

From Political to Porn Tropes: Albania's Evolving Cinema Landscape

Ishmael Kardryni

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the transformation of Albania's film industry from its communist-era function as a tool for political indoctrination and the promotion of heroic narratives to its contemporary focus on post-heroic themes, often incorporating elements of popular entertainment, including porn tropes. We trace this evolution from the ideologically charged blockbusters of the 1980s, which explored themes of disciplinary society and conflicts between individual and collective roles, through the more serious, transitional art films of the post-communist period. The analysis then focuses on the recent commercial success of films that employ tropes familiar to audiences of pornography, exemplified by the works of Ermal Mamaqi, such as *2 Finger Deep in Honey* (2019) and *I made love to Tropoja* (2020). By examining these shifts through film-theoretic lenses, including Althusserian ideology, genre theory, and audience reception, this essay investigates the changing purpose of Albanian cinema in shaping or reflecting contemporary society.

1. Introduction

Albanian cinema has undergone a dramatic transformation since the communist era. Under Enver Hoxha's regime (1945-1991), film served as a state instrument for propaganda, idealizing the new socialist order and promoting party ideology.[9] The collapse of communism in 1990-91 initiated a period of reform within the industry, marked by new legislation, foreign co-productions, and increased exposure to global markets. By the 2010s, a notable bifurcation had emerged: auteur filmmakers continued to address critical and serious themes, while a new wave of market-driven comedies prioritized entertainment, frequently incorporating sexual humor and simplified plots.[3]

This essay traces this trajectory: from socialist-realist films, through transitional post-communist art films, to today's blockbuster comedies. We apply film-theoretic lenses, such as Althusserian ideology, genre theory, and audience reception, to analyze this significant shift. Specifically, we compare the works of directors like Joni Shanaaj and writer Ylljet Aliçka, who grappled with weighty social issues, with those of commercial entertainers such as Ermal Mamaqi. Case studies will include Mamaqi's *2 Gisht Mjaltë* (Two Fingers Deep in

the Honey, 2019) and *I made love to Tropoja* (2020). This analysis prompts an overarching question: what is the contemporary meaning of cinema for Albanian society today—does it offer critique or primarily provide entertainment?

2. Socialist-Era Cinema: Propaganda and Ideology

Under socialism, cinema in Albania was subject to stringent state control and overtly ideological. Films were produced by the government-owned *Kinostudio Shqipëria e R* (later Albafilm), which consistently imprinted the ruling party's myths and values.^[9] As scholar Lulzim Hoxha observes, films such as *Mountains Covered in Green* (1972) and *The Bride and the Curfew* (1978) played an "essential role in promoting communist ideology". These productions presented a Manichean world, depicting "good" party heroes against "evil" enemies, thereby reinforcing nationalist and even racialized notions of superiority. Cinema was integral to the "socialist-realist" aesthetic, featuring heroic narratives of Partisan fighters, industrious workers, or patriotic youth, all underpinned by Hoxha's cult of personality.

In Althusserian terms, film functioned as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), an institution designed to inculcate the regime's values in passive viewers. Even technical aspects, such as continuous camera gaze and narrative closure, were employed to draw audiences into identifying with the official worldview. In essence, socialist-era films were explicitly didactic.

Public memory regarding this era is mixed. Many young Albanians today are largely unfamiliar with these films or view them as historical relics. Critics like Agron Tufa of the Institute for Communist Crimes have characterized them as a "narcotic" that "keeps alive and activates nostalgia for the dictatorship". Tufa labels these movies an "ethical and aesthetic catastrophe," noting their tendency to depict the regime as "not that bad," which he argues misleads uneducated youth. Indeed, after 1991, debates even arose about banning communist-era films from television broadcasts. While some former actors and viewers defend them as cultural heritage, many others perceive them as propaganda that necessitates contextualization. Irrespective of individual reception, ideology was inherently embedded in every frame of this cinema, and viewers were intended to accept it uncritically.

3. The Post-Communist Transition: Reform and Reorientation

With the advent of democracy, Albania's film industry entered a turbulent transitional period. The state monopoly was dismantled through new legislation, including a 1996 Cinematography Law, and in 1997, the National Cinematographic Center (QKK) was established to supersede the former studio system. However, the implementation of these reforms proved "fragmented" and underfunded.^[9] State support diminished dramatically, compelling filmmakers to seek foreign co-productions and festival exposure to ensure their survival.

As Nika reports, Albanian cinema "began the switch to the new system and philosophy, whereby...the individual, competition of values, the market of ideas and products, [and] commercialization constituted its mainstays".^[3] Co-productions with Italy, Greece, and other European countries became commonplace. In fact, by the 2000s, for every lek of Albanian government funding, foreign co-producers contributed approximately twice as much. This

influx of external funds significantly enhanced technical quality and festival credentials; Albanian films and filmmakers began to appear at prestigious festivals such as Cannes and Venice by the 2010s. For example, Joni Shanaj's *Pharmakon* and Robert Budina's *Agon* were Albania's Oscar submissions in 2012-13.[9]

Despite these advances, many structural problems persisted. Nika notes that Albanian cinema continued to "suffer from fixed artistic forms and schematism". Budgets remained minuscule, and scripts were often underdeveloped; indeed, only about 0.5% of film budgets were allocated to scripting, in contrast to 10% in Hollywood.[3] Domestic producers frequently neglected narrative depth, opting instead for quickly marketable concepts. A scarcity of multiplexes and adequate distribution networks further hampered box office growth. As one observer remarked, Albanian film after 1991 has been produced "in the margins of European and global film production".[2] Consequently, international distributors rarely acquired Albanian titles, leading to many films being seen only at festivals or through informal broadcasts.

Amidst these limited resources, a new wave of socially conscious films emerged. The 2000s witnessed directors engaging with the legacy of communism and the upheavals of the transition period. For instance, Budina's *Agon* (2012) portrays two brothers who emigrate to Greece and face discrimination, addressing themes of migration and integration. Bujar Alimani's *Amnistia* (2011), with a script by writer Ylljet Alička, serves as an allegory critiquing Albania's EU accession process and its entrenched patriarchal traditions.[1] *EuropeNow* magazine observes that such films exemplify the post-communist trend, noting that "contemporary Albanian cinema [is] preoccupied with social upheavals that Albanians face at home and away". These directors maintained a more reflective, serious tradition of film as social critique rather than mere entertainment.[5]

4. The Rise of Market-Driven Comedies in the 2010s

By the 2010s, a distinct type of Albanian film began to dominate the local box office. Comedic entertainers started producing films explicitly aimed at mass audiences in Albania and among the diaspora who for years had been exposed to pornography, especially during the regimes of Sali Berisha and Fatos Nano.

These movies frequently blend genres in a postmodern fashion, incorporating romantic farce, adventure, slapstick, and even erotic elements, prioritizing humor and escapism. They often parody or exaggerate Albanian stereotypes, such as regional differences, family customs, and rural life, sometimes in a self-referential or satirical manner.

Ermal Mamaqi is a leading figure in this commercial trend. A prominent TV presenter and comedian, he ventured into filmmaking around 2018, after securing funds from undisclosed sources. His breakout success was *2 Gisht Mjaltë* (2019, Two Fingers Deep in the Honey), a romantic comedy directed by Emir Khalilzadeh and co-written and produced by Mamaqi. The plot, which revolves around a honeymoon gone awry, is lighthearted and bawdy. The key to Mamaqi's success lies in savvy marketing and his ability to tap into a demand for crowd-pleasing laughs. Mamaqi himself boasted that *2 Gisht Mjaltë* grossed over €1 million

on a €300,000 budget, selling 250,000 tickets in the first month alone. He remarked, "At first I was afraid...if I would lose the money. But this is business. If you know how to play, it's a good game".[6] His films are unabashedly commercial, replete with pop-culture references, celebrity cameos, catchy music, and even erotic innuendo. They are designed as products to entertain and sell, much like Hollywood blockbusters, rather than to challenge political ideas.

Mamaqi's 2020 film, *I Made Love to Tropoja*, serves as another illustration of this trend. It stars Mamaqi as a naive urbanite (a bank clerk) reassigned to the remote mountainous region of Tropoja. The "fish-out-of-water" premise drives the comedy, as the urbane protagonist grapples with rustic customs, formidable locals, and his own machismo. The title itself is ironic; rather than a romantic ode, the film plays on the region's gritty reputation for smugglers and feuds. While the camera does linger on scenic landscapes and local music, the majority of the plot hinges on gags, including comedic mishaps, sexual double entendres, and the clash of urban versus rural values. In both marketing and style, *Tropoja* epitomizes pure pop entertainment.

The reception of these new comedies illuminates their position within Albanian culture. Large audiences flocked to them; Mamaqi frequently screened his premieres in sports halls with thousands of viewers. He reported 5,000 attendees at the Tirana premiere of *Tropoja*, including the mayor of Tropoja, with audience members reportedly cheering the film's portrayal of their culture.[7] Concurrently, some critics voiced objections to their content. For *I Made Love Tropoja*, complaints emerged regarding a sexualized joke involving local custom ("Tropojans offering the most sexy girl of the house to make love to the guest"), which some perceived as offensive. Mamaqi retorted on social media that the allegations were "idiocy" and asserted that the film's message was positive: "In the film, the Tropojans appear as they are, people of faith in tradition and horny".[6] In essence, he recontextualized the risqué humor as a patriotic portrayal. This episode highlights the dynamic role of audience reception: viewers do not passively absorb a film's content; they interpret it through cultural lenses. While many found the broad jokes amusing, some local viewers perceived an insult. In either case, Mamaqi's work unequivocally demonstrates that contemporary Albanian cinema can prioritize audience pleasure.

5. Key Artistic Voices: Shanaj and Alička

Despite the prevailing commercial wave, a dedicated group of filmmakers continues to produce serious cinema. Joni Shanaj (b. 1976) stands as one such director. Trained in social anthropology and film, Shanaj debuted with *Pharmakon* (2012), a metaphorical drama.[1] The film stars Klevis Bega as a young pharmacist returning from university to work in his hometown. When his fiancée uncovers a secret concerning the town's mayor (the protagonist's father), a generational gap and tension emerge. The *Tirana Times* describes *Pharmakon* as "about a young man's road to adulthood, the search of truth in difficult time... (focused on) a love story between a young couple at the centre of a patriarchal system which has surrendered to power, corruption and deceit".[8] This indicates Shanaj's explicit engagement with issues of corruption, hierarchy, and family conflict—themes that resonate with

the moral concerns of earlier Albanian auteurs. He has continued with similarly reflective projects, including the documentary *100 Vjet* about Albania's founding, and the episodic drama *Another Day* (2023). Shanaj's films typically screen in festivals and art-house venues, aiming to provoke thought rather than mass laughter.

Writer and diplomat Ylljet Aliçka (b. 1951) represents another facet of serious Albanian cinema. While more widely recognized as a novelist (e.g., *Slogans/Tit for Tat*), he has significantly contributed to screenwriting. Notably, he co-wrote *Amnistia* (2011) with Alimani, an allegory about a caged criminal temporarily "released" to the outside world, offering commentary on Albania's attempts to join the EU and the clash between modernity and tradition. This film, too, addresses significant political and social themes rather than everyday slapstick. Although Aliçka's direct directorial output is limited, his work embodies the notion that Albanian cinema can still serve as a platform for critical reflection. As *EuropeNow* notes, *Agon* and *Amnistia* exemplify films whose "preoccupation with social upheavals" signifies the more thoughtful dimension of post-communist Albanian filmmaking. These works are the cinematic descendants of 1970s intellectuals, tasked with preserving depth and critique in a market increasingly saturated by pop culture.

6. Cinema's Role: Ideology, Critique, or Entertainment?

These fundamental shifts compel us to question the contemporary purpose of cinema within Albanian society. The ideological potency that film possessed under communism has largely dissipated, as no single party now dictates film content. Nevertheless, films inherently convey meanings. Apparatus theory reminds us that even ostensibly "harmless" entertainment positions the viewer; for instance, scenes depicting lavish scenery or stable families can subtly reinforce specific worldviews. In Mamaqi's comedies, the consistent presence of attractive women and consumer goods could be interpreted as normalizing a bourgeois lifestyle; similarly, jokes about regional "backwardness" might entrench stereotypes. Whether this constitutes ideology or merely market sensibility remains a subject of debate.

In contrast, filmmakers like Shanaj and Aliçka explicitly utilize cinema for reflection. They revitalize the notion that film can expose ideology rather than simply upholding it. For example, *Pharmakon* essentially allegorizes how a community's silence and corruption can be passed down from generation to generation.[8] Unlike a socialist-realist film, it poses questions instead of offering simplistic answers. In terms of audience reception, such films invite an active reading, requiring viewers to decode metaphors and potentially challenge what they perceive, rather than merely "resonating" with an obvious moral.

One might summarize the current landscape by stating that Albanian cinema is pluralistic. On one end of the spectrum are the critical, auteur-driven works (often seen at festivals) that aim for ideological critique or at least social commentary. On the other end are the populist comedies (e.g., *2 Gisht Mjaltë*, *I Love Tropoja*), which primarily aim for entertainment. Both categories attract distinct audiences. The popular films reinforce immediate values—such as fun, bravado, and a certain local pride—often without the viewer consciously perceiving any ideological content (it functions as ideology by default, if at all). The more serious films, however, explicitly acknowledge complex ideologies and invite debate.

This situation mirrors broader discussions within film studies. According to audience reception theory, a viewer's background profoundly shapes their interpretation of a film. A young person today might watch a Mamaqi comedy and simply laugh, taking away an image of friendly northern hospitality. Conversely, another might view a young Albanian filmmaker's drama and contemplate the legacy of patriarchy or post-communist corruption. Both represent valid modes of engagement. In a postmodern development, some recent Albanian films even consciously blend these functions; for instance, certain diaspora-themed comedies lightly touch upon the trauma of migration amidst the humorous elements.

7. Conclusion

In sum, Albania's film landscape has transitioned from a top-down model of political storytelling to a diverse terrain where market imperatives largely hold sway, yet serious artistic voices persist. Under socialism, film served unambiguously as ideological propaganda. The transitional years brought significant reforms and a brief flourishing of auteur cinema that addressed social realities. By the 2010s, a dual system had emerged: festival films continued to engage in ideological and social critique, while homegrown comedies garnered immense box office success with their blend of sexual humor and slapstick. Figures like Joni Shanaj and Ylljet Aliçka continue to uphold the tradition of critical reflection, whereas commercial figures like Ermal Mamaqi aim to satisfy popular tastes trained during the "deep penetration" of pornography in the 1990s. Ultimately, contemporary Albanian cinema increasingly prompts its audience to choose: do they desire a film to reinforce values, to challenge them, or simply to entertain? The answer, increasingly, is "all of the above".

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