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"Social Representations, Collective Memory and Socially  
Shared Emotions: narrative and experimental approaches"

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One place – two stories:  
visual rhetoric and  
polemical social representations  
in the Rosia Montana (Romania)  
mining conflict

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## **Social representations theory and the Rosia Montana (Romania) conflict**

- Objective of the research (PhD thesis): To study the environmental conflict related to the mining project in the Rosia Montana site
- social psychological perspective: the study of social representations, their properties, their origins and their impact (Moscovici, 2000).
- “conflict between groups” and “conflict between social representations” are substitutable expressions (Rouquette, 1994)

## The story in short

- Rosia Montana (the Mountainous Red): rural area situated in the Western Carpathians Mountains
- Important gold and silver deposits, said to be the largest from Europe
- Ancient mining tradition, continued over centuries
- Economic collapse of the mining industry all over Romania, in the transition period after the fall of the communist regime in 1989

● Rosia Montana



## **The source of the conflict: “Rosia Montana Gold Corporation Project”**

Launched in 1997 by a Canadian mining company

Main provisions of the RMGC Project:

- Gold and silver open pit mine on a large scale (if build, the mine will be the largest from Europe), that will completely affect the environment and inhabitants of the Rosia Montana site
- Ore processing plant, using conventional techniques for precious metals extraction (cyanide)

Strong opposition to the Project from a variety of actors (NGOs, public institutions, religious institutions), extending from local to the global scale, gathered round the slogan “Save Rosia Montana”

Highly polarized debate around the RM Project; each of the conflicting parts have engaged in major publicly campaigns for gathering popular support for their cause and, implicitly, for influencing political decision

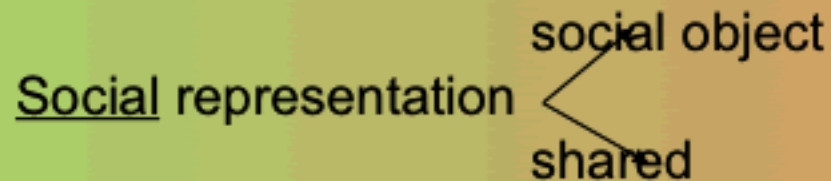
The dispute reveals a novel environmental conflict in Romania, a country where environmental concern has no tradition

## **Aim of this study**

- General Hypothesis – Two divergent versions about the “Rosia Montana story” :  
Each part in the Rosia Montana conflict competes for the construction of social reality, by developing social representations linked to the Rosia Montana issue and attempting to influence others to adopt them
- Aim of this study: to identify these versions, as they emerge in visual productions (photographs) produced and transmitted through internet by the conflicting parts.



# Polemical social representations I



Moscovici (1988): three ways in which representations can become social, depending on the relations between group members.

Three types of SR:

- *Hegemonic* : shared by all members of a highly structured group; uniform, coercive, prevail in all symbolic and affective practices
- *Emancipated* : subgroup products; reflect the “outgrowth of the circulation of knowledge and ideas”; autonomous; result from exchanging and sharing a set of interpretations or symbols
- *Polemical* : generated in the course of social conflict, social controversy and are not shared by the whole society; determined by antagonistic relations between members of society; intended to be mutually exclusive

## Polemical social representations II

Rouquette (1994):

- Every social representation has a polemical value, underlining the inter-group differences and intra-group identity
- Being opaque to itself, a social representation stands always for “a form of truth”

Consequence: in inter-individual relations the confrontation between representations implies the intervention of specific rhetoric and even polemics, everyone trying to undermine the other's position and to impose his own “truth”.



## Social representations and communication

Moscovici (1998: 402,403):

**“When people talk about *La Psychanalyse* they focus on representation, but they usually overlook the second part of the book which deals with communication and language”.**

**The context of communication makes a social representation be “not a quiet thing consisting of an object and a science and transformation of that object. Usually there is a kind of ideological battle, a battle of ideas. (...) I think that was is very much lacking in social psychology is concern with the strife of ideas”.**

Farr (1995: 8): Qualifies Moscovici’s approach as a “retro-revolution”

**“Representations are in the media as well as in people’s minds: they form part of the culture as well as cognition and they need to be sampled and analyzed in both contexts”**

## Iconic expression of social representations

Within the SR paradigm explicit suggestion is made in favor of switching from the “monotheistic” verbal approach to a more integrative perspective which admits that, besides words, there are other means, like images, sounds, conducts, rites, that contribute to the social construction of reality (de Rosa & Farr, 2001; Mamali, 2006).

de Rosa & Farr (2001): Visual image is jointly:

- *Source* for activating and/or favoring the emergence of SR
- *Product* of SR (the SR itself, as an iconic-symbolic synthesis, a materialization of one SR, a direct expression of the objectification process)
- *Medium*, a form of transmission of SR

## Why photographs on internet?

- Internet – *new media*: a place of debate
- 
- Moscovici (1983): “The iconic revolution” “Images communicate more things, more rapidly and to the largest number of people ... [allowing] people to inhabit the Tower of Babel” (p.569)
  - Barthes (1985): Photographs have the power of naturalization, due to the relationship of the signifieds to the signifiers based on analogy (recording). The denoted message in the photograph seems to obliterate any connotation of the image. In fact, the constructed meaning is masked under the appearance of a given meaning. This process of naturalization reinforces the myth of photographic “naturalness” and objectivity and confers to mechanical obtained pictures an immediate emotional impact.
  - de Rosa & Farr (2001): images possess the power of hypostatization, of transforming concept into substance, and that makes them particularly adapted to the representation of social stereotypes
  - Chinese proverb: “A picture is worth a thousand words!”



## The photo-dossiers

### Requirements:

- Photographs accessible (also) on internet
- The position of the promoters (FOR or AGAINST) the RM Project clear identifiable
- Samples alike in respect of the numbers of units (photographs) contained

The “AGAINST mining project” dossier: 67 photographs downloaded from the “Soros Foundation - Romania” website; “Rosia Montana. The hooded light” photographic album and exhibition held in February 2007 in a hall of the Romanian Palace of the Parliament  
[http:// www.osf.ro/ro/publicatii.php?pag=2#\\_\(catalog\\_Rosia\\_Montana\)](http://www.osf.ro/ro/publicatii.php?pag=2#_(catalog_Rosia_Montana))

The “FOR mining project” dossier: 74 photographs downloaded from the photo-galleries of two closely related websites owned by the company

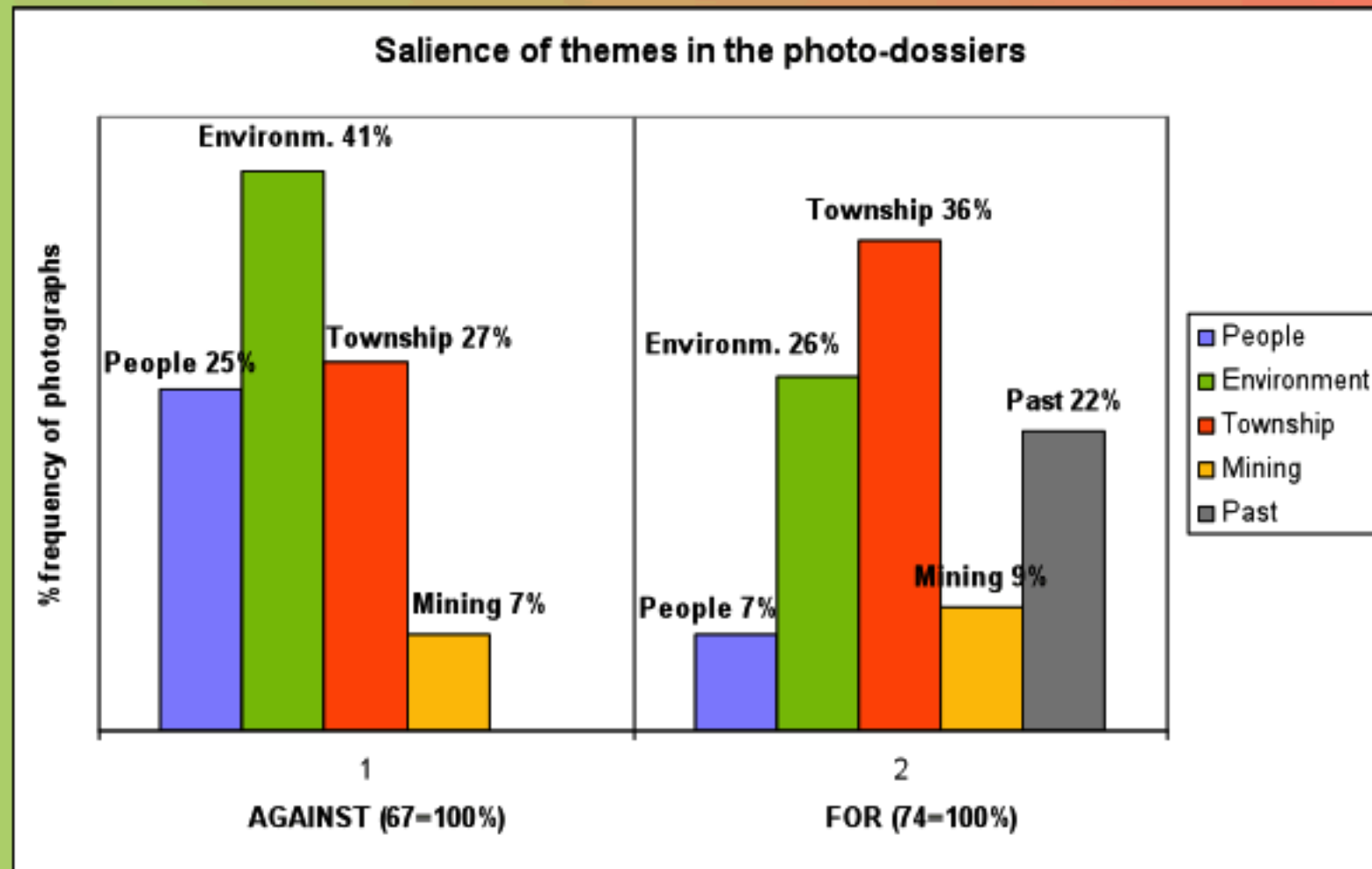
[http://www.rmgc.ro/rosia\\_montana.php?page=galerie](http://www.rmgc.ro/rosia_montana.php?page=galerie); <http://www.gabrielresources.com/images.htm>

## Methods

The analysis was designed for achieving the comparison between narrative structures and contents of the message in the two photo-dossiers and implied both quantitative and qualitative techniques:

- Visual content analysis: quantification of categories of manifest contents
- Semiotic analysis: plastic figures (composition, framing, colours and brightness); iconic figures (objects represented in the image and resemblance relationship); text joined to the image (caption, heading)

## Visual content analysis comparative results





## The “battle of ideas” through visual rhetoric

- Two differing “realities” are objectified by means of photographs
- It seems that each photo-dossier was aimed to be a retort to the other, indicating the polarization of groups
- Light is the plastic feature that marks strikingly the contrast
- Opposition beauty/ugliness of the place

## The environment

### AGAINST

Wonderful place to live in

Beautiful mountain landscapes (rocky peaks, forest slopes, flower meadows, trees, ponds, sunsets over the mountains, animals on the meadow, clear blue sky)

Water is clear and clean

Green nature = true gold

Human influence on nature:

Traditional agriculture is benefic

Pre-industrial mining tracks (old mine entries, old bare mountain peaks with vegetation) increase the area's spectacular feature

Few industrial mining tracks suggestive for the hope in environmental recovery of the area

### FOR

The place is a mess

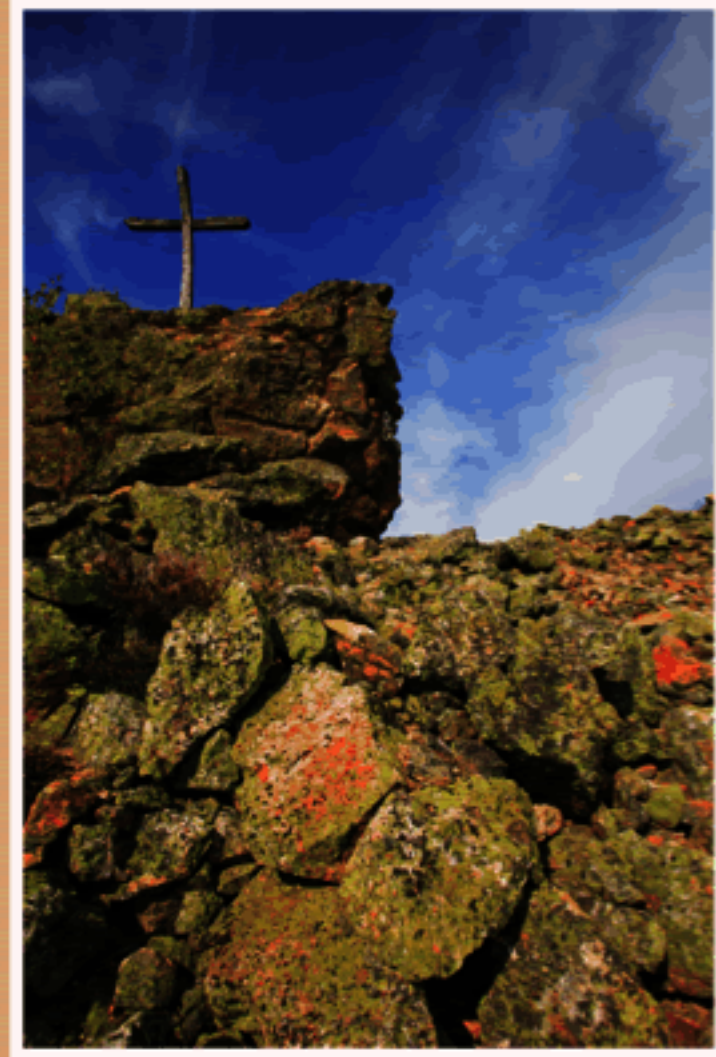
The environment: extremely damaged due to mining activity

The existing open pit dominates the landscape

Water in the river is red and dirty, polluting thus further the river it flows in  
Grey nature

Humans don't care about the environment (domestic waste on the riverbanks, not recycled scraps)

The environment in the AGAINST dossier





## The environment in the AGAINST dossier



The environment in the AGAINST dossier  
“Metastasis”





## The environment in the FOR dossier





## The environment in the FOR dossier



## The township

<b>AGAINST</b> <b>Cultural heritage</b>	<b>FOR</b> <b>Desolate place</b>
<p><b>Panoramic shots: typical architecture of the villages in the Western Carpathians (houses spread out on the mountain slopes)</b></p> <p><b>Old houses, churches and buildings, graveyards – cultural heritage</b></p> <p><b>“RMGC property” houses: the company has the main guilt for the degradation of the town, forcing people to sell and to leave</b></p> <p><b>Hope: new houses are built</b></p>	<p><b>Contrast OLD / PRESENT Rosia Montana</b></p> <p><b>Ancient town prosperity (new built big houses, large workplace buildings)</b></p> <p><b>Today: redundant images depicting houses in advanced deterioration state; courtyards of still resided houses are uncared for</b></p> <p><b>Poor and neglected local infrastructure</b></p>

## The township in the AGAINST dossier





## The township in the FOR dossier





## The people

### AGAINST

People live in harmony with nature

**Hardworking peasants practicing agriculture with traditional methods, as did their ancestors two thousands years ago (positive connotation: organic agriculture);**

**Peasants healthy and content with their lives, decided not to move out the place;**

**Old people's drama if forced to relocate;**

**Serenity of children raised in the clean and sound natural environment;**

**The company does not care about the people;**

**Hope: "the light of the end of the tunnel" (Good-bye mining!)**

### FOR

Where are the people?

#### **Contrast OLD / PRESENT**

**Old Rosia Montana animated by the human presence; double socio-professional role: miners and peasants**

**Today:**

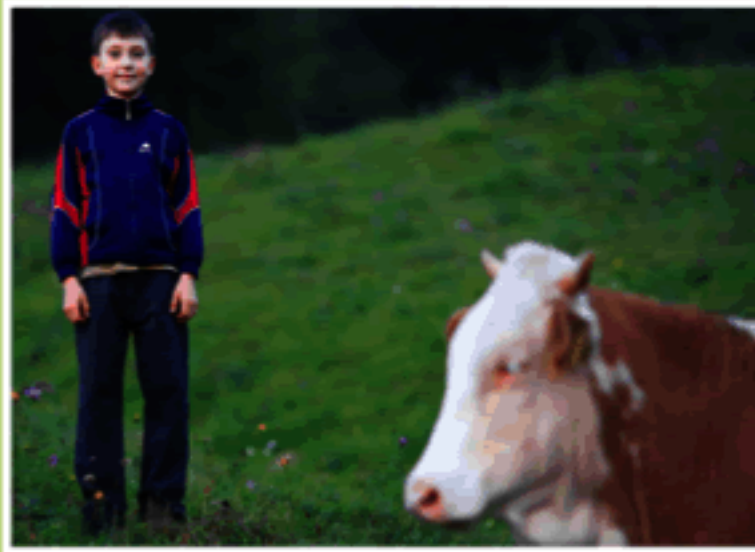
**Poverty;**

**Lack of perspective for children and adults (unemployed) still living in the area**

## People in the AGAINST dossier



## People in the AGAINST dossier





## People in the AGAINST dossier





People in the AGAINST dossier  
“The light at the end of the tunnel”



## People in the FOR dossier



## People in the FOR dossier



## Mining

### AGAINST

#### Cultural heritage

Mining in the pre-industrial past  
Roman and Medieval mine galleries:  
historical artifacts of inestimable  
archaeological value;  
Picturesque landscape with old mine  
tracks (wooden rails, old mine entries)  
God punishes the greedy (the gold  
seekers)

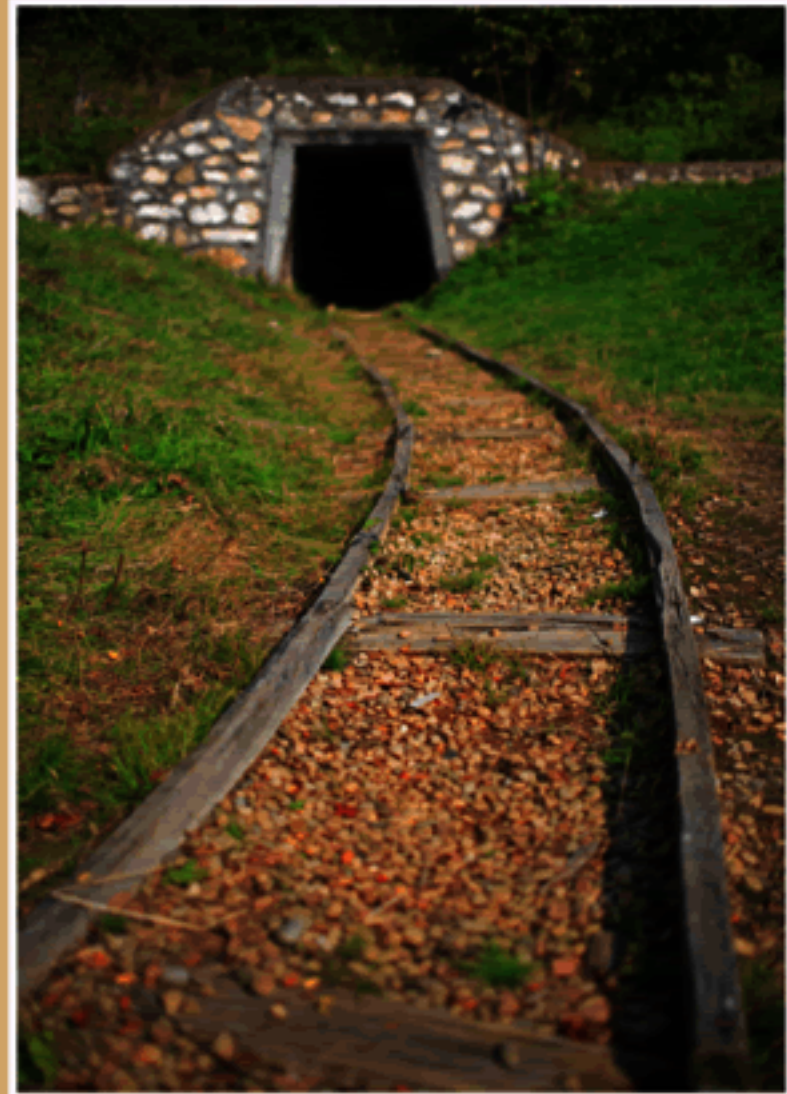
### FOR

#### Dependence on mining

Contrast OLD / PRESENT  
Today: Communist legacy: declined  
state of mining industry (equipments  
and infrastructure are busted, iron rails  
rusted, industrial establishments  
abandoned)  
In the past, mining brought wealth  
  
NOT the communist past of intense  
mining is positively connoted BUT the  
mining in the interwar period →  
SR is anchored in “The golden age”  
myth



## Mining in the AGAINST dossier



## Mining in the FOR dossier





## Concluding remarks

- Two pictorial representations about Rosia Montana site and people, which are highly contrasting but equally stereotypical and rooted in general beliefs which coexist in Romania social memory
- The “optimistic” representation of those who are against the project pertains to the general conception of Romania’s natural and cultural richness and beauty and to the more extended irresistible belief of the healthy country-life, of humans living in community with nature (essence of the pro-ecological ideology)
- The representation constructed by the mining company finds its roots in the old belief about Romania’s economic backwardness and poverty, mostly re-emphasized in the post-communist time. However this “pro development” representation is also reinforced by the myth of past prosperity of the interwar “golden age”.



## Future prospects

- Need to link “the media” and “people’s minds” representations
- Context generativity of public representations (Moscovici: 1994)

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# Is it RED or GREEN ?

- Can't tell for sure
- BUT you will sure get a story!
- Depending on when and to whom you open your eyes and ears

Thank you very much for your attention!