The cinematographic representation of social frames

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The author of the essay titled «The Cinematographic Representation of Social Frames» analyzes images in the context of representing physical and ontological aspects of reality. He considers Albanian Communist Cinema (1952–1991) taking into consideration the viewer's perspective in which cinema is treated as a metaphorical place when people learn to read images and can think through images. The author also focuses on following issues: processes of individualization, representation and the problematisation of subjectivity.

In the social sciences today we are getting used to focusing our scholarly attention on different aspects of cinema, such as the literary perspective, theory of art, politics etc. In my research,[1] cinema, and especially Albanian Communist Cinema (1952–1991), possesses a precious socio-historical value in showing approaches to modernity. It is a deep mirror in which we see, analyze and understand the processes affecting bodies, behaviors and thoughts. Inside the sociological domain we often take into consideration archives, interviews, statistics and field research, while images, paintings, photos, documentaries and films are perceived as superficial and less relevant to social understanding. Despite this conservative position, images can have scientific value, pushing our understanding to a wider exploration of hidden traces and phenomena – not only being able to describe but more importantly to enlighten reality through interpretation and methodology. Dealing with images is a matter of genealogy and archeology, and a matter for philosophical and socio-historical reflection. Images comprise a rich body of information, including colors, shapes, taste, time-space sensorial shifts, language, myths, sensibilities, knowledge and morality, all con-

[1] J. Bejko, *The Society of Cinema*, I, II, Edlora, Tirana 2012, 2013.

densed in a single or sequential order of frames, selected and elaborated inside human memory and traditions. Images represent physical, ontological and human aspects of reality according to our *interpretative perspective*, so they are capable of redirecting our reflections on the process of forming, adapting and banning *images*.

Since its birth, cinema has played a crucial role as a leisure activity, in artistic expression and ideological power, and, especially, in our current age of Internet and social media, affecting and shaping our minds, sensibilities and actions. Over the last two decades, cinema has boiled down to visual/virtual representation, information and communication. Whereas cinema represents a specific visual collectivity and memory, the contemporary world of network connections ironically represents a disconnected and fluid reality in which we are basically the solitary consumers of images. Less than a century ago, Walter Benjamin in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935) criticized the capitalistic input on art and cinema to the profit of what he calls the "aesthetetisation of politics" during the approaching vogue of fascism during his time. Nowadays, we have to deal with the historical, technical and political shift of cinematographic art to virtual art, including a deformation of the relationship between subject

and object that tries to paint a world devalued of objectivity. From the early 1930s to late 1950s, many directors on both the western and eastern sides were investing cinema with a role in shaping social inclusion and engagement, proposing a euphoric, progressive, modernized, industrialized and revolutionary life. This new direction was the main aim of State propaganda throughout the Eastern bloc (and beyond), which sought to inform a rural and urban collectivity based on the ideals of Marxism, inspired by heroic antifascist resistance, and assuming the role of the antagonist of Western societies. Under the State apparatus, it re-designed and politicized on a philosophical level the nineteenth-century dichotomy between idealism and materialism, collectivity and individuality, good and evil. Cinema had to film and propose the integration of the weak individual into the strength of mass society. Today we submit to the ideal of individuality and consumption, while cinema increasingly expresses the inner psychological experience of weakness, anxiety and solitude: I think Antonioni's film *L'Eclisse* (1962) is one of the first masterpieces reflecting on modern alienation.

When it comes to Albanians and the Albanian context, the twentieth century incarnates the accelerated process from traditional life to socialism through *Kinostudio* movies – the Albanian Hollywood – ruled by the Communist regime (1944–1991). In fact, cinema was already present during the 1930s, addressed to the cultivated social strata and screening mostly Italian movies, as during that time Albania was *de facto* the colonized neighbor of Mussolini's fascist state. But in terms of propaganda, the use of newspapers, literature, radio and cinema was just beginning, and it was the Communist regime that gave splendor and power to them. Cinema in particular supported the Politburo's modernization project; people were *educated* to accept, read and learn images: the easiest way to transform thoughts, mentalities and social practices. State cinema became an extraordinary layer of everyday life, not only as a leisure tool, but also as a reference for some serious issues like history, politics, morality etc.:

it was the birth of the famous slogan "Cultural monument protected by the State". Meanwhile, cinema became the narrative voice of the country's overall transformation, mirroring it through a sociological and anthropological perspective. Thus, cinematographic production represents the best multi-layer source of Albanian modernity, expressing the conflict between collective and individual frames in which the easy political solution was the integration of individuality within collectivity, the suppression of the subject and subjectivity to the benefit of social realism and materialist objectivity. After the first period of optimist life (the 1950s and 1960s), a later consequence was a process of depersonalization, a lack of responsibility, fake criticism and a fluid engagement with a turbulent and conflicted unidentified collectivity – the premises for the liquid modernity described by Zygmunt Bauman. This progressive liquidation of social frames would be the common aspect of the last regime's decade (1980s), and in particular the main voice of post-communist reality ruled by a chaotic free market manifesto.

During the mid-1980s, Albanian cinema was loosing its populist strength in terms of both proletarian and rural sensibilities. The Neo-realistic and Soviet artistic style had been abandoned since the early 1970s. The cinema's attention was now turned to a kind of micro-sociology and inner psychology primarily addressed to individuals, describing the neglected reality of economical and political failure. Traditional and socialistic collective frames served as a protective configuration of (but also as a suppressing force on) individuals, who faced a relativity and fluidity of values and morals inside a non-productive infrastructure. Historiography tells us that the transition era started just after the regime's fall in 1991, but from a sociological and genealogical point of view based on cinema narrative, the 1980s were the first transitional era. This metamorphosis is mirrored in late 1980s movies dealing with the psychological fear of death – a metaphoric image of the middle class expressing its own existential and cultural angst toward the unknown

political future. Several middle-class groups had long been invested in art and culture, but lacked influence on the ideological apparatus of State censorship. They were representing their fragmented life in cinema and literature, their last cultural archipelago, with the fear of being punished for bourgeois or imperialist expressionism.

Two films are interesting in this context. *In Every Season* (Viktor Gjika, 1980) and *Shadows that Remain Behind* (Esat Musliu, 1984). The first one is about youthful emotions of love and passion among students. The regime had interrupted the international ties with the Soviet Union (1961) and communist China, and the country was at its highest level of isolation. The film proposes to reflect on what remained original and pure inside our feelings. The director's interest is focused on love from an intellectual but tensional approach between two students dealing with their *communication*. Their questioning is about exchanging affects, facing a reality composed of other students trying to interfere with them as a couple. Beyond that, communication reflects traditional mores and manners, politicized by state ideology. The film pretends to idealize the passion and affect of love. Yes, we have to love each other, but since we are part of a suffering reality, the communication of affects is stalled by fear, anxiety and a lack of freedom to behave and dream as an individual. What makes this situation even more critical is the fact that we are incapable of understanding ourselves and others, as well those outside the circle of the State and social morality. There is a visible conflict between a desire for self-emancipation and a self-recognition that seeks individuality, and the social pressure to stay within collective protective frames. The socio-psychological and affective structures face something unknown, as we have been shaped to be vulnerable to others' desires – it is the State that decides what and how to behave, feel or think. This conflict has a greater consequence nowadays on the process of *individualization*, r*epresentation* and the *problematisation* of subjectivity.

At first glance, *In Every Season* seems to have less ideological importance, but we discover in it a real political problem, as the film implicitly but pointedly suggests an overall alienation of thoughts, ideals and affects. Cleverly and strategically, the director creates a double artistic reality. On one side, we find the young lovers involved in their affair, discussing the possibilities of love and the communication of affects. A romantic approach, visual poetry, the trembling tensions and musical expression accompanying their experience, neglecting others, and remaining unengaged in State ideology, in a neutral position. On the other side, we see their colleagues fulfilling a double role as film characters playing for the State apparatus, trying to be politically correct in terms of their speech and dialogue, and thus adhering to the proper ideological criteria of the era. This complex representation of romance constitutes two elements: the new reality of everyday life (also new mentalities and psychological/affective structures), and an aversion to representations of the working class of the 1960s and 1970s. Urban proletarian love was related to industrial reality, machines, and a man and women being paired together with the process of production; sexuality was sublimated and emulated through productivity in regard to the ideals of family, international communism and patriotism. Their children, forged inside this euphoric proletarian scene, are now the jilted generation of the 1980s, less interested in ideology and propaganda. They are the pioneers of a new human and existential condition formed by abandonment and oblivion. They incurred another *regime of needs and sensibilities* compared to their proletarian parents, so they seek the autonomy of love, the foundation of the first phase of an idealistic individuality.

At that time, the director could only express this social fracture from a poetic and romantic perspective, concluding in a happy ending, a cliché of that time. But the film's impact is fleeting compared to later dramatic portrayals, in which love is drawn from more melodramatic elements, such as corruption, immorality, treason or discrediting moral taboos. The overall socio-political metamorphosis emerging dur-

ing the early 1980s goes toward a progressive dark affective metamorphosis of the mid- and late-1980s. Cinema had to educate the young generation, to moralize individual behaviors considered problematic by the State, but the way it fulfilled this ideological order produced the opposite effect in people. The anti-heroic character represented in many films of the mid-1980s started to be a sort of half-voice narrating what happens behind the ideological curtain. For some social groups, the antagonist (mirrored as a problematic person) is proposed as a model to follow, while the hero functions as a museum of the old socialist morality. A political difference between good and bad still exists, but the State has less power in controlling society than it once had. Among other historical reasons for the 1980s social fracture, cinema and other ideological means were representing this conflict as a manipulated relation between individuals, instead of addressing the real problem as a political one, a classic matter of lordship and bondage. And consequently, we come to the 1984 film *Shadows that Remain Behind*.

Compared to "*Every Season*", a picture of poetic feelings, here we are in totally different ambiance comprised of Kafkaesque elements. The film initially presents an easy subject, the love between two people, an honest tribunal judge and his fiancé doctor, celebrating their official union with their respective families. The director emphasizes their common prestigious socio-political background; his father is a university professor while her father is an important enterprise director. Everything looks fine until one day during the robbery and impairment of State property by two low-class employees, out of fear of being sentenced in a exemplary punishment, one of the defendants starts telling a strange unknown story. He explains in front of the honest judge – the film's main character – how in collaboration with other bureaucrats and a famous State enterprise director, he falsified official documents for used merchandise, selling it to private people. The crowd inside the court is shocked by his testimonial confession. The trinity of communist judges cannot

handle this issue as a normal one due to the fact that an important political person is called into question. The case cannot proceed without receiving a higher political level of permission to continue the investigation against a person beyond suspicion. The judge on his side cannot believe his eyes when the corruption affair of his father in law is confirmed and soon he will be arrested. His family is involved, as are his feelings, honor, career, prestige and sense of duty. He hopes that his fiancé will remain out of the affair, but in the end, she offers him lot of money to close the case and their relation is ended on a very sad and obscure note, accompanied by a funeral march melody. From the director's perspective, it looks impossible to focus attention on the main problem of that time: the large scale of inequalities not only in an economic sense but first of all, related to power and State institutions.

Shadows that Remain Behind calls into question the class struggle of the last communist decade (the 1980s) and the way how privileged groups held onto power. Their tribunals are punishing ordinary people for small illegalities (promoted as the Communist Rule of Law) while hiding their illegalities behind the political masks of a legal but corrupt authority. Compared to the populace's poor reality, the elite's illegalities are related to money, as the regime is preparing to convert its ulterior form and capital toward the democratic era of the 1990s. As a consequence, throughout the film we can analyze the famous path of the Albanian second transition, paradoxically based on pluralism and parliament. It tells us that the communist elites did not suffer from the regime's collapse. On contrary, they saw the ongoing degradation of Communist rule as a very profitable occasion, an idea that goes against *the historical facts* of a massive popular rebellion as the main cause of the regime's fall. The elites were again one step ahead of future social development, leaving its shadows behind, shadows that have to be closely analyzed.

During the 1990s, the State was still in the hands of the old elites, holding economic, political and cultural power. The progressive forc-

es were then stuck, powerless and deprived of power to produce any criticism or direct the transitional democratic era. The middle class – the symbol of culture, art and literature – was subordinated to the new rule, threatening its social and historic existence. On the other side, the democratic elites were neglecting the power of cinema, culture and art as tools of social emancipation, including the fact that cinema depended on large financial sources inside an economically failed country. When the Communist regime failed, cinema understood as artistic representation and as an infrastructure failed as well. The role of the cinema was promptly replaced by the media and a vogue consumerism. Television was the main source of endless political debates (a sign of freedom of that time to finally express one's opinion freely) and served as a mean of connection to the Western world. Public/State television management during the early 1990s, did not differ much from the Communist era. It was again the Party's *voice* – the strongest apparatus for democratic and anti-communist propaganda, while the opposition was almost banned from being depicted on TV. In this way the discourse of class struggle was fortified in the name of anti-communist slogans and authoritarian political pressure that discredited anyone who opposed or criticized the *democratic regime*. The middle class had no choice but to quickly adapt to democratic rule, supported by a plebeian social strata composed of unemployed proletarian and rural individuals, abandoning their places and trying to build their life in Albania's major cities. People were no longer willing to listen to the words "culture", "arts" or "reason".

This economical failure had a sad consequence on cinema and literature, and the middle class had to express its pains and desires through other artistic forms. Music was their last domain, influenced by rock; in fact, music is much more representative describing the early 1990s in Albania. In just a few years (1991 to 1994) several new bands tried to catch up with what had been lost and interrupted during the long Communist period of isolation. They started from the 1960s fashion Woodstock era, progressing to the pop music of the late 1980s, inspired by the naïve romantic ideals of Europeanism and democracy, of love and peace not as a metaphorical cliché for the 1960s, but as a real necessity in that troubled reality. But as a matter of fact, that temporary rock music era couldn't create the premises for a social youth movement. The lack of cultural and economical means, surrounded by poor and angry popular lower classes, led to the bitter end of that generation's creative potentiality. Modern musical tastes were replaced progressively by traditional folk music mixed with contemporary elements of techno beats, producing a strange and chaotic vulgar taste, in accordance with the manners and mentalities of populist politics promoting plebeian ideals against middle-class culture. The short-lived rock generation had no place to express their cultural background or to emancipate society. They became isolated hippies being negatively associated with alcohol, drugs, colorful clothes and long hair. To some extent we find dispersed cinematographic works of the 1990s dealing with two issues: the difficult facing a problematic modernity and superficial representations of the Communist era. In both cases, the overall ambiance is one of solitude and individuality, a lack of ability to exchange affects, miscommunication, and fear and anxiety – déjà-vu feelings we also find in 1980s Communist cinema.

Time has flown since the 1990s, but the current frustrated cultural reality is suffering almost from the same issues as in the past, representing deep socio-political and cultural conflicts which set up the progressive forces of emancipation and real democratization. Art, literature and cinema as typical middle-class domains should make a critical analysis of its own *body* in order to realize their past, development and present-day conflicts. Perhaps the goal is not to search for a new form of art but to call into question what is art inside modern powers, and what are the possibilities for both collective and individual freedom. The cinema should film this fight against economic and *cultural* hegemony as the first step toward self-emancipation.