

# BOOK REVIEW

## Bruce Williams' *Albanian Cinema through the Fall of Communism: Silver Screens and Red Flags*

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Outside its borders, very little is known of Albanian cinema and its characteristics due to the lack of Albanian language knowledge by foreign scholars, the scarcity of publications in the English language, and limited access to films with English subtitles, while many of the award-winning and internationally recognized post-communist era filmmakers were trained and had worked during the regime. Almost every work written in the last decades on Albanian culture, history, and cinema outside of the country starts with a disclaimer that it is the least known country in the Balkans, due to its long period of isolation under Enver Hoxha's communist regime. While not false, this recurring statement is always problematic because it fits into colonialist

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frameworks, according to which places, peoples, and cultures, outside the purview of Western and European scientific knowledge are simply undiscovered and exotic spaces waiting to be charted, mapped, and interpreted by enlightened explorers from civilized nations (situated in the Global North). However, thanks to the continuous and sustained efforts and enthusiasm of a small group of filmmakers, cinephiles, archivists, and members of the scientific community from Albania and abroad, which the author of *Albanian Cinema through the Fall of Communism: Silver Screens and Red Flags*, Bruce Williams, also belongs to, the situation is slowly changing. Among these film culture, film heritage preservation and scientific initiatives there are a number of concerted efforts, such as The Albanian Cinema Project, a special issue on Albanian Cinema (*Kinokultura*, 2016), Mark Cousins' documentaries, such as *Women Make Film*, and now this first volume on Albanian cinema history in the English language.

Williams rightly notes how: "In the past two decades, we have witnessed a considerable growth in attention to Albanian film within a short period of time" (p. 20). Albanian scholars have written several books since 2000, such as the encyclopedia of Albanian film and two books on Albanian cinema history by Abaz Hoxha (*100 vjet kinema në trojet shqiptare* in 2002, and *Kinematografia shqiptare* in 2004), filmographies and film catalogs by Natasha Lako (*Film muzeum 1895–1952* in 2002, and *Energjia filmike* in 2004), and two books by Julian Bejko (*Shoqëria e kinemasë I* and *II*, respectively in 2012 and 2013). In English, there are a few texts on individual Albanian films or filmmakers scattered across several books and journals (for

instance, in Dina Iordanova's *The Cinema of the Balkans*, 2006, or in Marian Țuțui's *Orient Express*, 2008). Notably, since the creation of the Albanian Cinema Project in 2012—whose aim was to preserve and promote Albanian film heritage to global audiences, by drawing attention to the Albanian National Film Archive and undertaking film preservation and restoration (on films such as *Tomka dhe shokët e tij* [*Tomka and His Friends*], *Nëntori i dytë* [*The Second November*], and Fatmir Koçi's *The Land of Eagles*)—Albanian cinema has received wider recognition and garnered more academic attention internationally.

Bruce Williams' book, which provides an encompassing introduction to Albanian cinema from the origins of moving images within the country's territory through the communist period, is an important step toward filling a wide gap in international knowledge on a significant part of Albanian cultural production of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which concerns the medium of cinema. This first book on Albanian cinema in the English language allows interested readers to acquaint themselves with this still under-researched and difficult to access film heritage and culture. A professor at the William Paterson University of New Jersey in the USA specializing in film theory and history, and with an impressive catalog of publications on Hispanic film and the "other cinema" of Europe, Williams has a long history of fascination and interest in Albania and Albanian cinema. He has frequently traveled to the country since his first visit in 1991, when he also had the opportunity to visit the Kinostudio and meet with Kristaq Dhamo, the director of the first Albanian feature film *Tana* (1958). Williams has consistently written on different

aspects of Albanian cinema (published in international academic journals and edited collections), and, in particular, has been instrumental in bringing scholarly attention to the foremost woman film director in Albania, Xhanfise Keko.

Williams' book begins with the early moving images filmed on Albanian territory by local and foreign individuals, under the Ottomans as well as during the independence period, the monarchy of King Zog, and the Italian Fascist occupation, which paved the way for Albania's own cinema. However, the volume (which is meant to be followed by a companion volume on the post-communist period) focuses primarily on the creation and growth of the Albanian national film studio (*Kinostudio*) from the early years of communism until the collapse of the regime. Though Albanian postcolonial society is marked by cultural legacies and the heritage of several empires and political ideologies and influences, certainly the historical proximity of the communist past means that the communist-era legacy has the most palpable and traumatic effect on contemporary Albanian society. Many who lived during this period are still alive, and struggling to come to terms with the repressive and violent acts committed during the regime. The prevailing majority of Albanian film heritage belongs to the communist period (between 1952 and 1992, *Kinostudio* productions include over 250 feature fiction films, over 1000 documentaries, and over 150 animated films), which justifies the author's choice to focus primarily on national cinema and the uniqueness of Albanian cinema vis-à-vis Eastern European cinemas. Williams attributes this difference to Albania's own heritage of postcolonialism (Ottoman Empire, Fascist Italy, Stalinism), its politics of

isolationism, and the neo-colonial heritage thereof. The national cinema approach has some limitations because it understands the development of cinematic form, style, and aesthetics within national parameters, and inevitably minimizes the effect of transnational dynamics and cross-influences from global film traditions. Albania's cultural isolation was much more permeable than is frequently depicted: the majority of Albanian filmmakers studied in other Eastern European countries, and the catalog of the Albanian film archive's foreign film titles includes a variety of films from around the globe (India, Cuba, Russia, USA, Italy, etc.). Williams' book opens the dialogue on Albanian communist-era cinema, as it attempts to pierce through apparent propaganda and the orthodoxy of state-produced cinema, in order to consider the subversive nature of the films and filmmakers under discussion. These films, Williams argues in the book's film analyses, at times undermined the very system they upheld.

The book is structured into five chapters, each devoted to a period of Albanian cinema prior to the collapse of the communist regime. There is some overlap between different historical periods in order to account for the relatively long process of political transformation, such as the break with the Soviet Union. The first chapter sets the scene by providing an overview of the cultural and historical context that led to the birth and growth of Albanian cinema. Williams discusses the photographers of the Marubi studio dynasty, who were crucial for the development of visual culture in Albania, and the Manakia brothers, considered the first Balkan filmmakers, who documented Albanophone communities and spaces in the region at the start of the twentieth century. This chapter also analyzes the documentary footage

produced by the Near East Foundation and other international organizations, as well as providing an overview of the filmic work of Mihallaq Mone. Mone is considered one of the most important early pioneers of Albanian cinema, a filmmaker who worked during the Italian occupation (1939–1943), making several documentaries for the production company *Tomorri Film*.

The second chapter explores the communist regime's efforts to build and consolidate a national cinema, and early co-productions with other Eastern European countries to produce newsreels and documentaries that focused on political conferences and Albanian delegations to other socialist countries, agricultural advances and urban development. As Williams notes, these early non-fiction productions—designated as either documentaries or newsreels by the Albanian National Film Archive—are virtually indistinguishable in form and style (p. 80). Similarly to other Eastern European countries, close ties with the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc countries were crucial to the development of a national cinema, and this was especially the case for Albania. Notably, Williams highlights how the cultural and political ties with the Soviet Union, such as the training of future Albanian film professionals in Moscow, the founding of the national film studio (which was itself an homage to the Soviet Union), and the first feature film *The Great Warrior Scanderbeg* (1953), an epic coproduction between *Mosfilm* and *Kinostudio*, were among the key factors. Further, Williams argues that *The Great Warrior Scanderbeg* is significant because it broke with rigid moral indoctrination, was an action-packed historical epic with socialist realist characteristics, and moreover anticipated the

party line of future *Kinostudio* productions (pp. 90–91). This chapter also provides an examination of Endri Keko's documentaries and Viktor Stratobërdha's, a highly innovative documentary filmmaker who was subsequently imprisoned by the regime.

Chapter Three engages critically with Enver Hoxha's views on the arts and cinema, and explores the golden age of the *Kinostudio* and its flourishing under increasing isolation, within the changing socio-political context of Albania severing its ties with the Warsaw Pact and shifting alliances from Moscow to Beijing. Here, Williams begins by noting that the history and ideology of the *Kinostudio*, rather than being a simple instrument of propaganda, was more complex and ambiguous than acknowledged. He notes that the official state view of cinema aesthetics was somewhat contradictory (p. 112). Interestingly—as Williams highlights—Hoxha challenged artists to greater levels of creativity, encouraging them to study foreign works in order “to open horizons”, and apply this knowledge to the specificities of the local situation and Albanian society (p. 113). The author provides a close discussion and analysis of several movies belonging to the group of films dealing with the fight for national identity, the Second World War, labor, social problems, and women's issues, notably Hysen Hakani's *Debatik* (1961), Piro Milkani and Gëzim Erebara's *Victory over Death* (1967), Muharrem Fejzo and Fehmi Hoshafi's *The Captain* (1972), Viktor Gjika's *Open Horizons* (1968) and *White Road* (1974), and Dhimitër Anagnosti's *The Silent Duel* (1967) and *Red Poppies on the Wall* (1976). Williams notes how *Victory over Death*, which recounts the story of two women who become

martyrs under the Nazi occupation, became one of the first Albanian films to achieve popularity in China during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Today, many communist-era Albanian films dubbed in Chinese can be found and viewed on the streaming platform YouTube.

Williams dedicates Chapter Four to the discussion of Albanian cinema after the break with China, a social and political period considered to be at the height of the country's isolation. Conversely, as Williams argues, this period of isolation was also marked by greater formal and narrative innovation in Albanian cinema, as filmmakers moved away from predictable themes such as the partisan movement and the country's struggle under the fascist and Nazi occupations, and began to embrace topics that dealt with social issues. Here, a number of feature fiction films are analyzed, such as the historical drama *The Second November* (1982), which celebrates Albanian independence; *Concert in the Year 1936* (1978) and *General Gramophone* (1978), both of which deal with the role of music in popular struggle and colonization efforts; and *Face to Face* (1978), which the author delves into in depth due to the complexity of the film and its subject, notably its "meditation on nostalgia and the passage of time" and "re-chronicling of the Albanian-Soviet schism" (p. 177). Of particular note is the author's discussion and analysis of one of the rare women directors in Albania, Khanfise Keko, known for her children's films, dubbed as the "child spy films". Williams argues that although Keko worked within the confines of official doctrine, her films present themselves as innovative works, through specific cinematic techniques and devices employed by the director, which in certain scenes "retard



the narrative and foster an active viewer”, and depict their child heroes as “rugged individualists” who “think outside the box and solve problems unconventionally” (pp. 168–169).

The final chapter deals with the *Kinostudio* productions following Enver Hoxha's death, which mostly continue the themes explored during the period of isolation. Williams notes how these films engage with contemporary psychosocial concerns, and become both more explicit in their social critique and varied in terms of genre, aside from notable high-quality literary adaptations also produced in this period, such as those based on books by the renowned Albanian author Ismail Kadare, *The Uninvited* (1985) and *The Return of the Dead Army* (1989). Here, Williams also explores one of the rare psychological thrillers of Albanian cinema, *The Circle of Memory* (1987), which deals with psychological trauma caused by past atrocities, as well as the *Pirate Cave* (1990) a unique fantasy adventure film, where the fantasy takes place within the real world of the child protagonists, thus allowing the characters' need for exploration and adventure to be met. Furthermore, the author notes that it is difficult to draw a clear distinction between the films of the post-Hoxha era and the earlier years of isolation, and that this period of Albanian cinema is particularly neglected and under-researched in scholarly discourse. Indeed, Williams' intervention in bridging this gap in our knowledge is particularly welcome and significant.

The book ends with an exploration of Albania's cultural climate immediately prior to the collapse of the communist regime, by engaging in a discussion of *Years of Waiting* (1990) by Esat Musliu, which foreshadows and anticipates the theme of

emigration that would characterize many of the films of post-communist Albania. Williams argues that this film represents a transition between the last *Kinostudio* films and one of the primary topics of concern of the early decades of post-communism. Overall, *Albanian Cinema through the Fall of Communism: Silver Screens and Red Flags* is a significant first step and an important contribution to the ever-expanding field of Eastern European and Balkan cinemas. It provides an informed and engaging introduction to Albania's dynamic film heritage and culture from the beginning of moving images to the end of the communist regime for Anglophone readers.