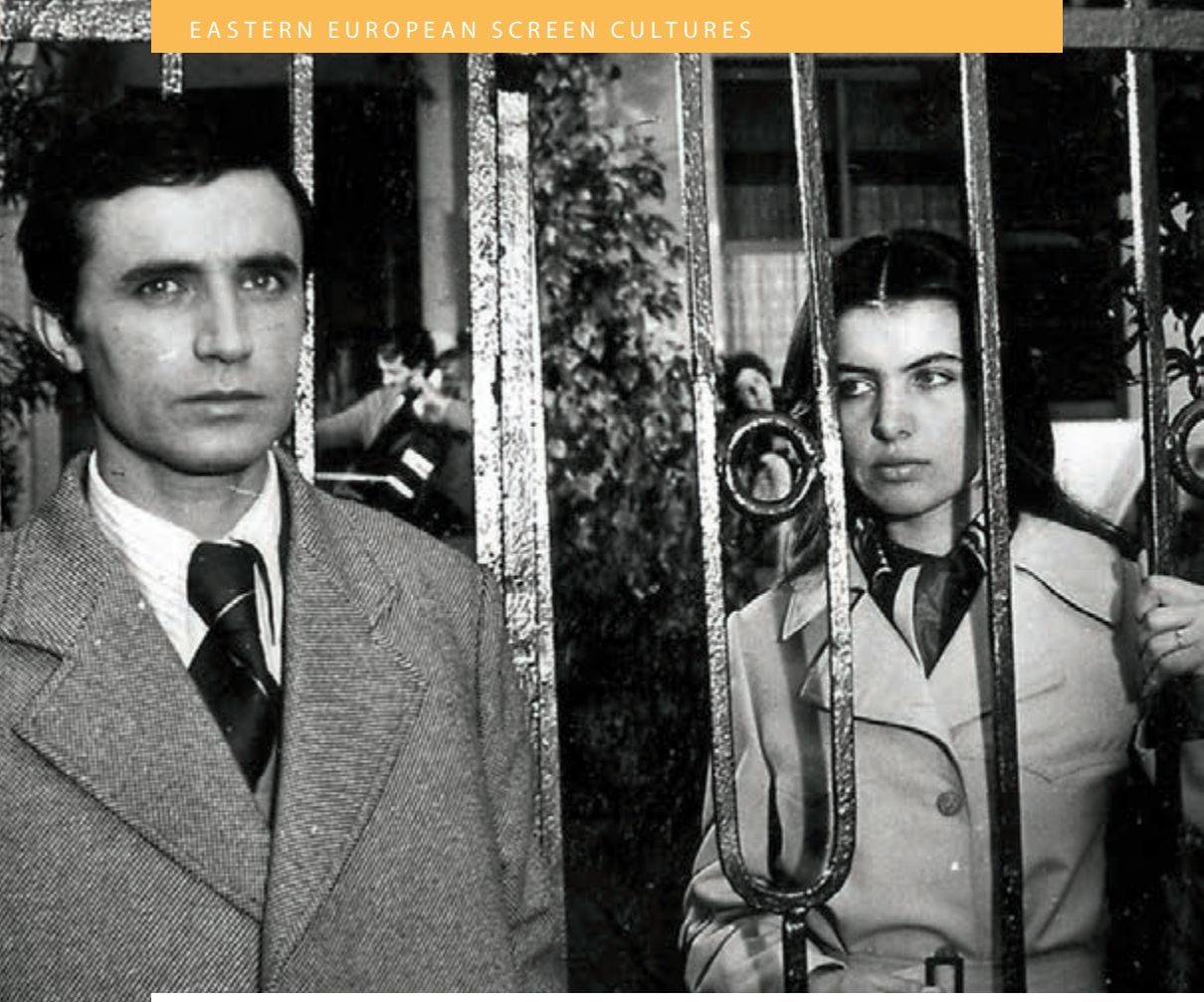
EASTERN EUROPEAN SCREEN CULTURES



Bruce Williams

Albanian Cinema through the Fall of Communism

Silver Screens and Red Flags

Amsterdam University Press

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Eastern European Screen Cultures

The series Eastern European Screen Cultures publishes critical studies on the screen cultures that have marked the socialist and post-socialist spaces in Europe. It aims to unveil current phenomena and untold histories from this region to account for their specificity and integrate them into a wider conception of European and world cinema.

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Eastern European Screen Cultures will also publish translations of important texts that have not been able to travel outside of national and/or regional borders.

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Cover illustration: Mevlan Shanaj and Raimonda Bulku in Piro Milkani and Kujtim Çashku's *Ballë për ballë*/*Face to Face*. Courtesy of the Albanian Central State Film Archive with special gratitude to the directors of the film and the actors depicted.

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Preface

A Personal Journey towards and through Albania and Its Cinema

Perhaps it was the fact that my first United States passport, issued when I was only seventeen, bore the menacing inscription, 'Not valid for travel to Albania, Cuba and North Korea' that my attention was first drawn to this Balkan nation. It was, for me, who grew up in the west of the United States, *terra incognita*. I subsequently learned of its politics and isolationism in a secondary school class called 'Current World Problems', and I was at once daunted and charmed. Although my curiosity was aroused, I knew that Albania was not merely out of reach, but also forbidden. And hence it disappeared from my radar for seven years or so. During my unrelated graduate studies in Hispanic Languages and Literatures at the University of California, Los Angeles, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, my obsession with Albania was rekindled. At that time, an extensive bibliography project was required as part of my doctoral coursework. I opted to explore scholarly work on Brazilian literature in Eastern Europe. Although Yugoslavia was rather extensively represented, I was chagrined that I could not find anything at all published on the topic in Albania. During my doctoral studies, I quenched my thirst for all things Albanian by purchasing a typical 1970s audio-lingual method for the language at a small boutique for educational materials on MacArthur Park. This was the only course available at the time with an audio supplement that used the current spoken language. I further invested in a dated language course from the Defense Language Institute. More will be said to this effect in the 'Introduction' to this book.

I was determined to ascertain whether Albania was really all that inaccessible. Could Americans somehow get there? Through the kindness of a stranger, I was put into contact with Rose Dosti,[1] a culinary writer for the

1 Rose Dosti is now the director of the Santa Monica-based Albanian Human Rights Project. She has directed two documentaries on the victims of the communist dictatorship in *Albania: Prison Nation—1943–1990* (2008) and *Lost Voices Making History: Albania—1943–1991* (2011).

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Los Angeles Times, who dispatched me off to Ajeti's Albanian restaurant in Hermosa Beach, where I was able to meet my first live Albanian, Haki, a young gentleman born in Vlora. Also, through Rose, I entered into contact with the late Mary Romano, an Albanian-American, who had visited Albania multiple times. Although I never met Mary face to face, I was enthralled by her over-the-phone anecdotes on Albanian travel and culture. I learned that I was not alone in my interest. Los Angeles actually had a group of individuals studying Albanian dance—and the language to boot—from a course originating in the homeland! Nonetheless, Mary confirmed to me that my lack of Albanian heritage made any prospects of visiting my promised land virtually impossible.[2]

My academic efforts, however, remained focused on Brazil, and they migrated from literature to cinema, and research for my dissertation took precedence over travel pipedreams. Albania remained a distant fairy tale. Yet, it was on my bucket list before this term was even in vogue! Some eighteen months after completing my dissertation, I made by first trip to the then Eastern Bloc in the summer of 1988, and was able to visit Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany. My fascination with the region grew considerably. In 1991, while on a Visiting Assistant Professorship at California State University, Chico, I was browsing through travel books in a shopping mall and learned that Albania had opened up—at least for day trips from Podgorica! Although I had made plans to take my first trip to the Soviet Union in March of that year, I knew that Albania was summoning me as well. After phone calls with the very helpful AlbTourist in Tirana—it is necessary to stress that telephone lines between the US and Albania had only been open for a year!—, I immediately began to undertake the visa process.[3] This entailed my need to spend a couple of hours in Budapest en route from Moscow to Tirana to visit the Albanian embassy, which graciously remained open for me after hours until I arrived. My excitement and passion betrayed me. The embassy officials thought I was up to something, and when I ultimately arrived in Tirana, the infamous Sigurimi, the secret police, were my constant escorts and dining

2 Romano was knowledgeable about Albanian cinema and felt that she could pack an auditorium at UCLA if offered the opportunity to screen a film. I learned then that, somehow, some Albanian films could be found in the US. In 2001, Romano translated an unproduced screenplay by Kujtim Çashku into English.

3 Albanian has both definite and indefinite forms for all nouns, including place names. The choice between these two forms in English is hit and miss. This book will use the definite form for places that end in 'a' (e.g. Tirana, Korça) and the indefinite for all others (Shkodër, Durrës). This seems to be consistent with the most common English usage.

companions over the course of my days in the forbidden land. This was in March, and, to cause even more consternation for Albanian security, my visit overlapped with the first 'free' elections held in some five decades. Albania, however, did not let me down; I was haunted by its synthesis of East and West and by the genuine warmth towards foreigners its people demonstrated. Thus, my obsession with this country was converted into a love affair with what I had come to see first hand, and since then, with the exception of the so-called 'Pyramid' years[4] and the more recent pandemic, I have been a regular visitor. Although I have never had the opportunity to live for an extended period of time in what I love to call my second home, I have travelled from Durrës and Saranda in the west to the border with North Macedonia and Kosovo[5] in the east, and from Han i Hotit, the frontier outpost with Montenegro in the north, to Kakavija, the southernmost town lying between Ali Pasha's strongholds in Tepelenë, Albania, and Ioannina, Greece.

By the time of my first visit in 1991, my academic direction had already expanded from Brazilian cinema to film studies at large. For this reason, it was inevitable that my interest in Albania would lead me to explore its cinema, for which I quickly acquired a love. On this initial visit, AlbTourist graciously arranged for me to visit Kinostudio, where I was granted a personal meeting with the institution's director, Kritaq Dhamo, who had also been the director of Albania's first feature film, *Tana* (1958). Although I knew nothing about Albanian cinema at the time, Kristaq received me most enthusiastically and promised me that the doors of Kinostudio's archives were open to me as a researcher. They would even provide me with a car and driver to get me from the centre to the northern outskirts where the complex was located. But who could predict the extent of the transformations that were in store for Albania only weeks and months later? By 1992,

4 Unlike other post-communist nations, Albania was precipitated into economic turmoil and civil war in 1997 due to the collapse of multiple financial pyramids. These Ponzi investment schemes had begun immediately following the fall of communism, and by 1997, some 26 of them had failed. Christopher Jarvis (2001) has articulated that these schemes were significant given that their scale in relation to the overall economy was 'unprecedented', and the political and social impacts of their collapse were tremendous. He attributes the popularity of the pyramids—some two-thirds of the population had invested in them—to numerous factors, including the lack of familiarity among Albanians with financial markets and the deficiencies of the old financial system, which allowed for the development of informal markets and government failure (Jarvis, 2001).

5 Throughout this book, the spelling 'Kosovo' will be used as opposed to the more authentically Albanian form, 'Kosova'. Such a choice does not apply a political agenda, but rather, more closely reflects the most common international practice.

Kinostudio had ceased operations, and inroads were being made towards the development of independent cinema in Albania.[6]

In the years following the chaos of 1997, I began to make frequent trips to Albania, during which I initiated serious research. My mentor in my new endeavor was Natasha Lako, the then director of the Albanian Central State Film Archive. Lako, a poet and screenwriter, had been a significant figure in the Albanian cinema world during the Kinostudio era. Author of several critical studies on Albanian cinema, among these *Energija filmika* (*Film Energy*) (2004a), Lako guided me not only in key concepts regarding Kinostudio's production mechanism, but also opened my eyes to the existence of Albanian films prior to the enterprise's first features. Through Lako, I met director Mevlan Shanaj, and later, the *grande dame* of Kinostudio, Xhanfise Keko, who has become one of the focal points of my research.

In March 2005, I attended a lecture by Faruk Basha on early American cinema held in the auditorium of the Albanian National Library.[7] At this event, I was introduced to director Kujtim Çashku, who had recently opened Albania's first private institute for the training of film professionals, the Marubi Academy of Film and Multimedia (Akademia e Filmit dhe Multimedias Marubi), built in a former sound studio complex between the main edifice of the former Kinostudio and the Central State Film Archive. I returned to Tirana in May of the same year to teach a master class on the Brazilian avant-garde director Mário Peixoto's *Limite* (1931). Over the course of the past eighteen years, Marubi has become my second academic home, and is the epicentre of my activities related to Albanian cinema.

This work began as an overall study of Albanian cinema from its origins through the present era of international coproduction. Its original intent was also to study Albanian-language films from Kosovo and Macedonia, as well as films made in Albanian and in Albania by such non-Albanophone directors as Johannes Naber, Joshua Marston, and Angeliki Antoniu. Such a project would have been far too massive, given the diversity and scope of the films involved, for a single book. I thus plan to remain working on the broader notion of Albanian and Albanophone film for the foreseeable future! Who was it, Confucius or Mark Twain, who said, 'Find a job you enjoy

6 By the early 2000s, not only was coproduction the wave of the future, but moreover, Albanian films from the communist era were available on VHS, and it was thus possible to view at home what would have required an archival visit a decade before.

7 Although the lecture was on silent film, the screening that accompanied it was of *Citizen Kane*. It is necessary to note that, after lacking access to foreign films for so many years, the viewing of any American film in Albania was a treat. Hence the incongruity between the lecture and the screening mattered relatively little.

doing and you will never have to work another day in your life'? Whoever it was, he must have been thinking about Albania!

This present work is intended to introduce Albania's dynamic cinematic patrimony to Western readers. I hope that it will inspire them to become acquainted with a cinema history that is only now becoming more readily accessible. This book project will have accomplished its primary goal if, through it, I can convey just a small part of my passion for Albanian cinema, which arguably remains one of the least known of European film traditions. Although Albanian films of the Kinostudio era were governed by the restraints of the authoritarian communist regime, they are replete with fissures of genuine creativity and innovation. Please join me in uncovering the dynamic imagination behind these rarely studied works.

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I am greatly indebted to numerous individuals, without whom this work would have been impossible. Since 2005, I have had the opportunity to give regular masterclasses at the Marubi Academy of Film and Multimedia in Tirana, and I thank rector Kujtim Çashku for his friendship and support over the years. He has tirelessly oriented me in so many ways in my research. Likewise, both Eol Çashku and Magali Perrichet have been invaluable resources for all my efforts. Few individuals have so generously assisted me throughout this present work and my previous articles on Albanian cinema as Eriona Vyshka of the Albanian Central State Film Archive, whose dedication to the field and passion for Albanian films from all periods is so greatly appreciated. Likewise, I must acknowledge the support of three of the Archive's former directors, Iris Elezi, Elvira Diamanti, and Natasha Lako, who have all shared my enthusiasm, in so many ways. Elvira has expressed thought-provoking views on the future of Albanian film, while Natasha has drawn my eyes back to its origins before the establishment of the People's Republic of Albania. Iris is passionately engaged in bringing the world of international cinema home to Albania and making her country's film tradition accessible to outsiders. Also, at the Albanian Central State Film Archive, Erand Meça has provided me with numerous copies of films, which have proven indispensable to my analysis. Moreover, over the course of my many visits to Tirana, I have come to appreciate the encyclopaedic knowledge of Abaz Hoxha, whose volumes were continually by my side in the writing process. Assistance from so many Albanian film professionals has been essential as well. I appreciate my many talks and email correspondence with such individuals as Piro Milkani, Mevlan Shanaj, Dhimitër Anagnosti, Roza Anagnosti, Vladimir Prifti, Joni Shanaj, Faruk Basha, Gentian Koçi, and Artan Puto. Particular recognition goes to the late Xhanfise Keko, with whom I was able to speak prior to her death and from whom I gained numerous insights into the artistic processes at Kinostudio, and to her son, Ilir Keko, and niece, Adriana Çipi. Other Albanian friends in Tirana have never let me down, among these, artists Leonardo Voci and Floriana Paskali.

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I am gratefulto a number of colleagues in other parts of the world and am humbled by the interest in and enthusiasm for Eastern European cinema at large. Specifically, I wish to thank Lars Kristensen, Ana Grgić, and Lydia Papadimitriou, who have been excellent editors of my prior work.

I offer a special thanks to Kledian Myftari at Charles University for his undaunted support. He has been not only a superlative co-writer on a piece related to Albanian cinema in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, but also an inseparable companion. A young and burgeoning scholar, Kledi holds himself to the highest of academic standards. I look forward to our next project together, which will somehow tie our divergent fields together!

Stateside, I would like to express my gratitude to Agron Alibali for his rich insights into the production of Yutkevich's *The Great Warrier Scanderbeg* (1953). His mother, Adivije Alibali, who was one of the film's stars, is a wealth of information on production details, and Agron graciously tapped her knowledge on my behalf. This film was a particular bug-a-boo for me, inasmuch as I had heard contradictory reports regarding its production. I therefore thank thank Elidor Mëhilli, whose insightful and innovative explorations of communist Albania have helped me contextualize my arguments. Elidor's extensive work on the overall historical context of Albania and its relations to the Soviet Union and China was invaluable for my deeper understanding of the context in which Kinostudio operated. From a different perspective, Michael Burrows assisted me with access to key Soviet files on production and shared his own valuable ideas. Drake Stutesman, moreover, provided me with great support for my early research on Xhanfise Keko, and her editorial suggestions were instrumental to me in formulating my ideas.

I also recognize a number of colleagues at the William Paterson University of New Jersey. Former Associate Provost Nina Jemmott was instrumental in my receiving several mini-grants to offset travel expenses. Deans Isabel Tirado, Kara Rabbitt, and Wartyna Davis have always encouraged me in any way possible. Jim Miles has been my cornerstone for all technical issues. The late Paul Vouras instilled in me an understanding of the need for a study of the ethnic relations between Albania and Greece; Octavio de la Suarée lifted me with his humour; and Ellen Frye has been a constant source of encouragement and new research ideas. Vanja Ludović, moreover, assisted me with Serbian-language materials. One of my fondest memories in the preparation of this book was screening Xhanifise Keko's *Pas gjurmëve*/ *On the Tracks* (1978) for my colleagues Charlotte Nekola and George Robb, professors of English and history respectively. Finally, Violeta Fernández has encouraged me in many years, over almost the entire process of working on this book!

Special thanks go to Eva Näripea of the Estonian Film Archives and Regina Longo of the Albanian Cinema project. I am indebted to them for their strong support of this manuscript! Also, I am extremely grateful to the editors of Amsterdam University Press's Eastern European Screen Cultures series: Greg de Cuir, Ewa Mazierska, and Franceso Pitassio for their support. Ewa has been a source of ideas and encouragement over the course of a good number of years.

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Small portions of this book have been previously published in earlier versions. In Chapter III, an initial version of the discussions on Gjika's *Clear Horizons* and Fejzo and Hozhafi's *The Captain* was published in 'It's a Wonderful Job! Women at Work in the Films of Communist Albania', *Studies in Eastern European Cinema* 6.1 (2015), pp. 4–20. The same chapter's discussion of Milkani and Çashku's *Face to Face* is a reworking of 'Chronicle of a Rift Reread: The Discourse of Nostalgia in Kujtim Çashku and Piro Milkani's *Face to Face*', *KinoKultura* Special Issue 16: Albania (2016). In Chapter III, an earlier version of the discussion of Milkani and Erebara's *Victory over Death* appeared, and, in Chapter IV an earlier version of the discussion on *Circle of Memory* was published in Albanian in '*Cherchez la femme*: Gratë revolucionare në filmat e Kinostudios.' ('*Cherchez la femme*: Revolutionary Women in the Films of Kinostudio'), *Politikja* 2 (2018), pp. 129–143. Finally, the discussions on Xhanfise Keko in Chapter IV rework analyses from 'It's a Wonderful Job' as well as 'Two Degrees of Separation: Xhanfise Keko and the Albanian Children's Film', *Framework* 54.1 (Spring 2013), pp. 40–58.

Last, but far from least, I would like to thank four special people at Amsterdam University Press. Maryse Elliott has been ever so patient with me over the years and supportive of this book. Mike Sanders has been an excellent gatekeeper of this manuscript. Finally, Chantal Nicolaes and Bria Heffernan have taken superlative care of the preparation of the manuscript.

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Introduction

Albania—The Context for a Little-Known Cinema

The Albanian earthquake of 26 November 2019, which was especially devastating in the port city of Durrës and environs, led to an international outpouring of humanitarian aid. Although considerably less affected, the capital city of Tirana, located only some 37 kilometres away, was also catapulted into chaos and panic. Yet this was short-lived. The invincible children of Skanderbeg rallied, and the country was soon vibrating with energy. There were only a few short months separating the earthquake from the arrival of COVID-19, and in this context, Albania once again proved itself to be rebellious in spirit, in many ways living on the edge. While most of the European Union closed its borders, the neighbouring land of the eagle remained defiantly open. The quake and the virus notwithstanding, Albania has welcomed foreign visitors even from countries whose citizens, at the time of the pandemic, were barred from most places.[1]

Slightly over a decade ago, the Australian-based *Lonely Planet* guides picked Albania as the number-one tourist destination in the world for 2010. It announced that this country, which had once been considered 'only for the brave', is indeed one of 'azure beaches, confrontingly good cuisine, heritage sites, nightlife, affordable adventures and the possibility of old-style unplanned journeys complete with [a welcoming populace] for whom travellers are still a novelty'. *Lonely Planet* asserts, 'Sick to death of being dismissed with blinged-up crime-boss clichés, [...] Albania won't be off the beaten path for much longer' (*Lonely Planet*, 2010). Indeed, during the few years prior to the *Lonely Planet* homage, the Balkan outpost had exchanged armed for open-armed locals! In April 2020, Prime Minister Edi Rama announced his goal to make Albania the tourism champion of the Western Balkans (Semini, 2021). An emphasis on this transformation

1 An 18 March 2021 report by *US News and World Report* titled 'Where Can Americans Travel Right Now?' indicates that, while US tourists were barred at the time from the likes of the European Union, Canada, Australia, and Russia, among numerous other nations, Albania required neither a COVID-19 negative test nor a vaccine for entry.

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is not an exaggeration. Over the course of its history, Albania has arguably been the most remote and mysterious of all European nations in the eyes of both East and West. Depending on the period, it has been alternatingly exoticized or vilified, or both at once. Albania has conjured up the romance of Lord Byron and Ali Pasha's court, not to mention the remote forests of Harry Potter. It has further been a paradise for anthropologists with its ancient blood feuds and sworn virgins. From a more negative perspective, Albania has been regarded as the erstwhile land of the world's most hard-lined Stalinist dictatorship and, in the postcommunist world, the home of one of the most brutal of mafias. One must note, however, that few of its twentieth-century detractors, particularly during the communist period, had ever been to Albania since it was so doggedly inaccessible! Yet who could imagine that Albania was home to a cinematic tradition, and a rich one at that? How could anyone, besides China under the Cultural Revolution, have conceived of the mere notion of an Albanian cinema? Albanian films, like the country's privileged position in *Lonely Planet*, are now on the map! Recent works are winning numerous international awards, and older classics are being restored and shown throughout the world.

For decades there had been a dearth of scholarly discourse on Albanian cinema, but this is slowly changing. In 1997, Dana Ranga did not allude to it in her insightful and entertaining documentary on communist musicals, *East Side Story*, even though there did exist a few musical numbers in the films of Enver Hoxha's Albania. In contrast, from a scholarly perspective, Dina Iordanova made reference to foreign films made in Albania, as well as to non-Albanian films with Albanian themes in her 2001 *Cinema of Flames: Balkan Film, Culture and the Media*. Four years later, of the 24 Balkan films thoughtfully and provocatively discussed in her *The Cinema of the Balkans* (2005), two are Albanian, and one of these is analysed by Iordanova herself. In the past two decades, we have witnessed a considerable growth in attention to Albanian film within a short period of time. A 2007 issue of *Cinéaste* published two pieces devoted to Albania, one by Iordanova and another by Gareth Jones. Since then, Albanian cinema has been discussed in multiple peer-reviewed journals, one of which was a 2016 special issue of *KinoKultura* devoted to the subject. It has also been the focus of essays in numerous scholarly books, including one in Portuguese. Albania's slow, but growing presence in scholarly discourse on Balkan cinema, moreover, stands in firm recognition of the fact that the country is an integral part of the region and shares, to a large extent, a good number of political, economic, and cultural processes. Yet it remains unique in other aspects, and one must look at both convergences and divergences with its Balkan neighbours.

Some words on the Balkans at large and at small

'Once upon a time there was a country, and its capital was Belgrade'. These opening words of Kusturica's *Podzemlje/Underground* (1995) allow us to reflect on the apparent unity forged by Tito in Yugoslavia and the notion, however fleeting, of Yugoslav cinema. As Iordanova asserts, this statement at once foregrounds Kusturica's (2002, p. 83) claim that Yugoslav union had been 'an artificial political construction built on lies and mutual betrayal' and evokes an undeniable nostalgia for the defunct state. In wake of the bombardment of Dubrovnik, the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo, and unrest in Macedonia, we recall with certain fondness an era in which Yugoslavia provided a peaceful and accessible portal between East and West. The case of Albania is distinct, although it indeed bears certain similarities.

The ambivalence of Kusturica's stance recalls Edward Said's reconsideration of the relationship of divergent communities to the ever-fluctuating nation-state, an argument which has provided a theoretical framework for recent re-figurations of the notion of national cinema by such critics as Mette Hjort, Scott Mackenzie, Andrew Higson, and Ian Jarvie. These scholarly debates have explored national cinema from the loci of production, reception (both local and international), and critical assessment. Moreover, Iordanova's seminal study *Cinema of Flames* pluralizes the turf of the national and examines the phenomenon of national cinematic voice in the context of the complex cultural entity known as Balkans, which she argues is widely defined by 'shared Byzantine, Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian legacies and by the specific marginal positioning of the region in relation to the western part of the European continent' (Iordanova, 2001, p. 6).

As Michael Moodie (1995, p. 102) has pointed out, the fragmented world of the Balkans dates back to the millet system of governance created by the Ottomans, 'which divided populations into semiautonomous religious groups'. Moodie further explains that the notion of nationality, which was introduced into the context of 'interdependent ethnic groups' in the nineteenth century, ultimately led to Balkan nationalism and to the 'powder keg of World War I' (p. 102). Galip Veliu (2011, p. 5), along similar lines, explores how, for the West, it was necessary 'to disintegrate [the Ottoman Empire] and thereby create national successor states, which would ease the way for the West to build their own power'. At the same time, even before the communist period, Russia had deployed pan-Slavic imperialism against the Ottoman control of the Balkans. As Veliu stresses, Russia was a primary actor in the Balkan wars in that it promised every nation a national state (p. 6). Later, such nationalism would prove the primary obstacle to a communist

agenda (p. 6). In response to these pan-Slavic goals, such countries as Italy and Austria-Hungary strongly supported the creation of an independent Albania, particularly inasmuch as 85% of its population was Muslim. As Veliu argues, '[…] the westerners were not so much concerned to help Albania, but they were in need of it, for their own interests' (p. 6).

In the film industry, the Balkans have played an unwitting, yet pivotal role in Hollywood. Dušan Makavejev (2006, p. xvi) emphasizes that Hollywood has been trading in Balkan stories for ages 'without knowing where the Balkans are exactly, who lives there and how Hollywood's favourite bad dreams are about the blood-thirsty Transylvanian count and vampire, Vlad-Ţepeş—Dracula'. Makavejev notes that a website about the 'son-of-the Balkans' identifies 307 films all about Dracula. He stresses that a similar fantasy is presented by Jacques Tourneur's *Cat People* (1942), which tells of Serbs who have morphed into savage panthers and terrorize Manhattan from their cages in the Central Park Zoo (p. xvi). Makavejev further points out a canny irony: Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* has its 'eleven stabs by eleven relatives' at the exact same place where, in 1991, the Yugoslav army would brutally attack the city of Vukovar, 'marking the break-up of Yugoslavia and triggering an endless chain of choreographed crimes committed by relatives only' (p. xvi).

Aware of the difficulties implicit in setting the boundaries of the Balkans, Iordanova (2001, p. 7) seeks an expanded definition of the region to embrace Turkey and Greece. In her edited collection, *The Cinema of the Balkans* (2005), her agenda is clearly to go beyond the confines of national cinemas and seek out commonalities. She is forceful in her argument that there is indeed a cinema 'of the Balkans'. Iordanova (2005, p. 1) writes:

> A closer examination of Balkan cultural output, however, reveals an astonishing thematic and stylistic consistency. Cinema in particular testifies to a specific artistic sensibility, possibly coming from shared history and socio-cultural space. The issues across borders are the same: turbulent history and volatile politics; a semi-Orientalist positioning which some see as marginality, and others define as a crossroads or a bridge between East and West; a series of adverse encounters between Christianity and Islam; a legacy of patriarchy and economic and cultural dependency.

Through her work, Iordanova hopes to address the 'shortage of scholarship that recognizes the affinities within the region and draws it all together. [Her work is] an exercise in connecting the disconnected Balkan space' (p. 3).

By having a different agenda with this present book, I am in no way intending to run counter to the strides that Iordanova has made in viewing Balkan cinema in interconnected terms. Rather, I hope to fill a noticeable void in scholarly discourse on the region, thereby tackling a problem that is only beginning to be recognized. Yet the task is not a simple one. To understand the twists and turns of Albanian cinema, one must apprehend, at least in general terms, Albania's historical and geographical position.

Albania in a postcolonial context

Of all the nations of the Balkans, Albania's postcolonial and postcommunist heritage is doubtless the most complex. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin have pointed out changes in postcolonial theory and argue that the term has broader implications than originally intended. For them, now that European imperialism has retreated further into the past, 'questions of resistance, power, ethnicity, nationality, language and culture and the transformation of dominant discourses by ordinary people provide important models for understanding the place of the local in an increasing globalized world' (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 2002, p. 222). By implication, postcolonialism can be extended to the postcommunist heritage of the former 'second world'. The application of postcolonialism to Albania is of particular consequence. In this case, the notion of 'traditional colonial rule' includes the heritage of the Ottoman Empire; the impact of the Fascist occupation; the legacy of Stalinism; Maoist orthodoxy, and Albania's own totalitarian past. The major 'colonial' influences on Albania have been Ottoman and second world. From the Ottomans, it at once inherited Islam and was, for reasons to be explained below, able to perpetuate tribalism. During the Cold War, Albania was needed by the Soviet Union to weaken the spread of Yugoslavia's liberal form of communism. In turn, it was essential for China in its efforts to solidify its influence over Russia in Vietnam. Together with these major factors contributing to Albania's postcolonial condition, we must also recall that the country was greatly impacted by Italy and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Nonetheless, of all these factors, it is clearly Albania's own former totalitarian regime that has provided the most powerful legacy with which contemporary society must come to terms. The emerging democracy needs to face residues of the communist regime that are still in place today.

Albania's intricate history can, to a great extent, be accounted for by geography and language. It lies on the southwestern edge of the Balkan Peninsula, and has, since the time of the Italian Renaissance, looked across the Adriatic

to Italy as a trade and cultural partner. This position actually worked in its favour during the communist period. Since it had no borders with the Soviet Union, it never suffered the fate of Hungary in 1956 or Czechoslovakia in 1968. In contrast, its position made it fall under Ottoman rule for over 400 years. One other factor that has complicated Albania's history is linguistic in nature. Albanian is an Indo-European language, yet it is neither a Slavic nor a Romance language, to which groups, with the exception of Greek, Turkish, and Hungarian, the other major languages of the Balkans belong. Albeit differences in religion have been of strong concern in the Balkans, diverse peoples have at least been united by their Slavic roots. Albania was left out of the equation, and fiercely defended its linguistic and cultural uniqueness. The *Rilindja*, or 'National Awaking', which took place between 1870 and 1912, attests to the extent to which Albanians have been defiantly proud of their language.

One could well link Albania's history of subjugation to the Romans, but for our purpose here, the Ottoman Empire provides a useful point of departure, in that its heritage is relatively recent. Ramadan Marmullaku (1979, p. 15) has argued that one of the characteristics of the Ottoman Empire was that non-Turks could attain high positions in government as long as they were Muslim. For this reason, Albanians '[linked their fate] with that of the Turkish empire for five centuries' (p. 15). The mountain tribes, moreover, were able to retain their tribal autonomy through tax payment (p. 15). The legacy of the Ottoman Empire thus rendered Albania the least 'European' of all European nations. The vast majority of its population, at least for bureaucratic expediency, had converted to Islam. Tribalism prevailed, and particularly the mountainous northern regions had little, if any, contact with the rest of the world. A growing sense of nationalism led to the *Rilindja*, and though the League of Prizren (1878–1881) sought Albanian autonomy, Albanians were not culturally prepared for independence. As Stavro Skendi has argued, such lack of preparedness distinguished Albania from other Balkan nations. There was thus a gradual path to national awakening, and 'the fate of [the] country now lay mostly in the hands of the great powers' (Skendi, 1967, p. 472). Nicholas C. Pano (1968, p. 24) has likewise examined how Albania as a fledgling independent nation was unable to transform itself from a 'backward province of the Ottoman empire' into a modern state.

When its appeal to the League of Nations for assistance was denied, Albania turned to Italy, which had been its trading partner hundreds of years earlier.[2] But Italian aid proved to be a double-edged sword. When Albanians

2 During a March 2005 meeting with the author, director Xhanfise Keko, introducing herself, apologized by proclaiming in Russian, 'Ya nye govoryu po-italianski' (Excuse me, I don't speak

took cognizance in the 1930s that close ties with Italy posed a problem for their nation's sovereignty, the Fascist occupation of Albania was already inevitable. Albania became a puppet state for Mussolini. Although tragic for Albanian self-determination, the Italian occupation and the subsequent German invasion would later provide ample material for Albanian films during the communist period. Fascists and Nazis would become the 'them' for the partisan 'us'.

Probably it was Stalin's opposition to Tito's plan in the late 1940s to incorporate Albania into Yugoslavia that led to close ties between Albania and the Soviet Union. However, when Khrushchev fostered tighter relations with Belgrade, Albania feared that the new alliance would cause it to be swallowed up by Yugoslavia. When Tirana ultimately broke with Moscow and aligned itself with Beijing, this was most embarrassing for the Soviet Union. As Pano (1968, p. 176) explains '[the Soviet Union] failed above all, to crush a country so small, so Balkan, so poor, so isolated, and to the world at large so nearly ridiculous that Moscow itself ever since has run the risk of being thought impotent'. Of special consequence in this case for Albania was that the breach with Moscow showed to the world just how small, unknown, and isolated the Balkan nation was. Pano (1968, p. 182) stresses that, for Albania, 'The vehemence with which the Albanians have waged their campaign against Moscow stems from the belief of their leaders that they are fighting for the preservation of Albania's independence'.

The affinities between Albania and Maoist China were primarily the result of similar ideologies between Enver Hoxha and Mao Zedong, the latter of whom had rejected the three bonds of the Confucian code of ethics. As Anton Logoreci (1977, p. 181) has explained, Mao eschewed bonds between ruler and subject, father and son, and husband and wife. Logoreci (p. 181) asserts that Hoxha was quick to abolish similar traditional loyalties so that the modernization of the country along communist lines would be accomplished. Hoxha's call for all communist parties to join Beijing and Tirana in a 'bloc' against breaches with Stalinism demonstrated his faith in the Chinese Cultural Revolution as the most effective weapon to prevent the spread of bourgeois ideas (Pano, 1968, pp. 177–178).

Finally, one can argue that the ultimate postcolonial thread, Albania's own totalitarian regime as felt in the present, may well be unique among postcommunist nations. Logoreci (1977, p. 213) has described Hoxha's leadership as 'an enclosed camp where Mao's totalitarian doctrines, interlaced

Italian), proudly underscoring her Soviet education in the early 1950s and perhaps hinting at a degree of scepticism towards Albania's continued fascination with Italy.

with Stalinist practices, have been tried out under perfect laboratory, almost test-tube conditions'. He maintains that the very mechanisms that improved education, social welfare, public health, and industry were also responsible for 'squeezing Albanians into a totalitarian straight-jacket of an all-enveloping character and vicious strength' (Logoreci, 1977, pp. 213–214).

Thus, it is a combination of extended periods of subjugation and deeply entrenched isolation that constitute Albania's postcolonial history. From the Ottomans it inherited Islam, and today, one witnesses a strong revival of this religion in Albania. Moreover, age-old tribal systems were perpetuated by the feudal system coupled with the autonomy the Ottomans conferred upon Albania's remote mountainous regions. Even today, Albania, to a large extent, still perceives itself as 'primitive'. Secondly, the vestiges of Italian Fascism have offset Albania's defiant nationalism; as the postcommunist state sought links with the West, Italianism seemed the most opportune path. Finally, it is difficult to determine which aspects of Albanian totalitarianism were the results of the country having co-opted the Chinese Cultural Revolution, or which were autochthonous in nature. In any case, what renders Albania distinct from other Balkan nations is that, combined with the expected influence of the Ottomans and the Soviets, one finds the impact both of two highly distinct pressures, those of Italy and China, as well as of its own profound isolationism.

Additional words on the complete isolation of Albania

It is difficult to imagine a European country gradually becoming the world's most isolated state over the course of the 1960s and 1970s. Yet one can assert that, under the Ottomans, it was also Europe's least-known region. When *Lonely Planet* emphasized Albania's transformation into an accessible, welcoming destination, it implied that the nation had a history of being the most remote and exotic of all European nations in the eyes of both East and West. Doubtless, it first became known to the Anglophone world through Lord Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812–1818), a work that foregrounded the romance, valour, and exoticism of the court of Ali Pasha. At this point, Albania was a remote outpost of the Ottoman Empire, an uncharted land where the values and codes of the West were unknown. In the early twentieth century, Britain gained further insight into Albania through the ethnographic writings of Edith Durham, in particular, *High Albania* (1910). This work opened Western eyes to the age-old social practices and traditions of the northern Albanian mountains. As I have emphacized,

(Williams (2012a, p. 92) , Durham's work was not limited to a discussion of rites of passage and the exotic. Rather, she also undertook an extended study of ethnicities, further historicizing and contextualizing Albania within the intense conflicts of the Balkans. Durham would subsequently extend her analysis in *Twenty Years of Balkan Tangle* (1920), a work that claimed that no solution to the region's long-standing problems could ignore the ethnic Albanian issue. From the other side of the Atlantic, American Rose Wilder Lane, the daughter of *Little House on the Prairie* writer Laura Ingalls Wilder, chronicled her experiences as a woman ethnographer in areas adjacent to those traversed by Durham in *Peaks of Shala* (1923).[3] Lane would later publish *Travels with Zenobia: Paris to Albania by Model T. Ford* (1983), which rendered an account of an automobile trip made by Lane and her companion, children's writer Helen Dore Boyleston, from France, through Italy, and ultimately to the port of Durrës on Albania's Adriatic coast.[4]

The United States, moreover, gained further, yet limited insight into Albania when a Hungarian-American became the consort of King Zog. The marriage between the Albanian regent and Géraldine Margit Virginia Olga Maria Apponyi de Nagyappony, granddaughter of Virginia millionaire John Henry Stewart and a distant cousin of Richard M. Nixon and Robert Frost, failed to have a long-term positive effect on Albanian-American relations. Queen Géraldine's reign was cut short by the invasion of Albania by the Italian Fascists in April 1939, at which time the United States officially ended its diplomatic ties with Albania. Although a United States mission was set up in Tirana in 1945, the government of Enver Hoxha cut off all ties the following year, a breach in relations that would last almost half a decade. The United Kingdom also broke off all diplomatic relations with

3 A friend of writer Ayn Rand, Rose Wilder Lane (1886–1968) was not only a passionate Albanophile, but also a fervent proponent of libertarian ideology. The rugged individualism of her travels through the Shala region of northern Albania attest to her independent spirit. Her purportedly merciless treatment of her aging parents has been widely discussed, as has been her claim that she was the true author of the *Little House* series. In her later years, her world travels were financed by the royalties from her mother's books. Lane, however, did somehow manage to have a humanitarian streak. On her first trip to Albania in 1921, she met Rexh Meta (1906–1985), an adolescent boy who served as her translator and guide. She later adopted him and sent him to Cambridge, where he earned his doctorate in Economics. Meta later became the Director of Albanian Finance. When he was imprisoned by the communist government after the Second World War, Lane, a hater of communism, petitioned President Truman to come to his aid. Although he was not released, Enver Hoxha did indeed pardon him from the death penalty. Meta spent 27 years in prison under the regime.

4 Boyleston was the author of the Sue Barton series for girls interested in becoming nurses and the Carol Page books for aspiring actresses. She was also a close friend of actress Eva Le Gallienne, whose lesbianism endangered her career in the American theatre.

Albania following the destruction of two Royal Navy cruisers off the shore of Corfu in May 1944, which resulted in 44 fatalities. In 1991, the two nations sought a rapprochement.

Albania remained a land of mystery and intrigue for most Americans and Britons from 1946 until 1991. Such intrigue was built upon both its exoticism and its political isolation. And together with this isolation, one had the sense of an impoverished country with very little to offer.[5] Even telephone service was unavailable between the United Statess and Albania until March 1990.[6]

Not only were telecommunications blocked for the larger part of the communist period for calls from the United States, but travel was also extremely difficult. While very few Westerners were granted the possibility of visiting the country, Americans were obviously the least welcome of all. As late as the 1970s, the United States claimed that its passports were invalid for travel to Albania, although it later clarified that the original meaning of the warning was that Americans were allowed to travel there, but they could not avail themselves of any consular assistance ('United States Appellant v. Lee Levi Laub et al., nr. 176', 1966-1967).

Albania, nonetheless, permitted selected Albanian-Americans whose families had emigrated to the United States before the communist period to visit. Tourists would travel inside the confines of Albania in groups of fifteen to 30, and since they were conspicuous, they were easily 'policed'. Moreover, a barber was stationed at Rinas airport to assure that visitors would maintain an appropriate appearance. Williams (2012a, p. 93) argues that 'Albania's tourism policies at once served to make the country accessible and preserve its aura of mystery. Tourists were permitted to see "something", but what they saw was limited and often reflected remote eras of the past rather than contemporary reality'.[7]

5 In the United States, parents would sometimes admonish their children who had not eaten all of their lunch or dinner by saying, 'Think about the starving children in Albania'.

6 Telephone contact for an American citizen was possible only when travelling abroad, or when crossing the border to Canada or Mexico, where phone calls to Albania were allowed. When the lines opened, it was somewhat of a surprise. Albania allowed outgoing telephone traffic before service negotiations even began. Americans with ties to Albania suddenly began to receive phone calls from their relatives and friends! When the lines officially opened via a connection in Rome, *The New York Times* quipped 'It is unclear as to how many Americans want to call Albanians [...]' ('Upheaval in the East—Dial "A" for Albania').

7 Van Christo, president of Frosina, an Albanian immigrant culture resource based in Bpston, was instrumental in coordinating the trips. They were restricted to Americans of Albanian heritage who had left or whose parents had left Albania for economic and not political reasons. Christo describes the trips, '"Many of those who visited Albania during Hoxha's regime saw that

Although Britain as well suffered a complete severance of ties, there did exist an Albania Society established by the Communist Party of Great Britain. The group ceased its activities in the wake of Hoxha's growing criticism of Soviet revisionism. Its dormancy was short-lived; an active defender of communist Albania, Bill Bland, reactivated the society in 1957 and remained at its helm until the collapse of communism. Growing to a membership of several hundred people, the Albania Society published a quarterly journal, *Albanian Life*, edited from Bland's home in Ilford, Sussex. Bland had learned the Albanian language and was active in the translation and publication of texts from communist Albania. In 1984, Bland received a special invitation, as an ardent supporter of the Hoxha regime, to visit Albania.[8]

Travel was never as off-limit to Britons as it was to Americans. Feminist film maverick Laura Mulvey has spoken of a group excursion through Albania in the 1970s in which she and her then husband, theoretician Peter Wollen, participated. She spoke of the strangeness of the country. (Laura Mulvey, personal contact, January 1992). Londoners were able to obtain books, periodicals, sound recordings, and memorabilia from Albania in the early 1980s at an establishment simply dubbed 'The Albanian Store' and located in London's Covent Garden district. With a purchase, patrons were allowed to take with them a couple of canned goods from Albania! The official Albanian publications available in this store reinforced the notion of Albania as an isolated, communist country marching to its own drummer.

There were, nonetheless, a surprising number of individuals from around the globe who were able to visit. A case in point is Ronald Taylor, a New Zealand dentist and president of the New Zealand Communist Party, who was invited in 1967 to proof the translation of the works of Enver Hoxha into English. His daughter, June Taylor, who accompanied him, was schooled in Albania. In 1974, she was hired by Radio Tirana to be the English-language voice for its broadcasts.[9] Today, Taylor is the Political Officer for OSCE in

their homeland had advanced from when they left it. They saw a new hospital or bridge built and got good impressions. However, this was not the case with young people"' . The first trip, in 1957, was led by Dr. Jojn T,Nasse' (quoted in Williams, 2012,pp. 103-103.

8 Bland published an article about his visit to Albania. 'Albania—1984' was originally published in *Albanian Life* in 1984 and is available online at the Marxists Internet Archive. Among the issues discussed in the article were education in Albania, the well-being of the Greek minority, whose situation Bland argued had been viewed negatively in the West, and the Albanian penal system. Bland explained that Albania had a very low criminality rate and that, contrary to reports in the West, the prisoners there were well taken care of and fed properly.

9 The reader is referred to John Escolme's 2022 radio interview with June Taylor.

Tirana. Numerous speakers of other languages who were communists were invited for short-term assignments in similar capacities.[10]

Part of the reason for the exoticization of Albania, not only in the United States and the United Kingdom, but also throughout Western Europe was linguistic in nature. Some words regarding language issues are in order given that the overall lack of knowledge of the Albanian language is a contributing factor to the dearth of scholarship on Albanian cinema. In Europe, the Albanian language was rarely studied outside of highly specific university courses. Neither the German Langenscheidt series of foreign language courses nor the French Assimil series offered—or offer to this day, for that matter!—a comprehensive course in Albanian. In this regard, the United States and the United Kingdom, albeit the most distanced from Albania during the communist period, were, and are, at the vanguard. During the communist period, the Defense Language Institute of Monterey, California, published an extensive basic course, released in ten volumes between 1965 and 1970.[11] In 1980, a basic course was released by Spoken Language Services of Ithaca, New York.[12] In Britain, Routledge's Colloquial Language series published in 1991 an Albanian course with an audio component based upon the language variant spoken in Kosovo. This course was thoroughly

10 During the Cold War, Radio Tirana broadcast internationally in some 22 languages.

11 Between 1965 and 1969, the Defense Language Institute published a ten-volume audiolingual course accompanied by ancillary materials. This work, however, was difficult for anyone interested in standard Albanian, inasmuch as it was written in the Gheg language variety of the north. Albanian was taught at the institute by Zev Logoreci, father of Thomas Logoreci, who in 2014 would be co-director with Iris Elezi of an internationally acclaimed feature film, *Bota*. Eduardo Mayone Dias, an instructor of Portuguese at the Institute, explained to me that there was very little need for Albanian among members of the US Army and other governmental branches who studied at the Institute. Hence, Albanian was used primarily to teach instructors of other languages the pedagogy used by the Institute (Eduardo Dias, personal contact, January 1980). In recent years, the Defense Language Institute's course, deemed in the public domain, has been made available, on various Internet sites.

12 At the time of the publication of *Spoken Albanian* by Spoken Language Services of Ithaca, New York, in 1980, the University of California at San Diego was home to an Albanian language project funded by the US Department of Health, Education and Welfare. The project was under the direction of Leonard Newmark, the author of a seminal work on the structure of the Albanian language (1957) and who would later publish an Albanian-English dictionary (2000). Other authors of the *Spoken Albanian* course included Ismail Haznedari, who would subsequently co-author with Sami Repishti a manual of Albanian language competencies for Peace Corps volunteers (1992), and Peter Prifti, who lent the Albanian voice to the audio tapes and was the author of a 1978 study on communist Albania, and Philip L. Hubbard, doctoral candidate assigned to the project as a research assistant, who had travelled to Kosovo in 1977 for a seminar on Albanian language and culture for foreign scholars (personal contact, Philip L. Hubbard, June 2020). Hubbard's 1980 dissertation on the Albanian word complex has recently been republished.

revised in 2015 by two linguists, one Albanian and the other a Chilean/North American, placing emphasis on standard Albanian as spoken in the Republic of Albania.[13]

All the while disdaining the Anglophone world, communist Albania maintained much more positive ties with France and Sweden. After all, Enver Hoxha's formative years were spent either studying in a French lycée or spending time in France and Belgium. Having completed secondary school in French in Korça, where he was exposed to French history, philosophy, literature, and culture, he matriculated at the University of Montpellier to pursue scientific studies. Hoxha subsequently withdrew, this due to his personal inclination towards law and philosophy. In Montpellier, however, he was closely aligned with the French Communist Party and attended conferences of its Workers' Association. Hoxha continued his university education in Paris, where he also wrote articles related to Albania under the pseudonym of Lulo Malësori for *L'Humanité*. From 1934 to 1936, he served at the Albanian consulate in Brussels in the personnel office of Queen Mother Sadije Zogu-Toptani, who had been the sponsor of his early education in France. The position was short-lived, and he was soon fired for his Marxist tendencies. Hoxha's education left him multilingual and, as evidenced by his speeches, a cautious Francophile.

Albania's 1960s diplomatic ties to France are wittily referenced by a scene in Godard's *Bande à part/Band of Outsiders*, when Madame Victoria, (played by Flemish actress Louisa Colpeyn) the guardian of the film's female protagonist, announces that she is on her way to a cocktail party at the Albanian embassy! Close ties also existed between the French communist movement and Albania. Large factions of French communists were disillusioned with Moscow's revisionism and the Sino-Soviet split, and these sentiments were evident in French intellectual and cultural life. Jean-Paul Sartre was fervently supportive of the Maoist cause. Simone Signoret actively visited hunger strikers of the Gauche Prolétarienne while her husband, Yves Montand was making Godard's *Tout va bien* (Ross, 1995, p. 17). Albanian studies, moreover, were not unheard of in France. In 1975, Gérard Girard, a Marxist professor, started a working group on Albanian cinema in the Department of Film Studies of the University of Paris, Vincennes. The Groupe de Travail sur le

13 *Colloquial Albanian* was originally written by Isa Zymberi and published by Routledge in 1991. It was a reasonably extensive course. The updated *Colloquial Albaniani* by Linda Mëniku and Héctor Campos, released in 2015, is far less comprehensive, but pedagogically it is considerably more in tune with current practices that use one of the more communicative approaches to foreign language acquisition.

Cinéma Albanais published what is most likely the first study on Albanian cinema either within Albania or abroad.[14] Their brief treatise, *Le Cinéma albanais/The Albanian Cinema* includes a cursory discussion of the history of Albanian film, excerpts from Enver Hoxha's speeches on the arts and literature, and numerous film summaries.

In 1969, Sweden opted to initiate diplomatic ties with Albania, and, to launch the process, it took advantage of Albania's close ties with France, reaching out to Albanian diplomatic channels through its embassy in Paris. Sweden's current ambassador to Albania, Elsa Håstad (2020), looks back to the 1960s when a good number of Swedish intellectuals and workers were interested in communism. In a 2020 interview, she explains that Sweden in the 1960s was characterized by protests among youth and left-wing activists. Work environment and human values were particularly important. Swedes were, by and large, politically active, and many became interested in the communist regime of Albania. She explains that, in the 1960s, Sweden was home to strong left-wing movements. There were strikes among workers over labour conditions and human values. Intellectuals, writers, journalists, and ordinary citizens with socialist beliefs travelled to such places as the Soviet Union and Cambodia. They were even able to visit Albania under controlled conditions.

Aside from France and Sweden, Albania maintained contact with those communist parties that it felt were strong in the battle against revisionism. A mere glance at volume V of the *Speeches, Conversations and Articles of Enver Hoxha* (Hoxha, 1977), which covers the years 1968 and 1969, is evidence to this effect. It includes portions of talks between Hoxha and delegations of the communist parties of Ceylon, Italy, Peru, France, North Vietnam, and the People's Republic of Congo.

The arts in Albania

The world's reconceptualization of Albania over the course of the past three decades has been met by a renewed self-imagining on the part of Albania itself. In recent years, the country has re-vamped its National Historical Museum, which had previously been an ode to Albanian communism, even though it presented an overview of the country's history from the early

14 For an engaging account of Gérard Girard's later years, the reader is referred to a French-language radio documentary by Sophie Knapp, *Le Phantôme de l'université: L'esprit de mai-68 dans les couloirs de Paris 8.*

Illyrian days to the Hoxha era. Today, on the other hand, displays related to the communist period are relegated to a much smaller space, and are presented through the lens of genocide. Although critics deem that such a decision was intended to whitewash 46 years of Albanian history and frame the Hoxha regime as a dictatorship, supporters of the change feel the Museum is now more balanced, providing a more objective view of historical transformations on Albanian turf. A similar phenomenon has occurred in the fine arts. Following the fall of communism in Albania, a great deal of attention was devoted to examining the arts in Albania as a continuum, from works made under the Ottomans, through those of independence and Fascist occupation, through the Hoxha years, and to the post-1991 era. The National Art Gallery in Tirana has an excellent collection of socialist realism, housing in 2007 a special exhibition to this effect. Its collections explore the communist period from diverse angles. In fact, it displays socialist-realist pieces that were banned during the Hoxha regime.

Nonetheless, even under communism, art criticism was more complex than might be expected. An example is the way in which the sculptures of Odhise Paskali (1903–1985) were read during that period. Andon Kuqali's *Odhise Paskali: People's Sculptor of the People's Socialist Republic of Albania*, published in 1980 under the auspices of the Gallery of Figurative Arts in Tirana, presents an overview of Paskali's work from 1924 through his contemporaneous works. The volume portrays Paskali as a patriot and ardent anti-Fascist. Indeed, it foregrounds the artist's work as an integral part of the state agenda. It stresses: 'Odhise Paskali's figures have internal dynamism, heroic pathos, and revolutionary drive. They are the bearers of the lofty ideals of the people and socialist society. His work is well-known and dear to the people' (Kuqali, 1980, p. 3). On the other hand, other characteristics of Paskali's work are noted. According to Kuqali, Paskali's art is at once meditative and philosophical, imbuing his work with strong national traits such as bravery, nobility, and lively temperament (p. 3)

More recently, Paskali's sculptures have been assessed from even more diverse standpoints. *Për Paskalin nga Paskali*/*Paskali on Paskali*, a three-volume compendium compiled by the sculptor's daughter, Floriana Paskali, and published in 2005, examines the artist's work, foregrounding his aesthetic and philosophical writings. The three volumes include Paskali's work prior to communism and during the Hoxha period, as well as an assessment of how his work has been read after the fall of communism. Also in 2005, Leonardo Voci, a Tirana-based artist, published *Odhise Paskali: Themelues i skultures shqiptare/Odhise Paskali: Founder of Albanian Sculpture*, which focuses very heavily on Paskali's work prior to communism, and to the works the artist

dedicated to his wife Keti, the great love of his life. Voci indeed devotes a great deal of attention to Paskali's work during the Hoxha years, but his discussion is aesthetic rather than political. In 2009, Floriana Paskali published *Best of Paskali*, a book which opens with a quote from Paskali—'Like beauty and love, the magic of art cannot be told, but felt'—and consists of photographs of the sculptor's work, presented without commentary. The book includes a one-page biography, a chronology of important dates in Paskali's life, and a photo montage of bank notes, an Albanian passport, and other artifacts that bear images created by the artist. It closes with a list of five studies devoted to Paskali. Once again, the communist regime is not mentioned. The chronology, however, notes that Paskali was awarded the title 'People's Sculptor' in 1961 and that the President of the Republic attended his funeral on 13 September 1985. It makes no mention of the fact that the president who attended was Ramiz Alia, the communist successor to Enver Hoxha, who had died in April of the same year. The critical studies of both Floriana Paskali and Leonardo Voci clearly eschew political context in favour of exploring Odhise Paskali's work from aesthetic and philosophical perspectives.[15]

Albanian cinema and the project of this book

Recent years have seen an unprecedented growth in interest in Albanian cinema, and despite the numerous peer-reviewed articles and book chapters mentioned above, no extended scholarly work has yet appeared in any language other than Albanian. Given the high output of the Albanian film industry under communism, it is significant that this country's cinema has been one of the least studied of Central and Eastern Europe. This is due not only to Albania's isolation under Enver Hoxha, but also to issues of language. As mentioned before, Albanian is an Illyrian rather than a Slavic language. Hence, much academic criticism and unsubtitled films are inaccessible to Slavicists, whose specialties are most directly related to most scholarship on the Balkans.

Two years following the aforementioned publication of *Le Cinéma albanais* by the Groupe de Travail sur le Cinéma Albanais, Kinostudio released *The Albanian Film* (1977), a trilingual English/French/Albanian opus, which became the first study devoted to the subject to be published in Albania. It

15 Floriana Paskali and Leonardo Voci have presented homages to Odhise Paskali in the United States. One of these numerous events was held at the William Paterson University of New Jersey in November 2012, to commemorate 100 years of Albanian independence.

summarizes and categorizes Albanian films produced to date. The volume is closely aligned with the dominant ideology of the era and presents film as an integral part of the overall political and social agenda of the Enver Hoxha regime. *The Albanian Film*, moreover, is selective in its Hoxha quotes and tends to paint the national leader as monolithic in his views. In 1987, Abaz Hoxha published *Filmi artistic shqiptar*, an overview of Albanian film from 1957 to 1984. Following a brief historical introduction, the work proceeds film by film and provides production credits, casts, screenings at festivals, and a bibliography of film reviews. Furthermore, published in 1990, Gazmend Hanku's *Filmi shqiptar: realizime të Kinostudios 'Shqipëria e Re:1977–1987'*, a volume which is virtually unattainable at present, discusses a good deal of the final decade of communism. What is most noteworthy is that, during the communist period, critical works on Albanian film, whether published in Albania or France, either foregrounded the country's socio-political agenda, or were merely descriptive in nature.

This book, as its title indicates, explores Albanian cinema from the origins of moving images on the country's turf through the communist period. It is intended to be followed by a companion volume that will have as its focus the postcommunist era of coproduction. Although it will have as its primary focus the creation and growth of the Kinostudio enterprise, which spanned from the early years of communism and Albania's growing seclusion through the collapse of the regime, it will also examine early films made by diverse individuals, both Albanian and foreign, within the confines of Albania. These works are included not only because of the important images they present of Albania under the Ottomans, the period of independence, the monarchy of King Zog, and the Fascist occupation, but also due to the fact that they paved the way for Albania's own cinema, which developed with the foundation of the People's Republic of Albania. A good number of films made by diverse foreign entities are available, yet there are a number of works which have either been lost, or which never reached the stage of post-production.

Considerable consideration has been devoted to the uniqueness of Albanian cinema vis-à-vis Eastern European cinema at large. This book, for its part, attributes this difference to Albania's own heritage of postcolonialism (Ottoman Empire, Fascist Italy, Stalinism) as well as to its politics of isolationism and the neocolonial heritage thereof.

One significant aspect of the book is that it penetrates through the apparent propaganda and orthodoxy of the Kinostudio era to look at the subversive nature of such figures as communist Albania's sole woman director, Xhanfise Keko, whose child spy series of the late 1970s and early 1980s actually undermined the system they purportedly upheld.

This book is not intended to present an extended theorization of the colonial context of communist Albania. That has been explored in a number of the peer-reviewed articles that have appeared in the past fifteen years. Nor does it have as its goal a theorization of the complexity of national identity/ies in the case of Albania. Nonetheless, references will be made to theoretical sources as appropriate throughout the book. This work, rather, is intended to present an *introduction* to Albanian cinema in the early years and during the communist period. Its perspectives are largely cultural and historical.

Films chosen for discussion and analysis

It is essential to stress that this book in no way is intended to constitute an exhaustive study of Albanian cinema from an historical perspective, although it does proceed, for the most part, in chronological order. Albanian film historian Abaz Hoxha has already assumed such a challenge in several of his Albanian-language books, and this study would have been impossible without his work. Moreover, extensive scholarly analysis has been offered through Abdurrahim Myftiu's thorough-going studies of cinema and literature in Albania, Albanian cinema under communism, and Albanian cinema at the turn of the millennium. I am further indebted to his work, which has offered me significant perspectives to help shape my own. It must be noted that the studies of Hoxha and Myftiu have been intended primarily for a domestic audience. More recently, the Albanian-language analyses, both in Albanian and English, by Julian Bejko have contributed to an ideological understanding of Albanian cinema.

The goal of this book is to examine and analyse the phenomenon of Albanian cinema, and to open the eyes of scholars and Albanophiles alike to this engaging film tradition. In each of the chapters that follow, some films are explored in greater detail than others. My choice of films to be discussed in more depth shows, for the most part, an inclination to those films for which subtitled versions are available in English, or occasionally, French or Italian. Thus, this work focuses primarily on *films that have been made available to non-Albanophone viewers*. The works chosen for more detailed analysis are indeed worthy of close study and undisputedly reflect significant moments in Albanian cinema. Nonetheless, my selection of films in no way implies that other works are not equally important. In short, through the films discussed, I am not attempting to create a canon, or to favour one director over another. Granted, certain names appear far more frequently than others in my analyses, this being due to the fact that a number of directors have

had their films subtitled and shown abroad more than others. It is of special consequence that two of the films chosen for closer examination were restored by the now defunct Albanian Cinema Project, which constituted a concerted international effort to save Albania's film patrimony. For these reasons the selection of films to be discussed either briefly or at greater length has been the result of a conscious decision on my part. If for whatever reason, my choice leads to disparities in the discussion, I assume full responsibility and apologize. Any imbalance noted should open the doors to Albanian cinema and pique the interest of viewers for the rich works not discussed here. It is my hope that the works I have chosen will encourage scholars and other readers to pursue their knowledge of Albanian cinema and explore its wealth, which extends far beyond what I have been realistically able to cover in this book. I also hope that this volume will encourage readers to advocate for the subtitling of more works, which will place them within the reach of international viewers. Along similar lines, the focus of this book is on *feature* filmmaking. Although chapters I and II devote considerable attention to documentary and/or newsreels—after all, this is all there was in the early years—, this focus is greatly reduced once the discussion reaches the feature film output of the late 1950s. There will, however, be limited discussions in later chapters of the documentary work of such figures as Endri and Xhanfise Keko and Dhimitër Anagnosti. In sum, I consider this book, together with recent critical analyses on Albanian film, to constitute an invitation for further debates on the subject. I, myself, relish the opportunity to visit a number of the films mentioned here in less detail or not at all in future projects.

Structure of the book

Albania's film history has indeed been a dialectic between the local context and the outside world. During the Kinostudio era, Albanian cinema was a national one, made by and for Albanians. It is a known fact that, particularly in the early years of the communist period, when Albania was well integrated into the Warsaw Pact, film professionals were often trained abroad, most notably in Moscow, Budapest, and Prague. Nonetheless, Albanian cinema was virtually unconnected to interests beyond the confines of the nation-state. As the country grew in isolation, its film professionals had less and less access to international cinema. In this respect, it is considerably distinct from the works of its Balkan cousins. The structure of the book will attempt to take into account this dialectic by virtue of its division into chapters. It is necessary to stress that there is a great deal of overlap between diverse

historical periods, particularly with regard to the development of film in communist Albanian. For instance, Albania's severance of ties with the Soviet Union did not happen overnight, but rather, involved a relatively long process. I have made an effort to divide the chapters in such a way that the prevailing socio-political context can elucidate the films discussed to the extent that this is possible in a case in which political transformations were ongoing rather than instantaneous.

The book will be divided into five chapters, each devoted to a period of Albanian cinema prior to the collapse of the communist government. Each chapter will begin with an historical discussion reflecting the specific context under discussion. An overview will be made of significant films produced during the given period, and this discussion will be interwoven with lengthier examinations of individual films.

Chapter I will look back to early filmmaking in the Balkans under the Ottoman Empire and will stress that it is difficult or even irrelevant to argue whether given films of the time were Albanian or not. It will also look at footage taken by non-Albanians on Albanian turf, and how the notion of Albania is employed by various foreign regimes, be they Fascist Italy or the United States, to further their own agendas. It will examine, as well, the rudimentary beginnings of an Albanian cinema per se, which occurred primarily during the Italian occupation.

Chapter II will begin with early efforts under the communist regime to partner with production entities in other Eastern Bloc countries to produce newsreels and documentaries celebrating the accomplishments of the fledgling socialist state. The focus of this chapter will be on the period when relations between Albania and the Soviet Union were at their apex. It will discuss the early training of future filmmakers in Moscow and the establishment of the Kinostudio enterprise on the outskirts of Tirana. Sergei Yutkevich's *Luftëtari i madh i Shqipërisë Skënderbeu*/*The Great Warrior Scanderbeg* (1953), an epic coproduction between Mosfilm and Kinostudio, is discussed as an example of a work celebrating the close relationship between Stalin and Hoxha. An examination will follow of the documentary work of Endri Keko, one of the future professionals trained in Moscow, and of Viktor Stratobërdha, a highly innovative documentarian who became persona non grata to the regime and was subsequently imprisoned. It will subsequently present a discussion of Hysen Hakani's *Fëmijet e saj*/*Her Children* (1957), a short feature, with elements of both documentary and fiction film, which focuses on the vaccination of children in Albania's far north. Finally, it will move to an analysis of Kristaq Dhamo's *Tana* (1958), Albania's first feature, which was highly influenced by the aesthetics of Stalinist cinema.

The Albanian Film Archive has identified a number of prevailing themes, among these the fight for national identity; the Second World War; labour; social problems, and women's issues. The films discussed in Chapter III represent these themes. Included in this chapter will be a discussion of Enver Hoxha's official treatises on the arts and documents which attest to the mission of Kinostudio. Documentary filmmaking has been discussed at length in Chapters I and II given that, in the early days of shooting in Albania and the first decade of film production in communist Albania, the documentary mode was dominant. Beginning in Chapter III, however, documentaries will be mentioned only in passing due to the number of fiction films made in Albania from the early 1960s onward. The film discussions of Chapter III will begin with an examination of Hysen Hakani's *DEBATIK* (1961), a work exploring the involvement of children and youth in the partisan movement, which set the prototype for the child spy films of the following years. The chapter will explore the golden age of Kinostudio and its flourishing under increasing isolation. It looks back to a time when Albania was severing itself from membership of the Warsaw Pact and shifting its alliances from Moscow to Beijing. A significant work discussed will be Piro Milkani and Gëzim Erebara's *Ngadhnjim mbi vdekhen*/*Victory over Death* (1967), which tells of two young women who become martyrs under the Nazi occupation. This was one of the first Albanian films to gain a high level of popularity in China during the Cultural Revolution. Special attention will be drawn to such works as Muharrem Feijo and Fehmi Hoshafi's *Kapedani*/*The Captain* (1972), a comedy focusing on the modernization and gender equality attained by the socialist state. Of special importance are the films of directors Viktor Gjika and Dhimitër Anagnosti. Their jointly directed *Komisari i dritë*/*The Commissary of Light* (1964) tells the story of a partisan who returns to his home town in Albania's north to fight against the age-old traditions that must be discarded in order for the country to embrace the new ideology of communism. In subsequent discussions, the chapter will explore Gjika's *Horizonte të hapura*/*Open Horizons* (1968), an ode to the New Man of Communism replete with poetic dynamics. Another Gjika film, *Rrugë të bardha*/*White Road* (1974), which returns to the visual dynamics of the earlier film will be examined, once more in light of an innovative approach to the theme of the hero of socialism. Dhimitër Anagnosti is arguably the most celebrated director of communist Albania. This chapter's discussions of Anagnosti will begin with *Duel i heshtur*/*The Silent Duel* (1967), at once a political and psychological thriller, focusing on the kidnapping of a young sailor and the hijacking of a ship from the port of Durrës by Western sympathizers. A film of special consequence is Anagnosti's *Lulëkuqet mbi mure*/*Red Poppies*

on the Wall (1976), probably the most famous film of communist Albania, which explores the partisan movement from the enclosed space of a school for orphans.

Chapter IV focuses on Albanian cinema during the country's period of isolation following its split with China. It will, as did the previous chapters, offer a look at the political and social context of the period. The late 1970s and the first half of the decade of the 1980s constituted a period in which Albanian society, at the height of the country's isolation, felt considerable angst and alienation. This was also a period in which Albanian cinema began to eschew the strict formulas and narrative outcomes of its early productions. Themes began to turn away from the expected topics of the partisan movement and Albania's struggles under the Fascist and Nazi occupations and embrace topics that engaged in more depth social issues, all the while maintaining the strong party line of what the cinema should depict. Although films of this period continued to explore Albanian history, they did so from a more innovative lens. The chapter will be ushered in with a discussion of the thematic diversity of films of this period, including Gjika's *Nëntori i dyte*/*The Second November* (1982), which was made to celebrate the seventieth anniversary of Albanian independence. It was one of the films selected by the Albanian Cinema Project in 2012. This will be followed by a longer discussion of Xhanfise Keko, one of communist Albania's rare woman directors, whose work has brought international attention, both critical and academic, to Albanian cinema in recent decades. Keko is known for her children's films, which have been controversially dubbed 'child spy films'. Special attention will be devoted to *Tomka dhe shokët e tij*/*Tomka and His Friends* (1977), which was restored in 2014 by the Albanian Cinema Project. Two additional Keko films which will be discussed are *Pas gjurmëve*/*On the Tracks* (1978), a child spy film which, unlike *Tomka and His Friends*, is not rooted in the partisan struggle, and *Kur po xhirohej një film*/*While Shooting a Film* (1981), which foregrounds the role of professional women in the communist state and the defiance of traditional patriarchal society. Discussions will then ensue of two films that foreground the role of music in popular struggle: Salim Kumbaro's *Koncert në vitin 1936*/*Concert in the Year 1936* (1978), a work exploring the role of music in popular struggle and Gjika's *Gjeneral gramafoni*/*General Gramophone* (1978), which foregrounds Fascist Italy's attempts to draw upon popular music in its colonization efforts. The chapter will further look at Milkani and Kujtim Çashku, *Ballë për ballë*/*Face to face* (1978), and this film will be analysed from the perspective of nostalgia for Albania's close friendship with the Soviet Union. Of all films

discussed in this book, *Face to Face* is afforded the longest analysis, this due to the complexity of the film and its thematic. Among the films from the early 1980s mentioned or discussed is Çashku's *Dora e ngrohtë/The Warm Hand* (1983), a provocative study of a youth who has srayed away from the ideals and norms of communist culture and society. Çashku's film has been read as an auteur film, and it is exemplary of the innovative film discourse of the 1980s.

Enver Hoxha died in 1985, and from that time, until the fall of communism, Kinostudio continued its portrayal of sociological and psychological issues. Following a brief examination of Hoxha's successor Ramiz Alia's commitment to continue Albania's anti-revisionism, Chapter V will explore two films drawn upon Ismail Kadare novels, Çashku's *Të paftuarit/The Uninvited* (1985) and Anagnosti's *Kthimi i ushtrisë së vdekur/The Return of the Dead Army* (1989) in terms of their narrative complexity and quality of productions. There will then follow a discussion of Spantak Pecani, *Mos të heshtësh/Speak Up!* (1985), a bold indictment of official corruption, which would likely have been difficult to produce a decade earlier. In 1987, Esat Musliu made *Rreth i kujtesës/The Circle of Memory* (1987), which may well be deemed one of Albania's first psychological thrillers, and this film will be analysed in terms of the broadening of genre in Albanian films made under isolation. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of Eduard Makri's *Shpella e piratëve/The Pirate Cave* (1990), a tale of youthful imagination and daring exploration. This film was made during the final year of Kinostudio.[16]

In the Conclusion, an exploration of the cultural climate of Albania immediately prior to the collapse of the communist regime wilbe followed by a discussion will be undertaken of Esat Musliu's *Vitet e pritjes/Years of Waiting* (1990), one of Kinostudio's final productions, which anticipates the theme of emigration that will characterize much of the early cinematic production of postcommunist Albania. The brief conclusion will look ahead to Albania's emergence in the global film market following the demise of communism.

It is hoped that the above introductory discussion will help clarify what this book is and what it is not. I understand that there will be disagreement among diverse readers with regards to the works mentioned and/or chosen for analysis. Disagreement leads to fruitful debate, and such debate should

16 The focus in this chapter will be on Kinostudio productions rather than on work made for television by Radiotelevizione Shqiptar. Nonetheless, a separate study of Albanian television productions deserves to be made.

Image 1. Kinostudio in the mid-1950s. Courtesy of the Albanian Central State Film Archive.

be thought of as a chance to open doors to further studies and conversations regarding early images of Albania, the birth of a socialist cinema in Albania, and the Kinostudio period. The world outside of Albania knows so little about the country's cinema, and further discussions will offer tremendous insights into the creativity and innovation that were indeed present, even under the most restrictive of circumstances.

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