<RRF>Gkitsa | Chimneys and Electric Wires Conquering the Sky

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ARTICLE

**Chimneys and Electric Wires Conquering the Sky: The Great Transformation of Nature in Socialist Albania**

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When the Iron Curtain fell in 1989, the world discovered a relatively small country in Southeast Europe that had remained supposedly isolated from the rest of the world for nearly half a century. Since then, Albania’s recent history has often been framed through narratives of trauma and oppression, poverty and backwardness. If art histories of the former East have approached it as the “Other of the West,”[[1]](#footnote-1) that aimed, after 1989, to reposition and reclaim its place on the global map of art production, then Albania has been situated on the very margins of known cardinal cultural and geographical centers. As Raino Isto has observed, while art history has begun to recognize the transnational frameworks and exchanges within global socialism—for instance, Yugoslavia’s involvement in the Non-Aligned Movement—“Albania’s own efforts to participate in building a transnational (or at least globally international) socialist culture have received virtually no attention from historians of the arts and visual culture.”[[2]](#footnote-2) It is true that Albania’s staunch commitment to Stalinist ideology meant that artists did not have the conditions or complete freedom to explore the neo-avant-garde movements that flourished elsewhere in the socialist world. However, looking at the country’s industrialization and technological development, as well as the ways in which this was depicted and captured by artists of the time, tells us a more complex story. Similarly, while paintings produced during Socialist Realism have been approached extensively as mere visual materials of propaganda, examining these art histories through the lens of environmental history offers a deeper, more nuanced understanding of Albania’s socialist past—one that goes beyond conventional narratives of political isolation or cultural stagnation.

This article contributes to recent and ongoing debates in art history that have sought to position and better understand Albania’s Socialist Realism (1961–85) within the broader context of global socialisms and their respective visual cultures. In so doing, the article focuses on the ways in which Albanian painters depicted and engaged with the intense transformation of nature under state socialism. Albania’s environmental history—despite involving dramatic interventions that continue to this day to have consequences for both human and nonhuman lives—has largely been overlooked. Perhaps this does not differ much from other parts of the post-socialist world, whose ecological history has been discussed marginally, often reduced to Cold War–era narratives of environmental degradation under socialist regimes in order to proclaim the triumph of neoliberal capitalism.[[3]](#footnote-3) At the same time, conversations on political ecology have been “marginalized in the dominant readings of global 1989 since it did not fit neither the narrative of neoliberalist democracy nor that of the post-socialist condition.”[[4]](#footnote-4) However, recognizing the socialist global entanglements becomes even more essential in the time of the Anthropocene, a geological and ontological time that demands for us to recognize that “humans are profoundly changing the ecology of the planet, and that they are doing so on a global scale.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Approaching socialist landscapes, both natural and cultural, beyond their temporal or spatial restrictions is vital, both for the present and for the present that is yet to come.[[6]](#footnote-6) Since “anthropogenic landscapes are also haunted by imagined futures,”[[7]](#footnote-7) engaging critically with the more-than-human others of socialist modernity can offer critical realizations about all that is being lost with the present dreamworlds of progress.

The rapid transformations taking place in Albania during state socialism, such as the development of heavy industry, the damming of rivers, and the conversion of swamps and forests into farmland, were part of a global socialist trend. As Elidor Mëhilli argues, the “twentieth-century state-driven modernity projects mirrored, engaged, copied, and became entangled with one another.”[[8]](#footnote-8) In Albania, after the country’s break with Yugoslavia in 1948, the Soviet Union not only became a model to be followed but also played a key role in supporting financially, as well as with scientific expertise and knowledge, Albania’s early industrialization efforts during the 1950s. Adopting the model of five-year plans, Albania sought to rapidly industrialize, collectivize agriculture, and modernize its infrastructure. The first two five-year plans (1951–1955 and 1956–1960) relied heavily on Soviet support and prioritized agrarian reforms that would industrialize agriculture and the energy sector, predominantly through the construction of hydropower plants, since electricity was necessary to support industrial growth. However, as historian Ylber Marku has observed, more substantial differences came to the fore when “the Soviets, with their advanced planning capacities, their expertise, and their technological achievements, exposed all the limits of the Albanian economy.”[[9]](#footnote-9) From Moscow’s point of view, Albania did not have the capacity to build heavy industry, and the only way it could exist in the European socialist market would be by focusing on its light industry and exporting agricultural products.[[10]](#footnote-10) Stalin’s death in 1953 and the sociopolitical reformations in the Soviet Union under Nikita S. Khrushchev’s leadership meant that Albania could no longer identify ideologically with the Soviet Union.

China’s financial and technical aid was instrumental in the implementation of the Fourth and Fifth Five-Year Plans (1966–70 and 1971–75), which saw the development of large industrial complexes and a focus on extracting natural resources—mainly chrome, copper, and iron-nickel—that were used to support heavy industry. The political and industrial ties with China were fundamental not only for the country’s economy but also for its artistic and cultural life. Modeled after China’s own Cultural Revolution, Albania’s radical socialist reforms between 1966 and 1969 sought to eradicate feudal and bourgeois elements while fostering a purer Marxist-Leninist ideology. This period witnessed a drastic transformation of Albanian society, targeting religion, intellectualism, and anything perceived as counter to the state’s ideology. However, Mao Zedong’s death and China’s turn toward market-oriented reforms under Deng Xiaoping ended the period of direct Chinese influence on Albania. Remaining committed to a hardline interpretation of Marxist-Leninism, Albania became isolated only after 1978, pursuing a policy of self-reliance.

These international alliances, particularly with China, significantly shaped the development of Socialist Realism in Albania. As Isto shows, while Albania’s split with the Soviet Union raised questions about tradition and innovation, as well as the dilemma of whether Albania needed to follow the same Socialist Realism that was producing the Soviet experience, the relationship with China encouraged new explorations of form and method within Socialist Realism.[[11]](#footnote-11) As such, Socialist Realism in Albania brings to the fore ongoing tensions concerning the artist’s role in capturing, witnessing, and understanding the rapid transformations that were occurring in the Albanian landscape and society and in depicting this reality in visual forms. As Albanian art historian Ermir Hoxha observes, while artists in the 1950s had depicted volunteers working the land and the novelty of tractors in farming fields, by the 1960s, their work reflected a landscape that had undergone complete transformation;[[12]](#footnote-12) this transformation was the very material manifestation of socialist modernity and its aspired-to future.

Since it would be impossible to review the vast number of visual cultures of Socialist Realism, this article focuses on three interconnected activities that appear to have been prominent in producing Albania’s anthropogenic landscapes: the introduction of hydroelectric power through damming rivers, collective farming and agricultural transformation, and the construction of large industrial complexes and urbanization. In analyzing the processes through which these activities transformed nature, the article puts forward two interrelated arguments: First, it shows how nature was instrumentalized as a means of materializing socialist ideology within the Albanian landscape. Second, it demonstrates that, despite Western narratives of Albania’s backwardness or isolation, the country’s environmental transformation represented the peak socialist utopia, manifesting the entangled relationship of modernity and the Anthropocene.

The role of Socialist Realist art in witnessing and re-presenting these ecological transformations requires further examination, especially when it comes to positioning an underrepresented Albanian socialist art within the “still largely unwritten global environmental art histories.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Even within the ideological constrains of a system that controlled every aspect of lived reality, and despite a lack of the neo-avant-garde movements that flourished in other parts of the socialist world, the diversity of artistic expression in Albanian Socialist Realism reveals similar artistic engagement with the changes that were taking place in the natural environment. Sometimes nature appears tamed, molded, and sculpted by human interventions—its rivers dammed, mountains carved, and forests cleared to serve the big projects of industrialization. This is perhaps the predominant way that nature has been depicted in visual cultures, a perspective that, as T. J. Demos observes, reinforces the perception of human mastery and domination over the planet. Demos highlights that this perspective involves a dual colonization of both nature and its visual representation.[[14]](#footnote-14) However, in other paintings analyzed in this article, nature is depicted in harmony with modern infrastructure rather than subordinated to it. In both cases, art’s role deserves further attention because it does not merely document human achievements in promoting the Party’s propaganda. As this article shows, the paintings also offer a reading of nature as an entity with its own agency—shaping, resisting, or adapting to transformations of the landscape. By bringing this aspect into focus, my analysis aims to provide a more nuanced and complex reading of Socialist Realist art, shifting attention not only to how humans were controlled and mobilized in the grand modernization projects but also to how nature itself has been overlooked or forgotten in conventional analyses of these paintings. In doing so, this article calls for a reassessment of how socialist landscapes were visually constructed, emphasizing nature as an active rather than a passive backdrop for Albania’s socialist utopia.

**“Reaching the Heights of Light”: Taming Rivers and Sculpting Mountains**

Despite ongoing debate regarding the purpose and usefulness of the term *Anthropocene*, researchers agree that human activity on Earth drastically increased after World War II, triggering what has been termed the *Great Acceleration*. This period “jump-started the Anthropocene,” which has been shaped by “dam building, city growth, biodiversity loss, ocean acidification, the accumulation of plastic debris, and so on.”[[15]](#footnote-15) The Anthropocene, therefore, is inextricably linked to the growing demand for energy that has fueled and sustained such intense activity. As historian Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, the timescale of the Anthropocene overlaps with that of modernity, where the distinct boundaries between natural and human histories begin to dissolve.[[16]](#footnote-16) It is crucial to recognize, however, that while the Anthropocene may be global, as Chakrabarty suggests, its scale and impact have varied across different regions. For instance, Albania’s path to modernization differed from that of other socialist countries in several crucial ways. Unlike the Soviet Union, whose modernization efforts were often intertwined with imperial expansions to satellite states, Albania’s modernity unfolded within a confined national space, without colonial extensions. Additionally, while other socialist states pursued large-scale infrastructural projects, many of which had catastrophic consequences (for instance, nuclear power plants or massive river diversions), Albania’s scarce resources did not allow for such huge interventions. At the same time, modernization in Albania was not a smooth and linear process. The country’s shifting political alliances and dependance on external aid meant that economic planning depended on ideological and geopolitical considerations. However, as Mëhilli points out, even though Albania was “worlds apart in terms of any imaginable industrial indicator” from countries such as the Soviet Union or East Germany, making a strict comparison between the contexts impossible, the fact that still “they came together and attempted to speak in the same terms” was itself a defining practice of socialism.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The transformations of the more-than-human world show notable similarities. Albania’s modernization was structured around five-year plans, which provided a centralized framework for industrialization, agriculture, and energy production. Furthermore, modernization efforts across socialist states—including Albania—were driven by a common understanding of nature as an inexhaustible resource. Rivers were tamed, mountains reshaped to produce hydroelectric power, and this newly harnessed energy became symbolic of progress that propelled the path toward socialist modernization.

In Albania, landscape paintings of the 1960s are often dominated by images of electric pylons being installed in the mountainous terrain of northern regions. Ismail Lulani’s *At Deja’s Ford* (*Në Vaun i Dejës*),from 1969, depicts the large-scale construction of a reservoir accompanying the Mao Zedong Hydropower Plant on the River Drin. The mountains in the background dominate the scene, suggesting that the workers are taming and reshaping the landscape for the benefit of human development. In the foreground, a series of vertical structures—likely turbines or components of a hydroelectric dam—rise up, sharpening the contrast with the organic forms of the surrounding mountains. Workers and machinery are placed together at the center of the composition, emphasizing the immense scale of the labor involved in such projects. Trucks, construction materials, and scaffolding are scattered across the middle ground, further showcasing the monumental task of building infrastructure.

Lulani’s painting is executed in a semirealistic style, drawing from the principles of Socialist Realism. His brushstrokes, with earthy colors dominated by browns, grays, and greens, are expressive, particularly in the depiction of mountains and sky, giving the scene a somewhat dynamic, almost turbulent quality, as if the landscape were actively being transformed. This turbulence highlights an underlying tension in how the natural landscape is depicted: not merely as a backdrop for human endeavor, but as something resistant, requiring intervention to be reshaped. The very act of painting these landscapes becomes a reflection of the ideological struggle over what modernization should look like. Landscape here is not neutral; rather, it is a contested site where human ambition meets the unpredictability of nature.

Hydroelectric power plants were central to the communist regime’s vision of transforming Albania into a modern, industrially advanced society. More importantly, they served as vital sources of energy to support the country’s larger industrial projects. The development of hydropower was closely linked to Albania’s process of industrialization and its relationships with foreign allies. The first large hydropower plant, completed in 1952 and named after Lenin to mark the friendship with the Soviets, aimed to electrify the capital, Tirana. In 1957, the Karl Marx Hydropower Plant was built, with the construction of a dam on the Mat River, followed by the Joseph Stalin Hydropower Plant in Bistrica in 1960. Notably, the Light of the Party (Drita e Partisë) Hydropower Plant, completed in 1978, was built specifically to support the operations of the metallurgical complex in Elbasan, the largest industrial site in Albania. The feverish construction of hydropower plants across Albania—from south to north—was a strategic effort to fully industrialize the country.

Electricity pylons, dams, and industrial infrastructure become visual symbols of the human’s ability to tame and harness nature. In numerous visual depictions, electric pylons appear to grow almost naturally from the ground, in complete harmony with the mountains and the trees in the background. However, this visual harmony conceals an inherent contradiction. While Socialist Realism demanded that nature and industry be shown in unity, the very process of electrification fragmented and reordered the landscape. These paintings do not simply document the achievements of socialist progress, they also actively construct a vision where nature in transformed into a controllable resource, reinforcing the ideology that modernization is a necessity. For instance, in Hasan Hola’s *Landscape with Electric Pylons* (*Peizazh me Shtylla Tensioni*),it feels like the electric pylon in the front of the landscape is presented with much more admiration than the big mountains in the background. It is as if the human’s achievement is competing and comparing with nature’s grandeur. This shift in perspective raises an important question: what does it mean to depict nature within the framework of Socialist Realism?

If realism in socialist art is meant to affirm the material conditions of progress, then images of industrialized landscapes in art become a “vehicle of *aesthesis*” that is “central to thinking with and feeling through the Anthropocene,” [[18]](#footnote-18) since they reveal the complex “interconnections and intra-actions”[[19]](#footnote-19) that shape human and environmental entanglements. Here, iconic is also Shaban Hysa’s painting *Beyond* (*Më Tej*) from 1969. This painting shows a group of workers as they construct and install electricity pylons. In the foreground, two central figures dominate the composition: a man pointing forward, guiding or directing the work, and a woman holding a map or blueprint. They both stand close to towering pylons and machinery that contrasts to the tall mountains in the background, a common landscape that is present in paintings depicting the process of electrification. The map bears interesting connotations, symbolizing a deliberate reshaping of the landscape through human planning and intervention. However, how much of this vision was an ideological projection rather than an accurate depiction of Albania’s modernization?

<Set figure 1 after the previous paragraph. Preferred size: MEDIUM.>; Shaban Hysa. Beyond (Më tej), 1969. Oil on canvas, 194.5 x 253cm. © National Gallery of Arts (Galeria Kombëtare e Arteve. Tirana, Albania. National Gallery of Arts (Galeria Kombëtare e Arteve).

Thinking around this question inevitably requires us to consider the diversity of approaches and styles of Socialist Realist representation. Most notably, Petro Kokushta’s painting *Reaching the Heights of Light* (*Në Lartësitë e Dritës*), from 1981, portrays two young men working high on an electrical pylon, likely representing electricians or line workers responsible for maintaining or constructing power lines. The dramatic setting places the workers above a vast landscape of mountains and rivers, with the vibrant blue sky and expansive view emphasizing both the height and the dangers of their work, as well as their sense of achievement. Here, labor itself is elevated, quite literally, to a heroic act, suggesting that the process of modernizing the landscape is just as significant as the act of transformation itself. Perhaps it conveys an uncanny message: that the human-engineered system, along with humanity’s ability to achieve this stage of progress, is as monumental and important as the longstanding mountains and rivers, and that it holds limitless possibilities, much like the vast blue sky in the background. Unlike Hysa’s depiction of the landscape as something that can be precisely measured and rationally designed, in Kokushta’s painting nature becomes an ideal to be reached or overpassed through labor. In both these cases, though, art’s role does not emerge only as a method of *showing*, but rather as a potential for *creating* the ground to facilitate an attitude that is actualized in the society.

<Set figure 2 after the previous paragraph. Preferred size: SMALL.>; Petro Kokushta. At the height of light (Në lartësitë e dritës), 1981. Oil on canvas, 236 x 187 cm. © National Gallery of Arts (Galeria Kombëtare e Arteve. Tirana, Albania. National Gallery of Arts (Galeria Kombëtare e Arteve).

These depictions contain a valuable documentation of the time in which natural resources started to be used and exploited in sustaining human activities. Albania to this day remains heavily reliant on hydropower, a source of energy that is vulnerable to climate crisis. More crucially, the hydropower sector continues to face challenges, such as a lack of transparency, data deficiencies, and ongoing issues of bribery and corruption,[[20]](#footnote-20) that perpetuate issues of environmental injustice. While in the socialist regime energy was seen as a fuel to reach the communist ideal of modernity and progress, a reality that supposedly would benefit the whole of society, in the present state of capitalist progress it prioritizes private interests. This shift in economic ideology raises a deeper question about the legacies of these paintings. Were they merely celebratory images of socialist development, or do they contain underlying tensions regarding the very notion of progress? If the industrial landscape was once seen as a triumph of collectivist ideas, its contemporary condition, marked by environmental degradation and privatization, reveals the fragility of that vision but also the very material ruins of the Anthropocene.

**“Opening New Lands”: The (Trans)Formation of the Albanian Countryside**

In a 1971 article, Albanian art critic Anton Kuqali critiqued how revisionism, particularly during the de-Stalinization period in the Soviet Union, impacted the role of the visual arts.[[21]](#footnote-21) He identified two distinct styles in the depiction of peasants working in farming labor. On the one hand, some artists approached the subject merely as a “theme” through which to explore new forms of style; on the other hand, Kuqali noted artists who depicted peasants as miserable, suffering, and tired figures. To illustrate the latter style, Kuqali compared a painting by Soviet painter Yevsey Moiseyenko, who was titled the People’s Artist of the Soviet Union, showing three men working the land, with Jean-François Millet’s famous work *Man with a Hoe* (1862). Kuqali argued that in both paintings, labor is shown as a form of oppression and as a miserable activity that has stripped off the revolutionary and positive spirit of socialist labor and rendered it similar to that of the workers’ struggles in the capitalist West. Kuqali also noted that, together with the suffering of the workers, nature also appears miserable and sad, with dark colors that portray a “muddy” countryside. Kuqali countered this perspective by emphasizing the heroic role of the peasant worker, asserting that maintaining a positive revolutionary spirit in the depiction of peasants was essential for sustaining the socialist path toward modernity and progress.

This sentiment is vivid in Agime Faja’s painting *War against Drought* (*Luftë kundër Thatësires*), from 1966, which depicts women, men, children, and animals in a linear composition as they carry water for the crops. As Ermir Hoxha observes, despite battling the adversities of nature, the figures remain lively and joyful, embodying resilience and collective spirit.[[22]](#footnote-22) Perhaps this is not surprising, given that the optimism and revolutionary energy depicted in Socialist Realist paintings contrast sharply with the harsh reality of labor, which is often physically grueling, with harsh working conditions. While this may seem unsurprising, I wish to draw attention to another aspect often overlooked in art-historical analysis: the more-than-human entities also present in these works. To fully understand the depiction of peasants and the collective farming activities, one must also consider the natural world being reshaped, transformed, and terraformed during that period. Most notably, nature is treated as another agent that must work together with humans in manifesting, materializing, and further embodying the ideas and ideals of socialism. So it is not just that the human figures need to present a revolutionary spirit, but also that nature must be transformed, no longer wild, unprocessed, or unpredictable. Nature must be cultivated, tamed, and made to facilitate the path to reaching socialist modernity. This realization ultimately leads us to adapt a new “eye” in reading this chapter of art history, paying attention to a “neglected territory that lies between the care of the planet and the historical study of visual art.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

The positivism and the revolutionary spirit were essential in Albania, since most of the infrastructure that was pivotal for industry, such as the construction of railways, roads, plantations, and irrigation systems, was installed by voluntary labor during *aksion*, a campaign during which young men and women were mobilized to work on important national projects. In the early 1970s, the depictions of youth coincide with the appearance of a new generation of artists, among whom was Edi Hila, who at that time was pushing further in explorations of form and color. It is impossible not to consider within this framework the painting *Planting of Trees* (*Mbjellja e Pëmeve*) from 1971. Although initially the painting was praised and understood as being significant for introducing a fresh wave of young artists, it also puzzled critics of that time, who were not able to accept and understand the ecstatic joy that accompanies the youths while they are involved in serious labor. Placing emphasis on the form, critics thought that the painting was not depicting a “realistic” reality.[[24]](#footnote-24) However, it is not just the human figures that seem to overflow with energy—the trees themselves, painted in shades of blue like the sky, appear euphoric, as though they too are engaged in a springtime dance. One could argue that, rather than depicting nature as being subdued by human hands, Hila presents it as an equal participant in the process. Nature is not merely being harnessed, it is alive, vibrant, and seemingly in harmony with human endeavors. Although Hila was punished and sent to a reeducation camp, this painting does not go against the premises of Socialist Realism. Instead, it offers a different understanding and interpretation of the revolutionary spirit.

Hila’s depiction of the relationships between nature and humanity differed significantly from those of his contemporaries. For instance, in Agim Shami’s *Rice Paddies* (*Orizoret,* 1976), we see a group of people laboring in flooded fields, bent over as they plant rice seeds. Here nature is depicted as static and in order, contrary to the dancing trees of Hila’s artwork. In the background, a bright red tractor—a recurring symbol of a modernized countryside—can be seen, highlighting the ongoing industrialization of agricultural production. Other paintings of that time, such as Pleurat Sulo’s *The Opening of New Lands* (*Hapja e Tokave të Reja*), feature soldiers uprooting trees and clearing the land in preparation for its use by farming cooperatives. On many occasions the army is situated together with workers, assisting them in hard and heroic labor. In the background of Sulo’s painting, one can see a bulldozer and completely desolated and destroyed land. Here nature is being forcibly transformed to meet human needs, highlighting the intense interaction between humans and the earth.

*Terraforming* refers to the process of modifying a planet or environment to make it more hospitable to human life. While this concept is often discussed in the context of science fiction or space exploration, it also applies metaphorically to how humans reshape Earth. The process of terraforming Albania’s countryside—flattening hills, redirecting rivers, and constructing infrastructure—was not just a physical transformation but also an ideological one. For instance, in a photo album published in 1964 on twenty years of progress from the country’s liberation, photography becomes a means to document and praise industrial development, portraying it as a necessary step toward a utopian future. From electric pylons situated amidst vast rural landscapes, cranes in half-built dwellings, and drilling rigs to extract minerals whose sound has replaced “the sound of partisan rifles,” [[25]](#footnote-25) to the glorification of the different amounts of cement produced to build the new infrastructure and to terrace mountain slopes and hills that have been tamed and turned into agricultural land, the terraformed landscapes become a synonym for modernity and progress. What stands out from this photo album—which is also published in French, ironically titled *Blooming Albania*—is a visual imaginary that is not just for Albanians themselves but also intended to showcase an industry that competes with the West. It shows a photograph of the town of Maliq with the caption “Our Party changed nature and brought to the marsh life.” The life referred to here is a sugar refinery plant that was built in that area and that fundamentally transformed not only nature but also the very life of the peasant communities, turning them into a new working class. As Artan Hoxha writes, in his detailed study of how Maliq was turned from a swamp into an industrial zone, while “water and the thick blankets of reeds and groves, floods, and malaria symbolized the barren land and the weak and sick society of the past era,” the development of the sugar refinery “represented socialism, the modern, and the fulfilment of utopian development.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Vasil Talo’s *The Opening of the Terraces* (1966) depicts a vibrant, sunlit rural landscape with workers cultivating the land on terraces overlooking the coast. Their agricultural labor is harmonized with nature, emphasizing both the connection between the people and the land and the people’s power to work the terrain and make it more productive. Unlike earlier paintings that merely admired nature, the landscapes of the 1960s and 1970s approach nature as a material resource that is subject to socialist ideology. Here, nature is not just a passive recipient of change but a vital element in marching toward socialist modernity. It could be argued that what Boris Groys writes about Socialist Realism in the Stalinist context, that it “is oriented toward that which has not yet come into being but, which should be created,”[[27]](#footnote-27) is also accurate for Albanian Socialist Realism. The *real* reality that was depicted in this case was an intense transformation that was *taking place* in order to reach the new *real* that was yet to come.

Thus, an inherited conflict and tension between the actual/real and the symbolic/ideological finds resonance on the surface of Socialist Realist paintings. However, I would argue that, while the paintings analyzed here served as ideological tools, they also, inadvertently, document the profound environmental transformations of the time. Regardless of whether these paintings offer accurate depictions of socialist industrialization or serve as ideological constructs, they nonetheless become crucial visual records of the collective and cultural imaginary that was imposed over nature at that specific time and place. Although, as Timothy Clark observes, the Anthropocene “resists representation at the kinds of scale on which most thinking, culture, art and politics operate,”[[28]](#footnote-28) the significance of these paintings lies precisely in their ability to enact art’s representational power not only to illustrate material transformations but to reveal the ways in which socialist societies conceptualized and negotiated their relationship with the environment. Socialist Realist paintings in Albania, through their varied depictions of industrialized landscapes, do not simply celebrate human mastery over nature; they offer insight into how these transformations were envisioned, legitimized, and emotionally mediated. At the same time, exactly because the Anthropocene involves “profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to,”[[29]](#footnote-29) examining Albania within this transnational socialist Anthropocene allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how industrialization, modernization, and environmental transformation were imagined within socialist modernities.

**“The Chimneys Took Over the Sky”: Under the Shade of the Industrial Giants**

Industrialization in Albania progressed together with urbanization. In many cases, new towns were constructed from scratch to accommodate factory workers. Similarly to how industrialization took place across the country as a whole, urban centers were developed in a way that mirrored the planned, centralized model of economic expansions. This contrasts sharply with the post-socialist reality, in which rural peripheries have declined while economic and political focus has concentrated on Tirana, the capital. Yet socialist urbanization was not simply about actual economic expansion, but also about forging an ideological balance between the rural and the urban, creating a vision of modernity in which industrial and agricultural landscapes were mutually reinforcing. Urban centers, although distinct in their human geographies, since the movement of their population was strictly controlled, appear with the rural in Albanian Socialist Realism as co-supporting and working together toward a socialist modernity. For instance, Vilson Halimi’s painting with the characteristic title *On the Frontline Everywhere* (*Kudo Jemi Në Ballë*, 1976) depicts a family standing against a backdrop of rolling hills and farmland. Although their clothes suggest that they are from the city, they “naturally” blend in with rural life. The vast landscape in the background opens up to show a well-organized countryside with hints of technological progress and a helicopter in the sky, a new innovation after the tractor, blending tradition, which is depicted in the form of a nuclear family, with progress, which is depicted in the technological developments. This juxtaposition of human figures, pastoral landscapes, and mechanized progress presents an image of coexistence rather than domination. Unlike other representations where nature is strictly tamed or overpowered, here nature remains a structured yet harmonious element in the socialist vision.

<Set figure 3 after the previous paragraph. Preferred size: MEDIUM.>; Vilson Halimi. On the frontline everywhere (Kudo jemi në ballë), 1976. Oil on canvas, 145 x 200 cm. © National Gallery of Arts (Galeria Kombëtare e Arteve. Tirana, Albania. National Gallery of Arts (Galeria Kombëtare e Arteve).

In Halimi’s painting, a minor detail is also interesting: the contrast between a small red banner at the entry of the village and a memorial monument—a lapidar—on the other side of the painting. In an essay examining the material heritage of lapidars in Albania, Matthias Bickert makes a distinction between “cultural landscapes” that are defined by human activity and “natural landscapes” that have escaped any human intervention and cultural influence, observing about the Albanian socialist landscape that while terraces were “a typical *element of daily usage*,” “lapidars were intended as *static monuments*” for making an ideology distinct and visible.[[30]](#footnote-30) This distinction between nature and culture in Halimi’s painting becomes a recognition that nature is not wholly conquered but remains present in varying degrees of transformation, complicating the idea that nature was always seen as something to be fully subdued.

While terraces, drilling rigs, and cranes dominated rural landscapes, industrial landscapes were equally significant. They became not only spaces of daily life but also ideological symbols of socialist modernity at its peak. Albania’s industrial revolution was often framed as a “second liberation,” symbolically equal to the victory of the partisans in World War II. However, in this context, the heroic partisans were replaced by new heroes—workers operating factories and battling the hardships of nature. Characteristic of such paintings are, for instance, Vladimir Jani’s *Industrial Landscape* (*Peizazh Industrial*, 1966), Hiqmet Agolli’s characteristically titled *The Chimneys Took Over the Sky* (*Oxhaqet Pushtuan Qiellin*, 1976), and Lumturi Blloshmi’s *At the Industrial Plant* (*Në Kompleksin Industrial,* 1974). While each painting differs in style, they all share a common depiction of landscapes dominated by chimneys and factories. In these artworks, nature has all but disappeared, replaced by towering smokestacks releasing dense gray clouds into the sky. The blending of smoke with the clouds symbolizes the overwhelming presence of industry, making the machinery and factories seem like the new “natural” surroundings of this modern, transformed life.

Albania’s industrialization reached its peak with the metallurgical complex in Elbasan. Known as the “Steel of the Party,” it was the largest industrial site and the most ambitious project in socialist Albania. Built in the 1970s with significant financial and technical assistance from China, the complex was designed to produce steel and other metals essential for Albania’s heavy industry. Its construction marked a significant moment in the country’s industrial history, in that it transformed the town of Elbasan into a major industrial hub, creating jobs and reshaping the local economy and landscape. In paintings marking the construction of the metallurgical complex, such as *The Giant of Metallurgy* (*Gjigandi i Metalurgjisë*, 1974), which features workers once again holding a map or blueprint, or Çlirim Ceka’s *The Steel Breaks the Blockade* (*Çeliku Çan Bllokaden*, 1979), we witness an almost futuristic setting that barely resembles Earth. In these paintings, factories appear as organic extensions of the terrain, as if the socialist future had already materialized and merged with nature, or indeed, replaced it altogether. This differs greatly from earlier industrial landscapes, where smokestacks had loomed over the land as foreign, imposing structures. In this new environment, the machines have become “natural” structures and features that merge with the ground and expand in the background of the paintings. While the workers appear as strong as ever before, the surroundings have changed, as if the future of ultimate modernity has now been reached precisely due to their efforts. This shift in representation that came with the construction of the metallurgical complex suggests a deeper transformation: not just of physical landscapes but of the very way that nature was imagined within the socialist project.

<Set figure 4 after the previous paragraph. Preferred size: SMALL.>; Isuf Sulovari. The giant of metallurgy (Gjigandi i metalurgjisë), 1974. Oil on canvas, 172 x 134 cm. © National Gallery of Arts (Galeria Kombëtare e Arteve. Tirana, Albania. National Gallery of Arts (Galeria Kombëtare e Arteve).

Why does this body of socialist art from Albania matter for understanding the Socialist Anthropocene? These variations in Socialist Realism show that the process of transforming nature was never a single, unified narrative. Some paintings celebrate industrial dominance over natural landscapes, while others depict industry as a new, almost natural phenomenon. This diversity of representation reveals a crucial realization that is significant for both the ways in which we examine Socialist Realism and the framework in which we read or understand nature under socialist modernization: nature was never fully erased, nor was it entirely subjugated. It continued to shape, resist, or integrate into human interventions, having its own agency. This analysis challenges simplistic readings of Socialist Realism as a homogeneous and simple propagandistic moment in art history, since painters did not always portray nature in a similar style or with a similar understanding. At the same time, these diverse depictions also challenge readings of the Anthropocene as a one-directional outcome of human activity on Earth.

In the post-socialist era, Albania’s factories were abandoned to decay as the country transitioned into the “new utopia” of privatization and endless accumulation. This shift, driven by neoliberal reforms and market-driven policies, dismantled the industrial base that had once supported towns across the country. Industrial centers were left empty and lifeless, with factories falling into disrepair and entire communities collapsing economically. Looking back at the socialist paintings in light of this collapse, those paintings take on new meanings. What once had seemed to be definite symbols of progress now appear as fragile, precarious moments within a broader environmental history. Their diversity in depicting nature—sometimes conquered, sometimes in harmony, sometimes irreversibly altered—serves as a visual archive of human attempts to integrate into and reshape the natural world. Examining this archive manifests that anthropogenic interventions and transformations of nature are the outcomes of socially driven projects.

By the final decade of state socialism, Albania’s factories were far from the thriving industrial centers that once had been envisioned. Despite these centers’ ideological glorification, operating and sustaining heavy industry proved to be an impossible task, leading to resource shortages and technological stagnation. The last decade preceding the transition to a market economy, a period of extreme hardship and worsening living conditions, became particularly defining for post-socialist narratives. The socialist industrial system, once portrayed as an unstoppable force of progress, ultimately proved to be a burden on the economy.

Yet I would argue that understanding Albania’s socialist industry and the ways it was depicted in art and culture requires a more nuanced analysis than simply labeling the art as propaganda. Socialist industrialization was a material reality that extended beyond its historical period, leaving lasting impacts on both the land and society. As Stacy Alaimo notes, “if nature is to matter, we need more potent, more complex understandings of materiality” and to build a closer examination of how the “actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors” inevitably blur the line between the “human” and the “environment.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Albania’s socialist industrialization was not just about shaping the land but about being shaped by it in return. Its visual representation in painting, therefore, does more than reflect a political project. More crucially, it captures an ongoing negotiation between human ambition and environmental limits.

The variation in socialist paintings is crucial in this regard. These artworks do not present a singular vision of nature; rather, they reveal a spectrum of relationships between industry, modernization, and the environment. Some of the paintings analyzed in this article depict nature as being fully subdued by human labor, while others acknowledge its continued presence, coexistence, or even resistance to transformation. This recognition contributes to a broader understanding of the Socialist Anthropocene. The great and complex transformation of nature in socialist Albania, both real and represented, serves as evidence that the Anthropocene is not a singular or universal condition, but uneven, a historically specific process, shaped and defined by distinct social and cultural forces.

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