East European Film Bulletin

REVIEW

How to Hunt a (Vlach) Dragon

Eluned Zoë Aiano and Alesandra Tatić's *Flotacija* (2023)

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Last January, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, the organization behind the Doomsday Clock, a device symbolizing how close humanity is to global destruction, moved the minute hand to 89 seconds to midnight, the closest it has ever been to reaching the projected point of no return. The Bulletin scientists based their decision on the current state of global war zones (Ukraine, Palestine), nuclear risk, disruptive technologies, and, of course, climate change. The decision made headlines as a spectacular yet effective way to visualize growing fears of global catastrophe. After all, a quick glance at the state of the world and its pressing social, political, financial, and environmental problems would probably discourage even the most hopeful of us.

That human activity, be it the very logic of exploiting natural resources or our specific, capitalist mode of production, is the main source of planet-wide destruction on an unprecedented scale, is undoubtedly true. However, the role cinema can play in environment-conscious narratives is less obvious. Natural disasters, whether directly or indirectly linked to climate change, have always found their place on the big screen, often in the context of sensational and epic blockbusters. In recent years, however, a more toned-down, realistic approach has been developed in both fiction and documentary. Film crews have traveled across the globe to record the destructive impact of different human activities – such as mineral extraction, agriculture, or fishing operations.

In broad terms, such so-called "green" films aim to raise awareness and visualize the unprecedented scale of human activity. To achieve this, many films have sought to emotionally shock viewers through, for instance, spectacular drone shots showing barren areas after mining operations, or grey-tinted natural landscapes of deforested areas with sick, dying trees. Jennifer Baichwal, Nicholas de Pencier, and Edward Burtynsky's *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* (2018) perfectly exemplifies this trend with its costly choice of filming locations that became the basis of photographic exhibitions and book

publications as well. Smaller-scale documentaries tend to center on specific industries or sites. For instance, Nikolaus Geyrhalter's *Earth* (2019) portrays mines, quarries, and the environmental scars left by extraction; Carolin Koss' *Copper Mountains* (2019) documents the toxic byproducts of copper processing in the Ural Mountains; and Monica Lăzurean-Gorgan, Michaela Kirst, and Ebba Sinzinger's *Wood* (2020) focuses on illegal logging in Eastern Europe. The list goes on.[1] Arguably, such environmental films aim to become a moral compass, warning us about a looming apocalypse and calling for immediate action. In the films, environmental scientists and activist heroes clash with corrupt officials, property owners, or "brainwashed" locals who put their financial interests ahead of the common good. Many of these films have been successful both in terms of their balance sheets and their festival exposure, reaching diverse audiences across the globe. However, these narratives are arguably most successful with distant viewers who would agree wholeheartedly with the ethical imperative to correct humanity's errors, yet prove unable to take concrete action. Political action, if effective at all, takes place on a local level at the hands of communities closely impacted by and involved with transformation processes, whose reality is often more complex than an impassioned statement against human greed and corporate evil can relay.

Environmental concerns are crucial to *Flotacija*, the documentary of our friend and contributor Eluned Zoë Aiano and her co-director Alesandra Tatić, yet in a quite different manner. Shot in Majdanpek, a mining town in eastern Serbia, the film opens with a scene of modern-day dragon hunting. Dragan Marković, a miner in his late fifties, applies a hunting method passed down upon generations intended to ward off – or sometimes kill – the invisible dragons residing in the nearby forest. To hunt a dragon, you first need to locate its resting tree – recognizable by its hollow trunk and blood traces – and then light a fire inside the tree to chase the dragon away. Dragons are forces of evil, responsible for the death of livestock and humans alike. For the people of Majdanpek, they are natural enemies, part of Vlach folk beliefs that are still passed on in the region. Dragons used to be everywhere, but this is no longer the case, Dragan explains, possibly due to increased air pollution. In this light-hearted way, the film thus introduces the issue of air quality in the Balkans, which are also referred to as Europe's "blackened lungs."[2] Even mythical beasts are not immune when it comes to deadly air particles.

On the other side of the dragon forest lies the local copper mine, exploited for its mineral resources since the 17th century. Desa Buzejić, Dragan's sister and the film's second local guide, recounts the miners' reality. Her late husband was a trade union leader at a time when unions were still able to mobilize crowds of workers. His death at 50, caused by stomach ulcers, is just one example of the miners' poor health – Dragan himself being another, suffering from severe heart issues after 40 years in the mines. As Dragan explains, poor safety conditions and the harsh nature of the mining profession, which entails close contact with dangerous chemicals (the film's title refers to a complex part

of the mining process that involves a strange, toxic black liquid), intense physical work, and long hours of breathing dust are to blame. Though early retirement is theoretically possible, the low pensions that come with it make it financially unsustainable. The film alternates close-up shots of the mining operation, along with its tree-cutting machinery, with everyday activities and stories narrated in voice-over, suggesting that the mine, the forest, the dragons, and the air pollution are all key to understanding this workers' town.

While still operational, both the mines and the town are long past their prime. Desa goes on in her story: given the richness of local resources, she explains, streets should be "paved with gold." Yet all they got in return for the local riches were old buildings and failing facilities. She mentions the town's prevailing opinion that only foreign capital and investment can save them, since the mine essentially remains the main employer of the local youth. This adds a socio-economic prism to the anthropological observation of Vlach life. In countries struggling economically, foreign investment is often perceived as being desirable, even when it involves selling out the nation's most vital resources. After years of government neglect, with local infrastructure crumbling and working conditions deteriorating, people may become willing to accept foreign intervention, whatever form it takes. Greece remains the most notorious contemporary example on European soil. Over the past decade, core elements of its national infrastructure – mines, factories, airports, naval ports, railways, and energy infrastructure – were sold to for-profit investors, both private entities and public bodies tied to Italian and German authorities. The dream of investment showed its true face two years ago when the privatized rail system, now owned by Italy's Ferrovie dello Stato, ignored crucial safety protocols, leading to one of Europe's deadliest train crashes with the death of 57 passengers.[3] And yet, the image of privatization as a savior remains strong in public discourse.

The hope that Desa referred to came true in 2018 when a Chinese international company acquired the Majdanpek mine. However, as the film documents, the new owners did not just gain the rights to the operations – they took ownership of the mine's entire property, including the apartment where Desa and her family live. Much of the town's infrastructure originally belonged to the mine, likely part of a Yugoslav housing scheme designed to provide affordable homes for workers. Yet, in Desa's case, her apartment remained mortgaged to the mine even after 75 years of paying it off. Foreign capital now controls not only the means of production but also a portion of the town's physical space, which explains Desa's feeling of having been "bought off" along with the mine. Yet, these negative feelings surrounding the mines are in constant tension with the town's financial reality. The need for employment – especially for the generation of Desa's grandson – is the invisible force driving every action and decision the community makes. Majdanpek is, after all, a mining town, bound to one of the harshest jobs humanity has ever conceived.

As viewers, we may be eager to see the mining operation as being bad, reflecting some kind of leftovers of a grand socialist project now responsible for environmental damage, and its Chinese acquisition as even worse, a grab of local resources by private funds. We instinctively side with the forest, we admire these surviving strange and magical traditions, yet we also worry that dragon-hunting fires might harm the trees or burn down the forest. However, the film avoids such easy conclusions. If the two directors had any preconceptions at the start of the project, they clearly abandoned them on the way to let the film's narrative evolve through their interaction with the locals over several years of filming. This dynamic is reflected in certain dialogs: both Desa and Dragan appear entirely at ease with the presence of the camera and crew, acknowledging the filming process, asking the directors questions, and revealing an intimacy shaped by time.

This is also why the film seems to address many different themes that are not always clearly connected. Little by little, the film conveys the many dimensions of the lives of these people, who may feel neglected, forgotten, or wronged at times, yet remain cheerful, festive, and often very funny. Cinematically, this is achieved through the film's editing. Wide static shots and disembodied voice-overs alternate with close-ups of visual details, portraits of the locals, and anecdotal accounts in the form of casual discussions – a shift between the general and the specific, reflecting the crew's experience as they traveled through several layers of society to better understand it. Different themes, such as the persistence of folk beliefs, concerns over air pollution, and declining health, discussions on regional politics, international capitalist projects, social movements, as well as reveries of the past and local festivities, thus all find a place within the film. Local life, the film suggests, is the sum of these elements existing together and simultaneously. Reducing the film to one or the other would make for a convenient hook for viewers, yet it would be inaccurate.

Flotacija's approach is effective in addressing topics related to political action in a less overt and more implicit manner than most of the "green" films mentioned above. While no direct political action is seen in the film, it shows the local conditions that could shape it, when and if this happens: people whose life includes everything from drinking during local gatherings (to milden the symptoms of their health issues) and hunting dragons (not to forget what they learned as children), to working at the mine (for their financial survival), taking care of the forest (which houses their traditions), and collectively organizing (to reclaim ownership of their apartments). Within this portrait of Majdanpek's micro-society, one can observe clear instances of the multiple tensions that inform broader political debates regarding the environment, tradition, and politics.

The film ends on a bittersweet note. We watch as Desa's grandson gets dressed and prepares for his first day at the mine. As he steps onto the

premises, the credits start rolling over a long shot of the next generation of miners. The new owners have promised to improve safety conditions, yet the very nature of mining will continue to undermine their life expectancy. Similarly, many of the people we saw in the film passed away during the years of shooting or right after the film's release. Life goes on, it seems, and the workers' story continues, now with fewer dragons and even less hope for social or political utopias. The scene feels simple, real, and human, with a lingering touch of dragon magic – yet our world keeps racing toward midnight.

Can the film provide any answers? Probably not. We never learn what future the forest would have had without its dragons, whether Desa's actions to reclaim the town's apartments have any chance of success, or if the Chinese owners genuinely improved working conditions. Equally uncertain is the parallel the film draws between the mining machines and the dragons. As Dragan describes the dragons' appearance and movement, we see machines moving in a similar way, with its sounds echoing those the creatures are supposed to make. Are the mining operations some kind of modern dragons, erasing existing traditions and taking the place of dragons in becoming the enemy of the people? Are they forces of evil, responsible for deaths, much like their mythical counterparts? Or is this a poetic *clin d'œil*, where dragons and machines are two sides of the same coin, the town's unique identity and visual anchors for this cinematic spectacle?

1. The film festival landscape appears to have caught up with this trend. Each year, the Locarno Film Festival awards the prestigious Pardo Verde prize to a "green" film *d'auteur* and in 2020, the Thessaloniki Documentary Festival had a thematic focus on "Anthropocene" films, a term used to designate the current geological period in which human activity is the determining – and for the most part negative – factor in shaping the land, ecosystems, and related processes on Earth. ↩
2. Jelena Garcevic (8 November 2021). "The Blackened Lungs of Europe: The Dark Truth Behind Air Quality in the Balkans", *International Relations Review*. https://www.irreview.org/articles/2021/11/8/the-blackened-lungs-of-europe-the-dark-truth-behind-air-quality-in-the-balkans [Accessed on 9 February 2025]. ↩
3. The Visual BBC Journalism Team (2 March 2023). "Greece train crash: What we know so far". https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64813367 [Accessed on 9 February 2025]. ↩