

Mario Bava, Necro-Aesthetics, and the Secularization of the Death Cult: From Post-Fascist Italy to Socialist Albania of Ismail Kadare

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Abstract: The article examines the necro-aesthetic influences of Italian Gothic cinema and Albanian literature under communism. Focusing on Mario Bava's mise-en-scène and Ismail Kadare's reworking of revenant motifs, the article argues that Albania's secularized death-cult, often referred to as indigenous, was in fact mediated through Italian Gothic visual culture. Kadare's necro-literary imagination dovetailed with the regime's politics of reburial and remembrance. This provided the regime with a usable grammar for the revival of nationalism and legitimization after the break with the Soviet Empire.

Keywords: Ismail Kadare; Albanian Literature; Albanian Gothic Literature; Mario Bava; Italian Gothic Film

8 Introduction

Albania's fascination with death, long rooted in religious ritual and pagan survivals, found its first properly secular artistic expression not in indigenous invention but through the spectral influence of Italian Gothic cinema. Italian Gothic cinema of the postwar period, epitomized by Riccardo Freda's *I Vampiri* (1957) and, above all, Mario Bava's *Black Sunday* (1960), reinvented the horror genre by fusing baroque Catholic imagery with modern cinematic spectacle.

Unlike the Hollywood horror of Universal Studios, where monsters were individuated and largely anthropomorphic, Italian Gothic cultivated atmospheres of decay: ruined castles, crypts layered with centuries of dust, and staircases drenched in shadow where the camera itself seemed haunted. Bava, trained as a cinematographer, perfected a chiaroscuro style that transformed death into a visual principle: colored gels washed corpses in purple and green, fog machines blurred the line between presence and absence, and elaborate camera movements turned mausoleums into labyrinths. These were not simply films of fright; they were necro-aesthetic environments in which the audience experienced death as both intimate and ornamental. It was precisely this ornamentalization of mortality that provided Albanian writers with a secular vocabulary for re-imagining their own traditions of revenants and oaths.

The mise-en-scènes of Mario Bava—baroque crypts, staircases where shadows breathe, and corpses that refuse to stay buried—offered a visual grammar through which Albanian writers could secularize their own death-cults.

Ismail Kadare, often hailed as a national original, borrowed precisely from this Gothic repertoire. *Doruntina* reimagines the Bava-esque motif of the death-bed promise, the revenant brother compelled by oath to deliver his sister; *The General of the Dead Army* stages the uncanny task of exhuming bones from foreign soil, echoing the armies of the undead that Bava had already set loose upon Italy's screens.

What passed in Parisian literary salons as an “authentic Albanian mythology” was less indigenous than imported. Indeed, as suggested by literature experts like Ardian Vehbiu and Eralda L. Lameborshi, though perhaps first initiated subversively, Kadare’s work was also promoted by Western cultural diplomacy as part of a covert attempt to steer Albanian intellectual life.¹ Thus, beneath the rhetoric of originality lay a cinematic borrowing: armies of undead marching through memory, bones of sinful soldiers hidden in attics, promises of the dead weighing upon the lives of the living.

Kadare’s sustained interest in death also corresponded with the regime’s need to re-legitimize itself after the dramatic break with the Soviet Union. As Klejdi Këllici argues², the Albanian state embarked on a campaign of exhumations and reburials that resembled a national necromantic ritual. The bones of figures such as Sami Frashëri and Ismail Qemali were summoned from their graves in order to be displayed as tokens of continuity, as if the regime were fulfilling a death-bed promise on behalf of the nation. Corpses were accumulated, recorded, and warehoused. As some capitalist enterprise of the undead for future transactions with the living. Yet this same choreography of reburial carried a darker undertone: in calling up the dead to sanctify its authority, the regime risked conjuring others who could not be so easily controlled. Reburials thus resembled a Gothic conspiracy in which heroes were re-enthroned while the restless bones of the dishonored threatened to return as ghouls, undead reminders capable of destabilizing the carefully staged political cult of memory.

9 Bava and Necro-Aesthetics

The films of Mario Bava, the Italian master of Gothic horror and proto-giallo aesthetics, long praised for their baroque excesses of light, shadow, and color. Yet beneath the lurid surfaces of *Black Sunday* (1960), *Kill, Baby... Kill!* (1966), and *Lisa and the Devil* (1973), one finds a sustained meditation on what Achille Mbembe would later theorize as *necropolitics*: the management of life through the omnipresence of death. In Bava’s cinema, the dead refuse to disappear; their return is less a supernatural violation than an aesthetic principle.³

Necro-aesthetics, as developed in contemporary theory⁴, concerns the way

¹Ardian Vehbiu stops short of explicitly labeling *Dimri i vetmisë së madhe* (“The Winter of Great Solitude”) as Albania’s equivalent of *Doctor Zhivago*, yet he hints at a French ploy to popularize a nationalist writer who, while shadowing the ruler Enver Hoxha at home, perplexed the Parisian radical left. See: Ardian Vehbiu, “Romani me Enver (II): Propozimi i maskës ose teoria biografike,” *Peizazhe të fjalës*, January 21, 2021, <https://peizazhe.com/2021/01/21/romani-me-enver-ii/>. Eralda L. Lameborshi observes that: “Writers from Eastern Europe who produced texts that were overtly or covertly critical of Communist regimes were often motivated by the desire to influence change in their countries from within and without, but they were also ideologically fluent in how texts circulated on the international literary market.” See Eralda L. Lameborshi, “Ideological Fluency and World Literature: The Case of Ismail Kadare,” in *Discourses on Nations and Identities*, ed. Daniel Syrový and Achim Hölter, vol. 3 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021).

²*Një varrim për çdo regjim: përdorimi politik i trupit të vdekur në Shqipëri* (Berk, 2023)

³Mbembe, Achille. “Necropolitics.” *Raisons politiques* 21.1 (2006): 29-60.

⁴Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Duke University Press, 2016.;

art mobilizes the spectral presence of the dead to shape the living. Bava's Gothic tableaux stage this process through *mise-en-scène*: the death mask that cracks open in *Black Sunday* to release the vampire-witch Asa Vajda is not merely a prosthetic horror effect but a material reminder of the persistence of the corpse among the living. Objects—mirrors, dolls, coffins, even a blood-stained carriage wheel—bear witness to the dead and bind the living to unfinished oaths and betrayals.

10 Post-Fascist Italy and the Cult of the Dead

As George L. Mosse showed in *Fallen Soldiers* (1990),⁵ Fascism had constructed a cult of the dead in which political power was sacralized through funerary spectacle. This cult, tinged with occult mysticism, was never fully dismantled after 1945; it lingered as a guilty residue, compounded by what Emilio Gentile has called the “sacralization of politics.”⁶ Bava's necro-aesthetic tapped into this wound: audiences thrilled to corpses bursting from crypts because the images mirrored their repressed anxiety—that Fascism's victims and armies still haunted the piazzas, demanding recognition.

The post-fascist Italian reception of Bava's films can also be read through the prism of collective mourning and disavowed guilt. In a society emerging from Mussolini's collapse and civil war, the Gothic return of the dead provided a displaced register for the nation's unresolved relationship with its fallen soldiers. Nearly a million Italians died in Fascist campaigns, yet their sacrifice was never properly integrated into a national narrative.

Moreover, Bava supplied *mise-en-scène* is an allegory of aristocratic revenants and cursed families who, from a Marxist perspective, can be read as blood-thirsty landlords feeding on the peasantry, exploiters returning in different shapes and forms. This differs from George Romero, in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), who secularized the zombie along the line of consumerism plague, a countercultural critique of a society consuming its own flesh. Although both directors stripped the undead of exotic mysticism and relocated them into the material everyday: Bava through feudal crypts and aristocratic curses, Romero through the American suburb and shopping mall.

It is precisely this common denominator on the cinematic conceptualization of the “living dead” that Ismail Kadare used to depict the stubborn mnemonic residue of the undead. This allegory was sanctioned by the Albanian communist regime, because it Bava's Gothic a ready-made metaphor for the vampiric logic resonated with the idea of the Italian fascist imperialist invaders. And Kadare's armies of the dead in *The General of the Dead Army* are metaphors of both the fascist guilt and the predatory memories of arbitrary power, feudal or fascist, haunting the living.

Eric Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty*, University of Chicago Press, 2011.

⁵George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, Oxford University Press, 1990.

⁶Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, Harvard University Press, 1996.

11 Kuteli, Kadare, and the Albanian Appropriation

The paradox is that the communist regime could not build its necro-aesthetic from the indigenous folklore alone. Albanian traditions of *lugat* and revenants, which Mitrush Kuteli⁷ so vividly recorded in his fantastic short stories, were too unruly, too close to the ambiguities of oral culture. They dramatized the dead returning not to serve nationalist teleology but to unsettle the living with grotesque or comic presences. Kuteli's fantastic was silenced. Kadare, by contrast, fit the Bava template: revenants as allegories of obligation, graves and memorials as guarantors of unfinished promises.

The undead promises in Kadare's fiction fit perfectly with the regime's curated myth of the fallen nationalist or World War heroes. The dead were imagined as entrusting the Party with the continuation of their mission, legitimizing the regime as executor of their sacrifice. The living were constantly reminded that they inhabited the debt of those who had died, and that both nationalism and communism alike were bound to their spectral promises.

Another explanation is that of Lameborshi, who argues that Kadare's work was ideologically and market fluent in how texts circulated on the domestic and international literary market. According to Lameborshi, "Kadare sought to position himself as a writer whose work has universal value, and therefore world literary value, a gesture that displays his ideological fluency in literary markets and international circulation."⁸ Kadare's Gothic borrowings from Bava were thus not only domestically useful but also internationally legible. Western audiences, familiar with Italian horror, could recognize the cinematic allusions, while the regime could present Kadare as a writer who, though ostensibly nationalist, was conversant with global cultural trends. In this way, Kadare's necro-aesthetic served both internal and external functions: it reinforced the regime's legitimacy at home while positioning Albanian literature within a broader European context.

12 The General of the Dead Army

In *The General of the Dead Army* (1963),⁹ Kadare stages a Gothic allegory of necro-politics that resonates strongly with Mario Bava's cinematic vocabulary. The novel recounts the mission of an Italian general and a priest sent to Albania to exhume the bones of fallen soldiers from the Second World War. What begins as a technical task soon becomes a descent into a haunted landscape saturated with memory and death.

The atmosphere is recognizably Gothic: mountainous terrain that threatens the living, an unwelcoming countryside marked by hostility and silence, and a climate of endless rain and darkness that transforms geography into a mortuary. The novel's opening paragraphs establish this mood with cinematic force, echoing Bava's chiaroscuro aesthetics and his obsession with the material

⁷Rovena Vata, "The Fantastic and Semi-Fantastic Element in Kuteli's Short Stories," *Anglisticum*, Vol. II, Nr. 1, 2013.

⁸p. 560

⁹Here quoted is: Ismail Kadare, *The General of the Dead Army*, trans. from the French of Jusuf Vrioni by Derek Coltman (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1990).

persistence of the dead. On the other hand, as Lameborshi ¹⁰ Kadare's prose makes use of established tropes of Eastern Europe as other, mysterious, and dangerous.

He had spent much of the journey gazing out of the plane window at the menacing mountains. He felt that one of their sharp peaks was bound to rip open the plane's belly at any moment. Jagged rock on every side. Sinister escarpments sliding swiftly back into the mist. At the bottoms of those abysses and on those abrupt slopes, beneath the rain, lay the army he had come to unearh.

The scene recalls the opening sequences of Bava's *Black Sunday* (1960), where ruined landscapes, enveloped in mist and shadow, frame the return of the witch Asa Vajda. In both works, nature itself becomes Gothic: cliffs and ruins appear not as scenery but as hostile presences, accomplices of the dead. The jagged Albanian mountains mirror Bava's desolate Carpathians, landscapes where the line between the natural and the supernatural collapses, and where the living enter a world already claimed by the dead.

Kadare made extensive use of Gothic conventions to imagine the spectral return of the dead. In *The General of the Dead Army*, fallen soldiers appear not simply as absent presences but as a living-dead chorus: writing letters, speaking in diaries, and intruding upon the minds of the living as if unaware of their own death. They function like corpses still animated by duty, inhabiting a liminal state between memory and existence.

The motif recalls Mario Bava's *Black Sabbath* (1963), particularly the episode "The Wurdulak," in which Gorca (played by Boris Karloff) returns to his family claiming to have slain a vampire, only to reveal himself as one of the undead. As in Kadare's novel, the Gothic effect stems less from the violence of the revenant than from the ambiguity of his awareness: the dead does not yet know he is dead, compelled instead by an inexorable duty to bring others into his world.

Kadare makes this parallel explicit in Chapter 17, where the General, through his association with the remains of soldiers, effectively joins the ranks of the dead:

Henceforth he had grown accustomed to it, and there were even days when, in place of his earlier torment, he felt a kind of serenity. And with this feeling came the cold satisfaction that this universe had accepted him.

Since he had noticed that, not only in his conversation but in every episode of his life, alien elements were creeping in little by little, the words of visitors he had received, fragments of letters or diaries of dead soldiers, he had tried to dam up this flow. But this had proved so powerful that the words and phrases, sometimes entire narratives by the dead men, kept invading his mind. They trampled on all else and each day reinforced their tenure.

Sometimes he would comfort himself with the thought that it was something he was bound to expect. And his fear that if he

¹⁰p. 562

kept making use of sentences or words deriving from people in the kingdom of the dead, he would fetch up there himself, this fear did finally pass. He had in effect joined up with them; day after day, season upon season, he had entered this universe and, never mind what he did now, there was no escaping it any more.

Henceforth he had grown accustomed to it, and there were even days when, in place of his earlier torment, he felt a kind of serenity. And with this feeling came the cold satisfaction that this universe had accepted him.

In Chapter 18, Kadare introduces another uncanny link with the dead: the motif of infection. The corpses are not merely passive remains or spectral presences, but active carriers of contamination, threatening to transmit illness to the living. Here the Gothic logic slides closer to what later becomes the zombie convention in cinema: the idea that contact with the dead spreads disease, that the boundary between life and death is porous not only through promises or memory but through microbial corruption. In this way, Kadare anticipates the language of contagion that dominates Romero's zombies, where infection is the vehicle for expanding the ranks of the undead.

THAT EVENING THE OLD workman became ill. He had begun to feel slightly unwell during the afternoon, but he had decided it wasn't important. By evening he was looking pale and felt he needed to lie down. Everyone simply assumed he'd caught a chill. He was taken to one of the village houses and settled down in front of a big fire to keep warm. But as night drew on, his condition grew even worse.

It was still not dawn when the expert woke the general as he needed to borrow the car.

"The foreman is in a pretty bad state. We must get him to the nearest hospital urgently."

The priest had woken in his turn.

"What is the matter with him?" he asked. "He looked perfectly well yesterday afternoon."

"I can't tell you exactly," the expert said. "I'm afraid it's an infection. He has a scratch on his right hand."

"An infection?" the general broke in, lifting his head in surprise. The expert left.

"What's really wrong with him, I wonder," the general said.

"I think it probably is an infection," the priest said. "His face was quite grey yesterday evening."

...

"The germ can stay buried there for twenty years, then suddenly jump out as virulent as ever. It's strange," the general said.

"But true," the priest added. "At the first contact with air and sunlight it returns to life."

This episode underscores a central tension of Kadare's necro-aesthetic: the dead are not just remembered but embodied as sources of threat. The scratch

on the worker's hand, trivial in itself, becomes the mark of contamination, the physical trace of contact with the dead. Just as in Gothic cinema the vampire's bite or the Wurdulak's embrace carries death into the domestic sphere, Kadare's infected worker dramatizes the fragility of the living body in a landscape saturated with corpses. The regime's necro-politics thus takes on a pathological dimension: the nation is compelled to honor the dead of foreign armies, yet risks being infected by them—their imperial missions returning as a kind of contagion that threatens to destabilize the living nation itself. Dead foreigners appear as the living dead: vampires of the past and of future myths, feeding on the memory of sacrifice while dictating the terms of political legitimacy. In this sense, Kadare's infected revenants echo Bava's aristocratic vampires, whose curse lies not only in their hunger for blood but in their ability to transform the living into carriers of their own imperial legacy.

And when the infected worker, Gjoleka, finally dies, Kadare intensifies the Gothic atmosphere through the symbolism of crows. The image recalls both folkloric omens of death and Bava's cinematic vocabulary of dark birds circling ruined landscapes. Yet here it acquires a political edge: the crows mark not only the death of a comrade but the lingering presence of foreign powers, whose subversive force can still "infect" the living even after their military defeat. In Kadare's allegory, fascism is not vanquished with the collapse of its armies; it persists as contagion, as a spectral enemy that survives in memory and continues its work in the bodies of the liberated. The Gothic trope of posthumous revenge becomes an allegory of Albania's fraught sovereignty: liberation produces neither safety nor health, but a world where even dead foreigners remain enemies.

He was always saying much the same thing himself: "The Fascists kept me busy while they were alive, and now that they're dead I'm still having to hunt for them, they're still keeping me busy!"

"Yes! He fought against them so many years, and he beat them. But it was them that got him in the end. What pig luck!"

"Like a revenge after death."

"They waited twenty years for it too. But all the same, when he fought them he fought them fairly, in open war, whereas they killed him with a rusty button like filthy cowards."

"The enemy is always the same, even when he's dead."

"They stand up there, not talking, like two crows," the driver said in a hoarse voice, casting a look of hate at the priest and the general standing wrapped in their long capes by the ruins of the bridge. "Well, are you satisfied now?"

Here Kadare condenses the central logic of xenophobic necro-politics: foreign soldiers, once fascist invaders, return in death as vampires of memory, continuing to sap strength from the living. The "crows" are not only natural symbols of death, but figures of surveillance, judgment, and contamination. As with Bava's revenants, the true horror lies not in open battle but in the insidious afterlife of the enemy, who even as a corpse retains the power to wound.

He [the General] would muse on how very much one is a stranger in foreign lands. More of a stranger than the trees planted along the edges of the roads, he would think, and they, after all, are only trees.

Certainly much more of a stranger than the sheep, or the sheepdogs, or the calves whose bells you hear clinking as the evening falls.

In another passage of the same chapter, Kadare pushes the Gothic metaphor even further by making the General contemplate his own condition as commander of a dead army. He is no longer the representative of the living state but a figure suspended between worlds, already dead without realizing it, an undead functionary inhabiting Albania as if it were another dimension of human experience. The priest, too, is caught in this liminality: once a mediator with God, he now finds himself abandoned by the divine, while the General, servant of reason and discipline, discovers that rationality itself has deserted him. Both secular and sacred authority are revealed as hollow, spectral forms—undead institutions animated only by the corpses they claim to command.

Night fell, gloomier than ever. The general could not get to sleep and twice had to take a sleeping pill. He slipped into a disturbed sleep interspersed with wakeful periods. The death had quite unsettled him. Sometimes, in his dismay, he exaggerated the degree of adversity he had to cope with.

It was quite a new death and thus seemed both unacceptable and a promise of further ills. In this realm of silica grown cold over twenty years, such a death seemed as alien as could be.

The general felt panic-stricken without knowing why. As he tossed and turned on his camp bed, he thought he heard the priest praying.

In this scene, Albania itself appears as a necro-topos, a place where death has crystallized into landscape and where the living slowly discover that they belong to the dead. The General's insomnia and the Priest's whispered prayers dramatize two sides of the same condition: secular command and religious ritual, both exposed as undead practices, sustained only by proximity to corpses. Kadare thus renders both figures as revenants in their own right, emblems of a Europe that continues to march under the banners of its dead.

Just as in Bava's *Black Sabbath*, where animals—especially dogs—are portrayed as sensitive to the invisible thresholds between the worlds of the living and the dead, Kadare makes use of the same Gothic device. The dogs become seismographs of the other world, howling at presences unseen by humans, announcing that the boundary of the grave is about to be transgressed. Their restless cries punctuate the atmosphere of dread, reinforcing the sense that the exhumation of soldiers is not only a technical task but a ritual fraught with supernatural consequence. In both Bava's cinema and Kadare's novel, dogs function as intermediaries: creatures still of this world, but attuned to vibrations from another, warning of the contamination that comes when the living attempt to disturb the dead.

They had spent the last two nights in villages swarming with dogs who kept howling. Then came the day when they were to exhume the very last soldier. The general was filled with a sombre premonition. He wondered whether they were not in duty bound to leave this one at least in the ground. He had almost persuaded himself that after all the snags and reverses he'd been obliged to endure these last two years, this much compensation was due.

Here the Gothic and the political collapse into one another: the dogs announce not only the proximity of the revenant but the moral unease of disturbing the last grave. Their howls embody what the General cannot articulate—An intimation that exhumation itself has become excessive, that the Italy's necro-political duty to retrieve bones risks tipping into sacrilege. In this moment, Kadare borrows directly from the Gothic lexicon of Bava, where animals sense the undead before humans do, underscoring that the living are blind to what the natural world already knows.

While in the Gothic tradition it is usually the woman who appears as the primary victim—the maiden pursued by vampires, the daughter cursed to return as a ghost—in Kadare's novel it is the earth itself that takes on this role. In Albanian symbolic language, the earth is not neutral ground but the motherland, a feminine figure whose body absorbs the dead and whose integrity is constantly violated by foreign armies. The motherland is thus rendered as the ultimate Gothic victim: drained like a vampire's prey, dug up like a grave-robber's spoil, haunted by the corpses deposited in her soil. Yet unlike the passive heroines of Gothic cinema, this mother demands retribution. Her violated body becomes a site of vengeance, insisting that the debt to the dead can never be settled simply by exhumation.

The final stroke of the pick-axe sounded in his ear like a detonation. A moment later the expert shouted from a distance: "Five foot three! Exactly as listed!"

His regret at not having shown himself better disposed towards the earth was tempered by the idea that, after all, it was a kindness that the earth could maybe do without. The earth still kept back dozens of soldiers who had never been found and, whatever happened, even if several further missions were to be despatched, it would nonetheless keep hold of its share.

Here the Gothic metaphor fuses with national allegory: the motherland, overburdened with bones, silently refuses full exhumation. She keeps her share of the dead as both witness and weapon. In this sense, Albania itself becomes the Gothic heroine—buried alive under the weight of imperial corpses, yet also the agent who ensures that foreign armies can never fully claim victory, because their dead remain trapped in her body. The parallel with Bava's female revenants is striking: Asa Vajda in *Black Sunday*, impaled yet returning from the grave, embodies the persistence of violated femininity transformed into vengeance. Kadare adapts this Gothic logic by transferring the victimhood of the woman onto the national body, the motherland herself, whose apparent subjugation conceals the potential for retributive haunting.

Even the novel's ending makes deliberate use of Gothic devices. The final episode, in which the General finally locates the bones of General Z and confronts the old heroine who had once killed him, unfolds not in a battlefield or a graveyard but within the frame of a wedding feast. On the surface, this choice resonated with the socialist realist trope of the time: weddings as symbols of continuity, socialist happiness, and life moving forward despite adversity. In Albanian propaganda, the wedding embodied collective joy and renewal, a ritualized declaration that the nation's vitality endured. Yet Kadare subverts this official optimism by turning the wedding into a Gothic stage.

Here, the bride is no innocent young maiden but the aged woman who delivers the bones of General Z. The grotesque reversal is unmistakable: the wedding does not celebrate new beginnings but the belated consummation of death. General Z is revealed as her dead lover, whom she had slain in the past and exorcised from the community by concealing his remains. By finally surrendering his bones, she completes a long-delayed ritual, transforming what should be a scene of fertility and renewal into one of revenant closure.

The symbolic charge is unmistakable: the nation's socialist "happiness" is haunted by the skeletons of its past, and the wedding feast itself becomes a parody of celebration, a necro-ceremony where the dead intrude upon the living. In Gothic fashion, love and death collapse into one another, and the heroine's offering of bones functions less as a gesture of reconciliation than as a reminder that foreign generals, like undead lovers, always return to disturb the fragile happiness of the motherland.

The resonance with Bava's *Lisa and the Devil* (1973) is striking. In that film, a villa becomes the site of a grotesque wedding banquet in which mannequins, corpses, and living characters intermingle until the distinction between bride and cadaver collapses. Just as Bava stages marriage as a masquerade of the dead, Kadare transforms the Albanian wedding into a Gothic theater of exhumation. Both works invert the promise of matrimony: instead of inaugurating life, the wedding seals a pact with death, binding the community to its ghosts. In this parallel, Kadare borrows directly from Italian Gothic *mise-en-scène*, deploying the wedding as a stage where love, death, and political history entwine in a single ritual of haunting.

The old woman who had killed the officer emerges in the final scenes as herself undead, a spectral reminder from the past. No longer merely a participant in history, she has become its revenant—an emissary of the dead, returning to haunt her living compatriots with the danger posed by foreigners. Her presence is not only personal but allegorical: she embodies the persistence of history that refuses to stay buried, carrying with her both the memory of resistance and the threat of renewed contamination. In Gothic terms, she is a ghostly bride, intruding upon the feast of the living with the burden of bones, her very body marked as a conduit between worlds.

It was nearly midnight. The feast was at its height and everyone, or almost everyone, had totally forgotten old Nice when suddenly, just as the two foreigners were preparing to leave, she reappeared. It was perhaps the general who was the first to become aware of her return. He suddenly sensed her presence the way an old huntsman

senses the approach of a jungle tiger. Seeing people beginning to buzz and whisper around the doorway he immediately heard a voice crying in the depths of his being: “She is there!,” and felt himself go pale. This time the old woman was not weeping, nor could her voice even be heard; yet everyone could sense that she was there, at the centre of the group by the door. The band went on playing, but no one was listening to the music now. The group at the door increased in size. People were trying to puzzle out why old Nice had come back. And then, possibly influenced by her appearance, possibly by her supplications, the people by the door moved aside to let her pass, and she moved forward into the room amid general exclamations.

She was drenched through, covered with mud, her face as pale as death; and she was carrying a sack on her back.

Her return transforms the wedding into a necro-ritual: the music plays on but the true ceremony belongs to the dead. Old Nice is less a guest than a messenger, delivering the corpse of her lover as dowry to the community, forcing the living to recognize that their happiness rests uneasily upon buried violence. Just as Bava’s Gothic heroines—Asa Vajda in *Black Sunday* or the spectral bride in *Lisa and the Devil*—return to exact revenge or complete unfinished business, Kadare’s old woman intrudes as the uncanny conscience of the nation. She is the ghost of foreign domination, dragging the sack of history into the present, reminding the revelers that the danger of invasion and betrayal is never finally overcome but continues to reappear, pale-faced and mud-stained, at the very door of celebration.

13 Doruntina: Gothic Grief, Familial Oaths, and National Integrity

In the short story *Doruntina*¹¹ or *Ghost Rider* Kadare adapts one of Bava’s most potent Gothic motifs: the death-bed promise that compels a revenant to return. The tale revolves around Constantine, who swears to his dying mother that he will bring back his sister Doruntina from her marriage in a distant land whenever she calls. After his death, Doruntina does indeed summon him, and he rises from the grave to fulfill his oath, riding through the night to deliver her home.

Here not only the scenery—the dark and foggy night, the lonely road, the Inn of Two Roberts—but also the psychological tension recalls Bava’s *Black Sunday*, where the revenant Asa Vajda is similarly bound by a final oath to return and wreak vengeance. In both stories, the promise made in extremis binds the dead to the living, transforming death into a state of restless obligation. The revenant’s return is not arbitrary but contractual, driven by a pact whose force survives the grave.

The dusk was getting thicker. On either side of the road an occasional idler could be seen, no doubt awaiting the arrival of the

¹¹Ismail Kadare, *Doruntine*, trans. from the French of Jusuf Vrioni by Jon Rothschild (London: New Amsterdam Books, 1992).

carriage. News of the arrest had apparently spread. ... The flickering gleam of the lantern revealed no more than half the face of the man in irons, a face bizarrely streaked with mud. ... The light of the lantern flickered briefly as if terrified by those waxy twisted faces, then abandoned them to the darkness. ... He thought he heard that voice again, and even the muffled sound of footsteps. He started and looked back. Now he could make out the gleam of a lantern swaying in the distance, lighting the broken silhouette of a man in its wan glow. He stopped. The lantern and the splashing of the puddles, which seemed to rise up from a nightmare, were still quite far off when he first heard the voice. [Chapter 5]

The underlying theme in both Kadare and Bava is the family's desperate attempt to maintain unity in the face of external disruption. A father who resists marrying off his daughter to a foreigner, a brother who promises to return her even from beyond the grave: both gestures dramatize the defense of kinship against intrusion from outside. The revenant thus becomes more than a Gothic figure—it becomes an allegory of familial loyalty and national integrity, resisting fragmentation imposed by foreign powers. The grief of separation is figured as a living death hanging over the household, binding it to an oath that survives mortality.

Under roofs weighed down by their heavy burden the people talked of Doruntine. By now everyone knew of the arrest of the man who had brought her back, and though they had heard only bits and pieces of the tale he had told, that was enough to cover all the world with words, just as a handful of wheat can sow a field.

...

"You have all heard," he began, "some of you before setting out for this gathering, others on your way here or upon your arrival, of the strange marriage of Doruntine Vranaj, the marriage that lies at the root of this whole affair. You are all aware, I imagine, that this far-off marriage, the first concluded with a man from so distant a country, would never have taken place if Constantine, one of the bride's brothers, had not given his mother his word that he would bring Doruntine back to her whenever she desired her daughter's presence, on occasions of joy or sorrow. You also know that not long after the wedding the Vranaj, like all of Albania, were stricken with unspeakable grief. Yet no one brought Doruntine back, for he who had promised to do so was dead.

You are aware of the curse the Lady Mother uttered against her son for his violation of the *bessa*, and you know that three weeks after that curse was spoken, Doruntine at last appeared at the family home. That is why I now affirm, and reaffirm, that it was none other than her brother Constantine, in accordance with his oath, his *bessa*, who brought Doruntine back. There is no explanation for that journey, nor could there be. It matters little whether or not Constantine returned from the grave to accomplish his mission,

just as it matters little who was the horseman who set out on that black night or what horse he saddled, whose hands held the reins, whose feet pressed against the stirrups, whose hair was matted with the highway dust. Each of us has a part in that journey, for it is here among us that Constantine's *bessa* germinated, and that is what brought Doruntine back. Therefore, to be more exact I would have to say that it was all of us—you, me, our dead lying there in the graveyard close by the church—who, through Constantine, brought Doruntine back." [Chapter 7]

Here the Gothic oath is nationalized. Constantine's *bessa* is no longer just a personal pledge but the embodiment of collective identity, a covenant between the living and the dead that ensures continuity against foreign intrusion. Just as Bava's revenants dramatize the curse of aristocratic lineage, Kadare transforms the revenant into a figure of Albanian fidelity: an undead brother who resists assimilation by recalling the living to the obligations of kinship and soil.

What makes Kadare's Constantine particularly striking is how he inverts Bürger's Gothic paradigm.¹² In *Lenore*, the revenant rider abducts the living beloved into the grave, transforming the promise of love into a death sentence. Constantine, by contrast, brings his sister back from exile into the family home, restoring rather than destroying kinship. One ghost rider leads the living into the kingdom of the dead, while the other escorts the living back from the periphery of foreign lands into the sanctum of the Albanian household. In this mirroring, Kadare both appropriates and reverses the Romantic Gothic motif: the horseman is still undead, bound by an unbreakable oath, but his mission is not to annihilate the beloved—it is to preserve the unity of family and nation.

Kadare's Constantine thus revives this knightly and Romantic archetype in a Balkan setting: a soldier who, even in death, remains bound by his oath, riding back through storm and shadow to deliver his sister. The Gothic ghost rider, once a symbol of feudal loyalty and Christian virtue, then a Romantic emblem of doomed passion, becomes in Kadare's hands an allegory of Albanian *bessa*—an oath powerful enough to cross the boundary of the grave.

This figure also resonates with Bava's cinematic Gothic. In *Black Sunday* (1960), Asa Vajda and her vampiric kin are introduced with a similarly spectral scene: a Wurdulak rides into the inn carrying gruesome trophies—the severed head of a Turk, the corpse of his victim, and even a child's lifeless body. Here the rider announces the intrusion of the undead into the human community, binding vengeance, family, and foreign war into one image. Just as Bava's ghostly horseman embodies the return of history's violence, Kadare's Constantine embodies the persistence of Albanian oath and kinship.

In both cases, the revenant's ride is triggered by the disruption of foreigners: in Bava, the Turk as archetypal invader, and in Kadare, the distant in-laws who threaten to dissolve the Albanian household. The foreigner becomes the catalyst for the Gothic return, the external force whose intrusion awakens the

¹²Gottfried August Bürger, *Lenore* (1773). For an accessible English version, see Matthew G. Lewis (ed.), *Tales of Wonder*, London: J. Bell, 1801, pp. 19–28. On the cultural impact of the ballad across Europe, see Patrick Bridgwater, *The German Gothic Novel in Anglo-German Perspective*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004, pp. 67–72.

oath-bound dead. The message is clear: the revenant rides not only to honor a promise, but to resist foreign encroachment. Whether in the Italian Gothic imagination or in Albanian necro-literature, the ghost rider gallops out of the grave to defend the integrity of family and homeland against outsiders.

14 The Haunted Castle

In Kadare's *The Castle* (*Kështjella*),¹³ the Gothic atmosphere is transposed into the setting of epic warfare, rendering the siege of Kruja in 1450 not merely as a historical clash but as a nightmarish battle scene. The novel stages combat in ways reminiscent of both zombie exploitation films of the 1970s and the apocalyptic sieges of modern fantasy epics like *The Lord of the Rings*.

Imagined as some haunted place, the castle is set in a backdrop of a devilish darkness.

He knew by heart almost every one of its [the castle] details; now he could actually see it looming against a dark background, and its aspect stirred a painful feeling of anxiety within him. . . . The plain was being veiled in darkness and the host of white tents seemed to hover about like a mist above it. . . . The landscape reminded him of an oppressive nightmare from which he had striven to wake up in vain.

. . . These were high mountains, the chronicler read, where the fowls of the air could not land, where only the devil, leaning on this stick stumbling and fumbling in every step, could climb, where the slippers of the evil spirit are worn out. (p. 10-11)

The Ottoman forces, described as an indistinguishable mass, advance upon the walls like a horde of the undead: relentless, dehumanized, and driven by an inexorable force that erases individual identity. In their faceless multitude they recall George Romero's cinematic zombies, whose terror derives less from individual monstrosity than from the sheer, unstoppable weight of collective motion. Against them stand the Albanian defenders, whose resistance is framed not only as martial but also as Gothic-heroic figures encircled by overwhelming darkness, their valor shadowed by the inevitability of sacrifice and martyrdom.

The Gothic charge of the scene intensifies when the attackers are met with fire, their bodies seared and scarred as though they were vampires whose flesh records the mark of flame. The imagery recalls both medieval chronicles of infernal weaponry and Gothic cinema's obsession with the burning of the undead.

At that moment some burning globes, like small comets, rolled down from the battlements onto the assailants.

"The flame-throwing devils," murmured another. Mevla Chelebi thought this a suitable expression for his chronicle. The flame-throwing devils, he said to himself. He must not forget that.

¹³Ismail Kadare, *The Castle*. Translated by Pavli Cesku. Shtepia 8 Nentori. 1974

The sea of soldiers swayed with fear every time the comets fell from the battlements.

“They are balls dipped into resin mixed with sulphur, wax and oil,” the intendant-in-chief explained to Chelebi. “Their burning leaves its mark on you all your life.”

The chronicler knew this, as he knew many other things of which he feigned ignorance so as not to spoil the pleasure of having such secret knowledge explained by his high-born friend.

...

Tursun Pasha could not take his eyes from the shapeless mass of his army, which pushed ahead and throbbed like a gigantic living organism of bleeding flesh all around the walls. Time and again the odor of burning human flesh assailed his nostrils.

...

A little later, the soldiers of death [serdengeshtlers] marched off beneath their blue colors. The peculiar beat of their drums died away into the general uproar of the battle.

...

He looked back towards the walls again. Now the sun hung low upon the horizon, and those still fighting on the parapets seemed like ghosts. For a long stretch of time he followed those queer ghost-like movements, which no longer seemed to him to make any sense. Then, he shook himself free from the spell, and lowered his eyes to the main gate.

The castle itself becomes the Gothic protagonist: no longer merely a fortress but a haunted citadel, alive with spectral defenders and cursed in the eyes of its enemies. Kadare here reverses the conventional Gothic trope of the haunted castle—usually depicted as a prison of terror for those within—by presenting the fortress of Kruja as the spectral power of resistance. To the Ottomans, it appears not as a stronghold of the living, but as a necropolis animated by ghosts.

Finally, losing every trace of hope, he gave the order to sound the retreat. As he mounted his horse, he felt a deadly torpor immediately replace the terrible tension of his nerves. Turning his head to no one, he rode off towards his tent.

One of the sandjakbeys swore hoarsely: “Accursed castle!”

In this reversal, Kadare fuses national epic with Gothic horror. Kruja itself becomes an unassailable revenant, a fortress that terrifies its besiegers precisely because it seems to be defended not by men but by an incantation, an alchemical spell woven from Albanian nationalism and communist ideology.

Just as in Gothic cinema the castle harbors cursed bloodlines and vengeful specters. Gothic castles are necro-symbols¹⁴ harboring vampiric bloodlines, and

¹⁴See Mario Bava’s *Black Sunday* (1960)

Hammer Films' cycle of Gothic horrors in the 1950s–1970s, which repeatedly staged castles as both prisons of terror and haunted repositories of ancestral guilt.¹⁵ Here the Albanian stronghold is animated by the collective dead, transfigured into guardians of the nation. Kruja is no longer merely a site of defense but a necropolis whose stones echo with the voices of martyrs, an edifice where history itself has taken spectral form. In this way Kadare recasts the siege as both political allegory and Gothic pageant: the fortress is at once a bastion of material resistance and a haunted citadel of memory, embodying national endurance against imperial invasion.

15 Conclusion

The thread connecting Italy and Albania is thus the secularization of the death cult through capitalist popular culture. Bava supplied the *mise-en-scène*—aristocratic vampires, cursed families, revenant oaths—while the Albanian regime translated them into a political theology of memory. In the same way Romero secularized the zombie into a metaphor for consumerist hunger, Kadare transformed Bava's revenants into national martyrs who haunted the present.

Bava's necro-aesthetic thus offers a cinematic metaphor for the way societies and individuals remember their dead and deal with the grief of separation of the living or the dead—not as abstractions, but as material presences. Just as the ghost lingers in the family home through furniture and keepsakes, Bava's cinema insists that the dead remain tactile, visible, and threateningly beautiful. His films do not allow for forgetting; instead, they choreograph a spectral coexistence in which the living dead are not a rupture but the very texture of memory.

Thus, what looked like an indigenous Albanian necro-literature was, in fact, an Adriatic borrowing: Albania's death cult, refracted through Gothic cinema, made serviceable for both nationalism and communism.

The same dynamic shapes Kadare's writing: by appropriating Gothic tropes, he transformed folkloric revenants into allegories of Albania's historical trauma, making the dead into political actors who both legitimize and destabilize the nation.

Yet Kadare's use of Gothic tropes was not purely literary. It must also be seen as a pragmatic cultural choice within a shifting political economy of literature. Gothic aesthetics were gaining traction in global markets during the 1960s and 1970s, both through cinema and through the Romantic ballad tradition that publishers continually repackaged for mass audiences. To align his political allegories with Gothic conventions was therefore to ensure that his works could circulate internationally as part of a recognizable genre, while still encoding distinctly Albanian concerns. In this sense, Kadare's Gothic was as much a matter of economics as of aesthetics: a way of positioning Albania's political anxieties within a form that Western and Eastern readers alike could understand, whether as a parable of imperial oppression from the West or a cautionary tale of Russian domination from the East. The Gothic became the

¹⁵See David Punter, *The Literature of Terror*, London: Longman, 1996, pp. 192–204.

lingua franca of Albanian modernity, a literary currency that allowed Kadare to smuggle national trauma into a global marketplace of ghosts.¹⁶

This article offers the first sustained analysis of how Albanian literature's secularized death-cult drew not only on local folklore but also on the necro-aesthetic repertoire of Italian Gothic cinema. By tracing the influence of Mario Bava's *mise-en-scène* on Ismail Kadare's treatment of revenants and political remembrance, the essay situates Albanian cultural production within a transnational genealogy of the undead—a connection hitherto overlooked in both film studies and Albanian literary criticism.

¹⁶On the commercial rise of Gothic aesthetics in this period, see David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day*, London: Longman, 1996, pp. 273–301; and Kevin Heffernan, *Ghouls, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business, 1953–1968*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004, on the transnational marketing of Gothic cinema.