts 2012; Huysmans 1908). The urban photographers rediscovered them and brought a new centrality to the “interstitial folds” of wastelands (Levesque 1999). In the 1990s, postsocialism came with a double ruination: millennial capitalist ruins superposed on the socialist ones (Dzenovska 2018; Lahusen 2006) and new wastelands grew all over the landscape.

The 1990s (re)development projects marked a wide disjuncture between wealth and money, embedded in special market circuits, and the reshaping of postsocialist lives and personal trajectories. Images of speed, fun and wealth were conjured without much happening besides, as the legal status of the area remained unclear, and various investors put forth wild plans for spectacular changes and quick profits. In 2002, a Romanian-Australian firm leased the Văcărești Lake for 49 years, with the first four years free of charge. The lessee committed to build a

hippodrome, a golf course, and a hotel on the site of the empty lake. As accusations of corruption grew and nothing was ever built, the Bucharest Court of Appeal ruled to terminate the contract (Stoican et al. 2013:7).

Văcărești became part of the 1990s and 2000s postsocialist projects in the form of a planned car race ring or entertainment complex (and new reservoir)—a site for real estate projects, with the state, investors and former inhabitants, evacuated in the 1980s, vying for money, influence, memories, and imagined futures. These quickly changing post-socialist projects, and their ghostly resemblance with former socialist development plans (Chelcea and Druță 2016), was punctuated by the less coherent, wilder practices of millennial capitalism (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001:2).

Amid legislation flaws, garbage from the nearby areas and rubble from new buildings or renovations flowed in the empty lake. In the mid-1990s, a shepherd from a village nearby and his flock of sheep occupied part of the space. At Easter, it would turn into an apocalyptic landscape, as it became a slaughter site littered with dead and dying sheep, middlemen and buyers of lambs for the Easter traditional meal. During the weekends, neighbourhood teens drifted their cars on the concrete slab walls of the Pit. Informal scrappers mined the ruins for iron bars. Using makeshift traps of tree branches and glue, young kids, and the odd drug addict, caught singing birds and sold them at the nearby market. From time to time some young ecologists would fight the bird catchers inside and outside the Pit. The reeds would sometimes be set on fire, smoke billowing above the whole area.

Things were not only taken out of there, some were brought in, in order to be put out of sight or quickly transformed and reintroduced into the emergent post-socialist productive circuits. During the 1990s, the pit was rhythmically filled with garbage and construction work debris, animals (from pets to sheep), plants, as well as more fantastic entities such as thieves' caches, human and non-human corpses, only to be emptied out of iron scrapped from concrete slabs, copper from burning stolen cables, and slaughtered lambs.¹⁰

What belonged inside and what constituted "matter out of place" was a historical dynamic threshold, managed with various degrees of success by local horticulturalists, socialist engineers, fishermen, politicians, real estate developers, and middle-class ecologically minded groups. Their actions would sometimes complement each other, overlap, or even clash. Stories, fantasies, fears and desires gathered around this wasteland, this unlikely postsocialist heterotopia (Foucault 1998). For many of the inhabitants of the area, the Văcărești Pit has been a meeting place for Bucharest's gay population, a den of thieves, and a dangerous place where the swamps held many secrets.¹¹

The temporal and ideological relations between the older socialism and the new capitalism(s) were complicated. As Chelcea and Druță (2016) show, socialism and communism were important in the production of neoliberal monoglossia "a zombie and ghost". It created guilt by association for those who challenged the dominant wisdom of trickle-down economics, thus supporting the worldview and, ultimately, the interests of the winners of the post-1990 transition.

At Văcărești, the ghost of socialism was more than an efficient discursive mechanism, as it was embodied in the infrastructural ruins of the paradoxical lake—built above the ground and empty. People, whose families had been evicted from the neighbourhood over which the lake was erected, remembered the socialist lake leaking and flooding the nearby areas, but they were also proud and nostalgic of the feasts of socialist building and engineering. The socialist engineers saw it as a potential flood risk, while the political elites longed for its spectacular but never achieved full body of smooth water.

The empty lake was a ghostly place from and through which socialist times were reimagined in various, sometimes antagonistic ways: as a wasteland hiding wild capitalism opportunities; an ambiguously desirable socialist lake that could not actually keep the water in; and a 2010s middle-class variant of wild nature, in opposition with both socialism and postsocialism.

A Middle-Class Park: The Wild Nature

After the “wild” 1990s slowly receded, nature protected areas mushroomed all over Romania in the early and mid-2000s. Most Romanian natural parks came into being in the context of dramatic society-wide changes. VNP, while struggling to enter the international world of nature parks, kept its historical and theoretical wasteland characteristics.

As the Văcărești Pit was beginning to morph into a nature protected area and stunning pictures of it flooded the Internet in the early 2010s, I started to visit it frequently. The natural park looked like an irregular quadrilateral fortress, clearly delimited by high sloping walls. From these walls, large concrete platforms intended as docks or points of access to the water, overlooked the non-existent interior lake. With the embankments and docks turned into viewing points, the whole spatial organisation invited voyeuristic pleasures, plans of totalisation and surveillance, of containing and protecting a very well bounded nature, surrounded and framed by a sprawling urban infrastructure and housing projects.

Văcărești featured in the local edition of *National Geographic* from May 2012. The media report set into motion the revaluation of Văcărești from postsocialist ruin into an “urban delta” worthy of protection. I first met Cristian Lascu, the former editor-in-chief of the local version of the glossy American magazine, in 2017, at the headquarters of the NGO “Văcărești Nature Park”, in an apartment, in one of the Asmita Gardens high-rise towers, with a stunning view on the park. He reminisced that he had been looking for high-quality photos of the Văcărești area for quite some time when an ornithologist and amateur photographer friend showed him some pictures. They were not enough for a *National Geographic* piece, as “he was shooting birds taken out of context”.

Most of the photos he received afterwards were good ones but, this time, with the wrong context, too “social”. The only photos that he deemed *National Geographic*-worthy were those taken by the CEO of Konica Minolta Romania, a nature photographer. The first photographs were ready in February 2012, but then, in March, the editor-in-chief went on a *National Geographic* sponsored trip to Antarctica, and the photographer accompanied him. They visited Buenos Aires

and the Costanera Sur Ecological Reserve. The two were struck by how similar Văcărești and Costanera were.¹²

The text, with the new photos, appeared after the long Argentinian and Arctic detour, and had a huge impact. It showed a miraculous natural world thriving in the “Delta between blocks of flats” (*Delta dintre blocuri*) (Lascu 2012). The article enmeshed the place inside a series of intertextual links. The first reference, as the text presented the two friends (writer and photographer) entering the place, was to *Stalker*, Andrei Tarkovsky’s cult movie, and its literary predecessor the brothers Strugatsky’s *Roadside Picnic*—major cultural icons for the Romanian counterculture of the 1980s and 1990s. The fragments of the hydrologic engineering failed project became cultured ruins, ready to be re-codified further. The Roma family living in a cardboard hut inside Văcărești became “neolithical dwellers”, and one of the kids a local, wetland “Mowgli”. From the cracks of socialist ruins, an otherworldly, pre-modern, almost colonial nature emerged, understood, and mediated by cultured interpreters.

The seminal *National Geographic* text used the narratives of ecological redemption, an important part of post-socialist politics of nature that, as Yoav Galai (2017) shows for another historical setting, frequently legitimised practices of dispossession. The Văcărești “Delta” was to counterpoise green, self-sustaining and emerging nature to the drab and grey socialist blocks of flats. It pointed to a critique of state socialism, totalitarianism, its ugly architecture and social engineering.

VNP emerged at the intersection of a struggle for proper (photographic) representation, a denial of the postsocialist wasteland, and the imposition of regulated wilderness. Framing it as “ecologising” (*ecologizare*), various state institutions, NGOs and businesses organised land reclamation interventions inside the would-be park, gradually transforming it from a wasteland full of hybrid beings (Latour 1993) into an area structured by nature enhancing and purifying actions.

The socialist metonymical relationship between the Văcărești lake and the Danube has morphed into the metaphorical connection between VNP—the “Delta between the blocks of flats”—and the Danube Delta. In a 2014 interview, referring to the rather sparse trees of Văcărești, Lascu said that “[it] could have resembled Letea”, the famous Danube Delta wild forest, if only the people living around and in the failed socialist lake had not cut down the trees.¹³ A legitimate field of intervention emerged through this tropic mutation towards metaphorical connections: the wild wetland-like aspects of the Văcărești nature could be enhanced, if proper measures were taken. The reciprocal framing of ruined industrial wasteland and nature wilderness created an area of possible enlightened interventions as the twin infrastructural and ecological inversions could be used as middle-class politics.

The comparison with other similar nature protected areas in the world, besides Buenos Aires’ Costanera del Sur, such as London Wetland Centre and Schöneberger Südgelände Berlin, as well as a support letter from the International Union for Conservation of Nature and the support of the US, the UK, and the Netherlands embassies provided the necessary traction for the creation of a well-regulated nature protected area. While the association with the Danube Delta played on a

national-natural touristic destination made hugely popular during socialist times to lend its metaphorical legitimacy, the Park also claimed an affiliation with a desired Western urban identity, as it connected Bucharest with other European or Western cities, thus signalling a distancing from socialism, inside the larger process of Central European real and imagined “metropolitan convergence” (Ther 2016).

An alliance of Bucharest-based ecological groups, urban professionals with an interest in nature, journalists, professional and amateur scientists, tried to integrate or deflect different interests connected with the Văcărești area by enrolling wild nature in their project. Real estate interests but also attempts of people from the demolished neighbourhood to reclaim land have been fought rather successfully. The Roma family living inside the park has been evicted, but they had been provided new lodgings in another part of the city and “Mowgli” was allowed to return, as ranger of the newly established park.¹⁴ By using nature, through political-ecological narratives of redemption, they were able to construe VNP as an ideally moral middle-class project—different from both socialist control and post-socialist chaos. Even if not a representative sample of Bucharest middle class, they were able to assemble urban wildness as a “boundary object” (Star and Griesmer 1989) around which an idealised image of that middle class could be shared by very different actors, trying to distance themselves from both socialism and post-socialism. The middle-class character of VNP does not refer so much to the existence of a homogeneous social group defined by income or consumer statistical indexes, but to a mix of ethical and aesthetic discourses, ideologies, lived experiences and ways of imagining the “good life” (Crăciun and Lipan 2020). The political mobilisation around environmental issues played a major role in the creation of VNP.

In 2013–2014, environmental protests became the main public political events in Romania—mostly as a reaction to a Canadian cyanide-based mining operation in a picturesque mountain area. The mining exploitation never really kicked off but, in that charged atmosphere, the “Văcărești Delta” became relevant for a much larger audience, as wild nature emerging out of state-made, socialist historical debris. Both the resilience and fragility of the Văcărești natural landscape struck a cord with a middle class still in crisis and with its anti-statist and anti-socialist beliefs. Nature was true and strong but it needed protection. And what better, more enlightened guardians were there than the representatives of the battered local market economy and the fragile NGO-based civil society?¹⁵

In the documents used for the establishment of the Văcărești Pit as a nature park, the area has been presented as having no natural habitats, “no reference points from the past”, being made up of recent flora and fauna communities (Stoican et al. 2013:31). The ratio between native and alien plants in the park is 4:1, with at least one of the native plants (*Wolffia arrhiza*; spotless watermeal) on the national endangered list. The ratio covers some more complicated relations, as some of the natives are only relatively so, as they seem to have escaped or been thrown away from the gardens around the area,¹⁶ together with some unexpected forest species (*Corydalis solida*; solid-rooted fumewort) (Anastasiu et al. 2017:75, 77). The same problems arise for fauna, when it comes to

codifying natives and aliens, as many animals have arrived, in the last thirty years, on shorter or longer trajectories, mediated by various socialist and postsocialist political and economic structures.¹⁷

Almost a year after the Văcărești Park Association shaped Văcărești as a natural park and obtained (together with the Bucharest Municipality) the right of administration for ten years, nature started to reveal some of its ambiguities. The efforts to fend off fishermen-poachers, “arsonists” that were setting fire to the vegetation, the Roma families living in the middle and on the borders of the area, near the shopping mall, were eventually successful, but the effects were less straightforward than expected.

The nature, which was supposedly self-regulating, began to grow in strange and apparently self-defeating ways. The reeds that were no longer burnt threatened to cover the entire water surface and had to be cut down during costly interventions. Another solution could have been to introduce fish that would eat the reed saplings, but any deliberate introduction of new animals went against the regulations for natural parks.

New animals were still coming in and testing the borders and definitions of wilderness. Former pets, like the Florida turtles, competed for food, transmitted diseases, and endangered the smaller local ones—so the rangers tried to evict them from the Park. In the summer and autumn of 2019, *Ambrosia artemisiifolia* (ragweed), an invasive drought and heat resistant weed, gave rise to a wave of allergies all over Bucharest, as abandoned urban places and construction sites became overgrown with it. VNP administrators had to intervene again and clear away the ragweed growing inside Văcărești.¹⁸

“It Was Beautiful, Eventually!” Living and Seeing the Difference

Semantic and material inversions start to emerge everywhere as soon as you set foot into the wall-enclosed park: in and out, nature and ruins, infrastructure and nature, leisure and nature park, industrial socialist debris and self-regulating but guarded nature; middle-class nature lovers and absent state; middle-class nature lovers and uncivilised trespassers; towering structures (hotels, blocks of flats, smokestacks, and watchtowers) and low marshlands; aesthetic bliss and despicable rubble.

Văcărești functions like a tensioned palimpsest, a set of inversions that disrupts any attempts to organise it according to pre-existing aesthetic, cultural, and political expectations by unsettling “the association between landscape and specific vantage points” (Gandy 2016:436).

As I wandered through the Park, alone, with friends, organised groups, students and children, I would often observe and talk to people, whether they came in small groups or part of larger educational trips, climbing up and down, walking around for some time, only to finally remark—as they climbed out and looked back, or as they went up in one of the high wooden observation points: “It was beautiful, eventually” (*A fost frumos, pînă la urmă*).

The appeal (or lack thereof) of the Văcărești Pit has to do with the ever promised and ever delayed completeness of understanding, and the many little epiphanies that come out of the complicated crisscrossing and reversals of wildness and wasteland. It is always beautiful “eventually”, when you are about to go in or come out, as it enables the consumption of differences between urban landscapes, wastelands and wild nature, of ruin-mediated intimate connections between socialist, postsocialist and neoliberal times. It is always a mediated, delayed experience.

After the eviction of the family living in the middle of the park and, later on, of a couple of families that lived in cardboard houses between the park and the shopping mall, only one (large) family remained, living right behind the western wall. The first time I tried to talk to them, I had to turn back because of a large pack of aggressive, stray dogs. After some failed attempts, I visited and interviewed them in the summer and autumn of 2017 and in 2018. The big wall of the Park was visible not far away, but it was hard to say, at first, if you were inside or out of the nature protected area, as trees blocked the view to the highway.

Victor,¹⁹ the owner of the house, an old but muscular and jocular man, had been relocated, as a kid, along with his family, in 1986, from the neighbourhood on the site of which the lake was built. He was able to obtain a title deed for the land in 1994, but he was not allowed to build any permanent lodging. He did it nevertheless in the 2000s, fought in court against an eviction and demolition order, and eventually won. The house is not connected to the public water supply, and electricity is provided by solar and gasoline powered generators. The



Figure 3: The Văcărești park, 2017 (photo by Mihai Petre; reproduced here with permission) [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

family—his wife, children and grandchildren—is inside and part of the city, as they pay taxes and garbage fees and some of its members have jobs as taxi drivers and flower sellers. It is also outside it, as nobody collects the garbage, they do not show up on any municipal map, and they are threatened with eviction from time to time. They had to negotiate the existence of a road linking them with the motorway—first with some local construction crews, working on the building site of two new blocks of flats, only to later receive the official papers from the local municipal council.

Nonetheless, the whole family was quite happy living in a house “on the ground” (as opposed to a block of flats) and, even more, “in the middle of nature”; especially as they are geographically close to the city centre (Unirii Square, one of Bucharest’s main commercial centres, is only two metro stops away). Similar fauna and flora grow outside as well as inside the walled Park, but there are no swamps and ponds here. On the thin layer of dirt and soil which covers the rubble of the demolished socialist project, plants and small trees grow everywhere.

Although very close—a few hundred metres from the house—VNP seems distant, invisible, and dangerous. The nature that surrounds the house and the adjoining nature from the park look identical—the same trees and bushes, interspersed with concrete blocks and debris, but the tall wall that marks the park’s border hides an alien wilderness. For Victor and his family (children and nephews), the park is the place from where new kinds of disease-carrying mosquitoes,²⁰ rats, dogs, foxes, and fantastic stray dog-fox hybrids come out. Park nature is dangerous, and it lacks both beauty and usefulness. It is not a place one would go to with their children.

The house owner expressed his pride about the socialist Văcărești Lake as an infrastructural feat, a large leisure area for all the nearby neighbourhoods even if it was never completed. His animosity was directed at the new nature protected area that appeared to him totally cut out from the life of the older neighbourhoods. The inexistent lake, built on the demolished houses of his childhood, was remembered more fondly than the new opaque nature that replaced the socialist one.

As it appears, Văcărești wild nature is either fully displayed in mesmerising *National Geographic*-like high definition photos targeting urban middle classes, or dangerous, disorderly, invisible and totally separated from the people living on its edges. The fracture between its photographed visibility and the invisibility of the park and its nature on the ground has been a problem for the park administrators too. The solution they opted for, after the moment of crisis that followed the creation of the park, was to build observation points to integrate different ways of seeing the park.

An inbuilt visibility has been constructed into VNP; it contains a diversity of viewing points. Small wooden panels with slits were built around the water part of the Park, where visitors can hide and watch. The “wild nature” is supposed to be consumed by knowledgeable visitors from predefined vantage points that make them invisible to the wild birds, turtles, snakes, otters and foxes. Wildlife thus reveals itself only to the informed and patient eye. In addition to these small

camouflage constructions, the visitors can climb larger vertical wooden structures offering panoramic views of the Park but also of the difference between the “wild nature” and the urban one. Even if this kind of visibility was created as different from the visibility made possible by the failed socialist lake, the Park functions only if it integrates both. The juxtaposition of national park-like new wooden structures and socialist massive concrete leftovers constitutes the Park as a space of aesthetic delight, consumption of urban-wilderness oppositions, and fantastic totalising desires.

As you walk in the park, the city remains both visible and audible. Its smells mingle intimately with the wild nature. What is consumed is not so much the nature as such but the ways in which it opposes, frames and is framed by the city: the multiple inversions. Park nature is maintained atemporal only through sophisticated surveillance techniques and punctual technological-panoptic interventions in the spatial organisation of people, animals, and plants. Nevertheless, its political and aesthetic appeal has everything to do with its repressed wasteland character that re-emerges constantly and disrupts the attempts to keep figure and ground apart.

Conclusions

In July 1871, in Bucharest, during the construction of a bridge, a working team discovered a ferruginous spring not far from the Văcărești monastery. Apparently, it had medicinal properties. An improvised leisure area and spa emerged rather quickly. In 1873, the number of tourists was large enough to have a special omnibus line put in place. In 1880, the spring disappeared underground as the riverbed was channelled and regularised, and Văcărești lost, for the moment, all its touristic charm to return to the state of urban wasteland (Bacalbașa 2014:136). All these happened far away but almost in the same time with Paris’ insurgent fires and subsequent *terrains vagues*.

Văcărești empty lake provides a privileged entry point into re-thinking the changing and mobile political-historical negotiations of the borders between nature and society, through failed infrastructure, ruins and interstitial wastelands. It had functioned historically as a shifting threshold between various projects, connecting and cutting spaces and lives around the productive emptiness of the lake. Ruins index an always already visible material infrastructural inversion and frame the wild nature that becomes, in its turn, part of a movement of inversion as its hidden, inner workings depend on the active presence of ruins and failed development projects.

Each new modernisation project imposed a different regime of truth on it, framing the previous ones as historical errors and ruins: socialist hydrological project versus 18th century monastery and 19th century prison, tanneries and garbage dumps; postsocialist free market and land speculative fever versus socialist debris; and, finally, nature reserve, self-sustaining but scientifically managed, negating both the socialist failures and the postsocialist chaos. Nature, ruins and society intermingled and clashed again in the 2010s as a new political project invested the space with newfound ethics and images of middle-class good life.

As some kind of wild nature was deemed to replace both the failed development of socialism and the wild practices of postsocialism, VNP was created as a middle-class heterotopia, a place of education, reflection, civic engagement, but also exclusionary moral aspirations and surveillance, based on the visual consumption of nature. Planned as a fragment of a desired future national development—that would have integrated socialist Bucharest into the larger Danube-Black Sea area—in the last couple of years Văcărești has become the normalised and naturalised background against which parts of the middle class can legitimise its politics through morality and aesthetics (Winegar 2016).

Văcărești has always been a productive absence, signifying fracture, missing social and physical material, but also the promise of fulfilment—real and/or fantastic. During socialist times the pit was levelled and a reservoir built above the ground in an effort to achieve spectacular modernisation. After 1990 it became again a gap, a topos concentrating fears, hopes and ways of imagining new ways of life, as well as a way of coping with postsocialist loss. As a protected nature area, VNP became a palimpsest of historic presences and ruins, but also of imagined futures and individual and collective desires. The pit is now filled, but also fractured and framed, with middle-class politics, wild nature, and socialist infrastructure ruins. By bringing nature in, as the only legitimate inhabitant of the pit, Văcărești became even more a place of ruins, figure-ground reversals, and infrastructural and ecological inversions.

VNP is now part of a group of kindred western urban nature protected areas, in London, Berlin or Vienna, that mirror the ethical self-image of local middle classes. Nevertheless, Văcărești's nature is never safe, ever shifting, and dependent on the continuous recreation of differences. VNP is also, even when working as a topos for the local bourgeoisie ethical and historic identity management, a distant, peripheral cousin of the wild fires, forests, and fantastic grounds of the last *terrains vagues* of revolutionary Paris.

The “fantasy of the [urban] ground” that Huysmans encountered in post-revolutionary Paris has been constantly re-assembled in the ruinous spaces of European nature, science and society. The ruderal thinking that emerged with Huysmans, Vallot, Jovet, Sukkop, Stoetzer and others, allows us to see, with the corner of our eyes, how the resilience of the Văcărești wasteland “introduces possibilities for cultural and scientific autonomy that invert ... bourgeois conceptions of nature” (Gandy 2013:1311). Inside the infrastructural-ecological inversions, as both wasteland and wildness, the Văcărești Pit/VNP works not only by thematising and disturbing conceptions of nature and society, but also by creating a larger and, admittedly, ambiguous, space of multispecies life and hope.²¹

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Notes

¹ For the ways in which modernity/development can take the form of a series of ever-growing failing projects, see Ssorin-Chaikov (2003).

² I want to thank Liviu Chelcea for drawing my attention to the differences and dynamics going on between the “infrastructural” and “ecological” inversions.

³ The wild nature persisted until 1898 when it was cut down as the construction of Gare d’Orsay started.

⁴ This wasteland is, in a way, a wildness but not a literal, natural wildness. It is more, as Edward Casey (1996:35) says in another context, an “ontological wildness”, as it retains “the radically amorphous and unaccounted for, something that is not so much immune to culture as alien to it in its very midst, disparate from it from within”.

⁵ Interview with engineer Abduraim Sefcati, July 2019.

⁶ Interview with Emil Hagi, the former superintendent of Văcărești Lake engineering project, September 2020.

⁷ Interview with Radu (pseudonym), former inhabitant of the demolished Văcărești neighbourhood, August 2018.

⁸ Institute Project Bucharest (IPB), a technical administrative body for the new, socialist projects of systematisation, was founded in 1953. Fresh university graduates with no connections with the interwar bourgeois world of urban expertise were actively sought. Abduraim Sefcati, an offspring of a poor Tatar family from southeastern Romania, was quickly hired and soon became the head of the Hydrologic Engineering Department. When I met him, in 2019, he was an old but very active man, who reminisced vividly the plans and transformations deployed in the socialist and postsocialist city, his life still closely intertwined with Bucharest’s waters. IPB brought together technical and administrative expertise for the realisation of large expansions and infrastructural improvements in Bucharest. The Institute was privatised in 2007, which unfortunately made its archives unavailable.

⁹ Yesterday’s commodities, styles and buildings—the “wish images” of their time—can become “dialectical images” thus opening the analytical mirage of a flash-moment of historical truth obtained by gazing, walking, and thinking through ruins (Benjamin 1999).

¹⁰ I have put together this short postsocialist history of Văcărești from interviews with former inhabitants of the demolished area, the present-day neighbourhoods and members of the Văcărești Nature Park Association, and double-checked it, when possible, with newspaper articles and archive material.

¹¹ Interview with Victor (pseudonym), living near the eastern border of the park, August 2017.

¹² Interview with Cristi Lascu, September 2018.

¹³ “The coolest tourist site of all Bucharest, more important even than the House of the People—Interview with the founder of VNP”, Ziare.com, 30 June 2014.

¹⁴ Gheorghe Enache and his family moved in the Văcărești Pit in 2008. A couple of years after, his brother-in-law moved in an adobe hut nearby. In 2013, a fire killed Florina, Gheorghe’s niece, and they were evacuated. They returned next year only to be evacuated in the spring of 2017 after the area was declared natural park (Ciorniciuc 2017). Their eviction was framed as part of a larger ethical middle class project, as the children were helped to go to school and one of them was temporarily employed by VNP. A documentary movie about that family (*Acasă; My Home*), was screened in the park in September 2020.

¹⁵ The middle-class meta-political stance towards nature has been legitimised internationally in Văcărești. In 2017, Charles, the Prince of Wales, came to Văcărești and planted a tree. The Dutch and American ambassadors came to visit too. A constant stream of foreign officials has climbed down into the Văcărești Pit since its transformation into a nature protected area.

¹⁶ As one of the rangers (Vlad Cioflec) said, during a long walk through the park, in August 2019, “[s]pecies arrived here thrown away by people emptying their gardens”.

¹⁷ Turtles and other small pets were either released in Văcărești or escaped from the pet shop at the mall. Even if there is a thriving fauna, from mammals to insects, birds are the most visible and spectacular animals in the park, that has become an important stop on migratory routes (interview with Dan Bărbulescu, director of VNP administration, July 2019).

¹⁸ In 2018, a law was passed against *Ambrosia artemisiifolia* (Law 62/2018).

¹⁹ Not the real name.

²⁰ In the period I was talking to members of this family, there were reports in Bucharest of an “invasion” of the Asian Tiger mosquito (*Aedes albopictus*)—carrier of the Dengue fever virus—that survived and reproduced locally due to longer hot seasons.

²¹ For multispecies worlds, the solidarities, dangers, and biocultural hopes they engender, see Kirksey et al. (2013).

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