

Albanian Doctors Through the Movie Lens

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Abstract

The medical profession has been surrounded from mixed feelings of admiration, mysticism, as well as of fear and refusal. Authors and enthusiastic directors have dedicated serials and movies to the physicians' everyday work, in their ebbs and tides. Albanian cinema produced a score of titles dedicated to the medical profession, with some movies focusing on the physician as the principal role, and some others more peripherally.

The physician as a movie character underwent serious changes in the way the directors and scripts defined it, and maybe even in the way the general audience perceived the same. Changes in this modeling of physician's character were part of the maturation process of the Albanian cinematography that has otherwise been strongly politicized from scholars; this trend could as well, or mainly, be related to the intrinsic alterations of the Albanian society from the immediate post WWII, until the fall of the totalitarian regime.

Keywords: movies, medical profession, Albania, deontology, ideology, WWII (World War II)

1. Introduction

Albanian cinema has rarely focused on a medical professional as a theme per se; rather and due to ideological pressure, the doctor was part of an evolving society that was craving for perfection, equality and welfare. Half a century after the crumbling of the communist illusion, we might see consistent changes within three periods, related to the depiction of the medical doctor as a movie character, within a timeframe of almost twenty years (1969-1987).

Although largely considered a *terra incognita*, scholars of dedication have studied Albanian cinema in its ebbs and tides. Impressive is nevertheless, the obsessive position of shortcutting every sense and detail as simply

related to the hierarchical control that the state was perpetrating, through his communist ideology, laws and bylaws.

There was obviously and beyond all doubts a strict control and censorship of Enver Hoxha regime. On the other hand, overplaying the role of politics will be of little help if we want to have a full view. Albanian-naïve readers will suppose that the dictator (deceased 1985) was himself shooting movies, directing scenes and writing scripts: an extremely simplifying explanation, far away from understanding of the public psyche and the social anxiety, with embedded roots much deeper in time and space.

Several Albanian scholars did a lot of precious work while studying local movies: Natasha

Lako, Abaz Hoxha, Abdurrahim Myftiu and many others (Lako, 2004; Hoxha, 1987; Myftiu, 2003). Since their detailed works is written in Albanian and not translated, these materials unfortunately are not at hand of foreign scholars, except for a few passionate able to read and understand the language. Important and wide-scale studies from these scholars are as well available, with Bruce Williams publishing extensively, together with Grgić and others (Williams, 2012; Williams, 2015; Williams and Myftari, 2020; Grgić, 2021).

Almost none from the scholarly sources pretend to be exhaustive, and a thorough, unbiased written history of Albanian cinema is yet to come. Some interesting attempts did exist even before the collapse of communist regime, when the country faced an unprecedented and hermetic isolation. A working group from the University of Vincennes, Paris VIII, published in 1975 a brochure *Le cinéma Albanais* (Albanian cinema) whose cover is reproduced here below (Figure 1). The French team composed of some *pauci beati* that were meticulously selected (and probably financed) from the government of Albania, was able to visit the country when the majority of foreigners considered such a visit a mission impossible. Nonetheless, French authors mention in their bibliography, some precious studies: an article of Endri Keko (1974), still in Albanian language and non-accessible via internet sources, might be a nucleus of ideas, achievements and challenges (Keko, 1974; Working group on Albanian Cinema; 1975).

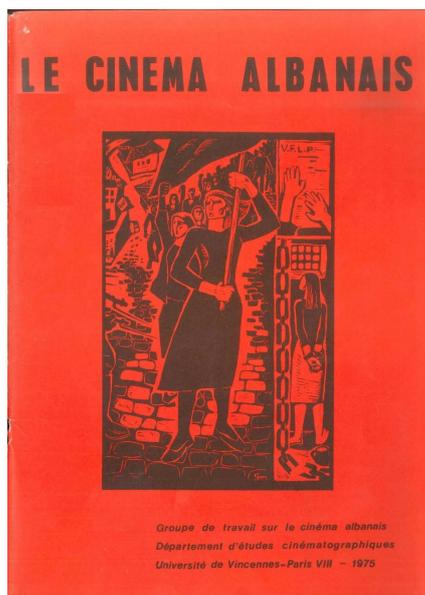


Figure 1. Cover of a French brochure, published 1975, on the Albanian cinema

The time trend imposed to artworks and artists themselves, exactly due to the social changes, need a methodological approach. There was a tendency to overplay the importance of geopolitics, even though good grounds to proclaim so do exist. Most of Albanian filmmakers and directors were educated in Eastern communist countries, with Soviet Union having the main say while helping a lot to create and maintain the future of the Albanian film industry (Mëhilli, 2018). Once in alliance with Soviet Union, and then the unexpected come about towards China, has led authors to suggest a straightforward connection between geopolitical moves, movie themes selection and why not, actor performing (Grgić, 2021). A few have hazarded, however, to raise red flags about “any reductive understanding of Albanian cinema as a tool of political education”; and while doing so, were talking about Albanian movies offered to the Chinese viewers (Lu, 2021).

1.1 Doctor at the Focus: A Difficult Character

The way in which the medical profession has evolved during last decades mirrors in artworks and movies as well. The ever changing technological and scientific advancements contributed into the de-mystification of a previously unknown or less known profession, that of a doctor.

Flores has made a thorough investigation into the ways the media, and especially movie industry, depict physicians (Flores, 2002). The title of one of his papers says it concisely: mad scientists, compassionate healers and greedy egotists; these are more or less three main forms of portraying medical professionals in the cinema (Flores, 2002). Materialism and a love of money highlighted the cinematic portrayal of doctors since 1920s and the trend seems unceasing (Flores, 2004).

The universality of this portraying is a point of discussion; however, Albanian doctors as movie characters will subdue to some extent to this description. The Soviet influences might add to these assets a heroic transfiguration, which was by no way realistic at all. While this entire standpoint is individualistic as it can be for doctors, when considering characters individually and separately, the time trend with all shifts and changes of the period (1969-1987) is more eloquent, thus more important.

Indeed, while Lako made a detailed summary of all film festivals in Albania, that initially were

organized as annual galas of sober sumptuosity (to the extent that the country's isolation and poverty conceded), some periods of importance were denoted (Lako, 2004; Williams & Myftari, 2020). Each edition of this festival seemed to have a specific theme who ranged from *happiness* and *accomplishments* (1976) to *social anxiety* (1991) and *euphoria* (1995). This is a specific and psychoanalytical approach needing further scrutiny. All this while the issue is unnecessarily over-politicized.

Not overlapping with the schedule of the Albanian film festivals and encroaching a larger time dimension, Grgić divided Albanian cinema alongside three-time frames, the Soviet period (1948–1960), the Chinese period (1966–1978) and the period of isolation (1978–1990) (Grgić, 2021).

While periods, classifications and divisions have all a methodology that can still suffer from biases, the psychological stance embedded in Lako's approach in an embryonic form, is lacking elsewhere. Instead, a deeper research of the public psyche, the changes that Albanian society underwent through decades, and the subconscious of artists creating and shooting under censorship might uncover other details. Highly talented artists were able to challenge atheistic constraints during communism, although under cover and disguise (Vyshka, 2020).

Medical doctors had, and probably are having, a particular position in the Albanian society. This might be largely true for the years after the newly state was founded (1912), in between the two World Wars; and this particular societal position held straight even during communism years, when everything seemed flattened and equalitarian (Banac, 2014).

This is obviously, a multi-faceted issue. Medical profession is represented with sober figures within Albanian cinematography, whose production counted more than two hundred twenty movies from the inauguration of the *Kinostudio* (Film Studio) *New Albania* until its practical closure in the early 1990s. In fact, medical doctors could be met in not more than 10% of all this production, with some roles being merely episodic or casual, while in a few cases (such as those mentioned below) the plot itself was entirely or largely dedicated to the doctor, its professional dilemmas and crossroads.

This is very much true with initial productions such as *Her children* (*Fëmijët e saj*, directed by

Hysen Hakani), a short movie released on 1957 (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0272100/>). The painful death of a child following a dog bite, which instead of searching medical help was left ashore in the hands of a magician, raises two main questions (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Snapshot from *Her children*, 1957. The mother holding her dying child, following a rabid dog bite, and left without appropriate medical care. (Courtesy of Albanian Central State Film Archive)

First, the accessibility of medical services in Albania has always been insufficient. The communist regime tried to copy a soviet model of health care (the so-called Semashko system of medical care) but the system itself had serious flaws whose nature is out of the scope of this paper (Sheiman, 2013). *Second*, the general public lacked widely the minimum of medical knowledge; but this could on the other hand have granted until recently supernatural qualities to the healer, namely the doctor itself. This belief was obviously reversed recently due to a diversity of factors; technicalizing the medical profession, and the broken relationship patient-physician might be some of these factors (Baron and Berinsky, 2019).

Socio-politics and history will offer us as well a different corner regarding the role and the position of medical doctors inside the Albanian society. In his memoirs (*Rrno vetëm për me tregue – Live only to tell*) the renown Franciscan priest Zef Pllumi denoted physicians '*as the only profession who the regime permitted a certain humane behavior towards his citizens... most liberal intellectuals educated in Albania were in fact, the physicians*' (Pllumi, 2006). Here again, the difference in the relationship and its nature, between the authority and the ordinary citizen, might have been proportional when the

representative of the state (authority) was a physician, instead of another professional (Scheye, 1991).

(1) First attempts (1969, 1970): looking for a hero
The period precedes the *happiness and accomplishments'* age of Lako since film festivals

had not yet started; the *Chinese* influences alleged from other sources did not materialize within the characters and movies dedicated to medical doctors. In fact, three movies of the period depicted physicians in their everyday life and work (Table 1).

Table 1.

Year of release	Title	Director	Doctor's roles	Cast	Character	Gender
1969	Old wounds	Dhimitër Anagnosti	Career surgeon; chief of clinic of surgery	Roza Anagnosti; Naim Frashëri	Doctor Vera; Doctor Pëllumbi (operating surgeons)	Female/Male
1970	The trace	Kristaq Dhamo	Career surgeon	Naim Frashëri	Doctor Artani (surgeon; transferred in remote areas)	Male
1970	The bronze bust	Viktor Gjika	Career surgeon	Sandër Prosi	Doctor Kristo Borova (surgeon)	Male

Should we call for a political/ideological perspective, the post-soviet orientation might be closer to the framing of movies and characters. Authors and directors were still looking for a hero; when this was absent, there was an impending need to invent one. A young female doctor in the movie *Old wounds* (1969) was forced to leave a university hospital, and headed toward a lost village while downgrading her professional status and probably the long-time career. The displacement, apparently made of good grounds of helping people even in remote areas, and the psychological dilemma, depicts the immolation in a modified form, convenient to the society. A pure ideological framework that hardly survived the time proof (Figure 3).

Some elements are noteworthy in Table 1: directors of the movies were all three of them founders and moviemakers that would dominate the Albanian film industry for the years to come. Furthermore, doctors selected to deal with were all surgeons: the medicine had to be current and intrusive. Some of the respective patients that these doctors were dealing with were suffering from bullet gunshots: *Old wounds* describes Vera removing a projectile from her patient.

The bronze bust was even more eruptive since the

plot took place during the Nazi occupation of Albanian in WWII: doctor Borova was as well dealing with a wounded fugitive. This long-career surgeon was secretly treating an injured partisan inside his home, facing serious consequences should the Nazi Germans that were occupying the country would have uncovered the truth. A mixture of ideology and deontology, partially still acceptable to most viewers (Figure 4).



Figure 3. The chief of clinic of surgery (*Naim Frashëri* – left in the image) smoking a cigarette after the operation was over; the operating surgeon (*Roza Anagnosti* – right in the image) and another colleague in the backstage. (Courtesy of Albanian Central State Film Archive)



Figure 4. Doctor Borova (*center*) outcries to his unusual patient (*right*), a wounded communist absconding from Nazi Germans, with the son of the doctor (*left*) witnessing the argument. (Courtesy of Albanian Central State Film Archive).

Maybe the most in-depth and extensive movie focused on the life and work of a doctor (still a surgeon) was *The trace* (1970, directed Dhamo). An endowed young surgeon leaves the university clinic, while abandoning a lot from petty favors and advantages that he and his family was enjoying. In a kind of public trial, his colleagues and relatives will go through his life odyssey: the doctor was dead, a brutal death presumably suicidal. The story is not satisfying to the law enforcement officers that after investigating find out instead that the case was of a murder, perpetrated from a delinquent while trying to escape from Albania. A lot of granted heroism to a doctor that was otherwise a greedy egotist – to borrow Flores’ terminology (Flores, 2002).

(2) Second approach (1980, 1984): searching for a killer

The storytelling of later years will change substantially the more we distance from the war theme of WWII and partisan heroisms. Things will be differently seen and imposed: the dark side of the medal had to be visible. The Chinese

cultural revolution could have had influenced in a decisive form, especially within the frames of a clear anti-intellectual position it marshaled openly (Blumi, 1999; Eddy, 2019).

As with other cases and movies mentioned above (*first approach*), Albanian artworks and creativity reflected the political changes with some years of delay, as to be sure which way the politics would go. The heroic image of a doctor that resembled so much to the partisan culture needed some years to be formatted accordingly to a cinematic model: in fact, Albania had no cinematography at all before WWII, and Soviet collaboration and models had a founding effect.

Diversely, at late 70s, the directors had come of a certain professional age. With the fading of the need for heroes, some scripts and movies took care of brutalizing the image of a doctor (Table 2). *Hell 1943* (released 1980) depicted a cruel physician (Figure 5) that was serving inside a concentration camp – but this was of no surprise at all, since allegations of medical abuses during the *Third Reich* were already at hand and proven (Seidelman, 1996).

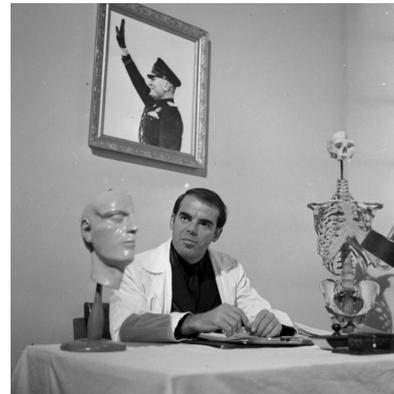


Figure 5. Jorgaq Tushe in the role of the doctor of a fascist concentration camp, *Hell 1943*. (Courtesy of Albanian Central State Film Archive)

Table 2.

Year of release	Title	Director	Doctor’s role	Cast	Character	Gender
1980	Hell 1943	Rikard Ljarja	Military doctor	Jorgaq Tushe	Doctor of the concentration camp	Male
1980	New mornings	Muharrem Fejzo	Ophthalmologist	Aleksandër Pogaçe	Private clinic	Male
1984	Who dies standing up	Vladimir Prifti	Family doctor	Stavri Shkurti	Communal/village doctor	Male

If the doctor in a concentration camp was a consumed and classic model, nevertheless depicting physicians while deliberately malpracticing was something new. The ophthalmologist in the movie *New Mornings* (released 1980) secretly refuses to treat accordingly a glaucoma patient, a female partisan in the first years of liberation. While giving her a non-effective treatment although aware of the diagnosis and its severity, the physician becomes part of a larger script perspective. The war class, i.e., the struggle between the new governing social class (communists and generally non-wealthy people) with the wealthy men losing their power, must be extended even in the medical field.



Figure 6. A family doctor of a remote village performs an unsolicited house visit to the main character (a patriot teacher) of the movie. Later, this doctor would provide to commissioned assassins the poison to kill the teacher. (Courtesy of Albanian Central State Film Archive)

An otherwise rarity is the role of the village doctor in the movie *Who dies standing up* (1984), based on historical data. A famous patriot, intellectual and teacher was striving to promote Albanian language and culture in his area during the years when the country was part of the Ottoman Empire. Being challenged from authorities and the Church, a handful of local notables decide to get rid of him. The doctor (Figure 6) provides a powerful poison: at that time doctors use to have even the role of pharmacists, and often manipulated themselves galenic preparations here including highly active drugs potentially lethal. Accomplice to an assassination, the image of the doctor is similar with a shaman, so usual for the XIX century, when the events take place (Hultkrantz, 1985).

(3) Third shot (1986, 1987): An ordinary man

The third model will come up in the 80s, a period which denotes the end of an era when the state controlled and sponsored almost entirely the artistic activities.

Physicians are seen as normal people, making simply their duty – which becomes a technical one, not any longer needing a particular vocation. Healing is nowadays no longer a blessing, but something reachable to anyone: hence the medical doctor is neither a hero nor an antihero, but simply an employee (Dans, 2000).

Table 3.

Year of release	Title	Director	Doctor's role	Cast	Character	Gender
1986	While life doors are opened	Rikard Ljarja	Family doctor	Petrit Malaj	Communal/village doctor	Male
1987	Invisible world	Kristaq Dhano	Laboratory doctors	Robert Ndrenika; Roza Anagnosti	Experimental setting/ laboratory medicine	Male/Female
1987	Memory circle	Esat Mysliu	Psychiatrists	Agim Qirjaqi; Rikard Ljarja	Treating psychiatrists	Male

A recently graduated doctor with no experience at all (*While life doors are opened*, 1986) is obliged to perform an abdominal surgery in a catastrophic setting of having no anesthesia, no assistants, and probably no surgical tools at all. The shift from ideology towards deontology (1969 – 1986) is clear, maybe overrated but

artistically sound. Facing the stress and the difficulties of the profession, the young doctor endures the hardship of a job considered till some years before as an idyllic emphasis of being all-powerful; thus, even able to defeat death (Figure 7). An illusion that in fact, has accompanied medical profession for centuries,

far longer than rationality would have permitted, and that has been a meditating theme both for lawyers and physicians (Moynihan, 2002; Sage, 2010).

The other two movies focusing on the doctors are highly technical in their details: *Invisible world* (1987) describes the everyday working life of a group trying to synthesize a vaccine. Deontology, truth-telling and sense of responsibility of doctors and nurses, while facing professional failures, are a step ahead from the clichés of the heroic doctor. *Memory circle* (1987) tries to approach another delicate theme, with a group of psychiatrists dealing with a lady-patient apparently suffering from a hard psychotic status, that turned out to be a post-traumatic stress disorder related to the previous traumas during her imprisonment in a Nazi concentration camp.



Figure 7. A young doctor starts his professional career while facing the lethal condition of a child. The father of the dying patient (in the background) oversees the grisly scene. (Courtesy of Albanian Central State Film Archive)

2. Discussion

There is a clear time-trend in the archetypal changes of depicting a medical doctor in the Albanian cinema. But this is not, obviously, a local phenomenon.

Peter Dans has sketched an exhaustive chronological course of medicine, and how medical professionals are seen through the movie lens (Dans, 2000). He writes about a *golden age of medicine* when doctors were highly admired (till early 50s), and when medicine was able to administer ‘magic bullets’ for treating acute life-threatening diseases. Already by then (60s and on) movies concentrated on medicine’s fall from grace: the bond between patients and

physicians weakened; intensive care units generated ‘exorbitant bills’ and ‘half-way technologies’ accumulated societal concerns about unscrupulous doctors (Dans, 2000).

Albanian cinematography had very little time, if none, to deal with medical miracles pertaining to a period prior to 1950, when the movies production in the country was inexistent. However, the first heroic period approximates what Lako showcased as the leitmotiv of the first Festival of Albanian Film: *happiness and accomplishments* (Lako, 2004; Williams and Myftari, 2020). The back-to-earth positioning of the third phase (1986, 87) reflects fairly well Lako’s finding about the social *anxiety* that characterized the period (Lako, 2004; Williams and Myftari, 2020). The anti-heroic stand in between the years was still there, maybe left unnoticed due to its episodic nature, but nevertheless noteworthy.

While Grgić spoke about a *Chinese period* and delimited years of the same, two elements need special mentioning. Firstly, ‘heroic’ characters as in the movies *Old wounds*, *The trace* and *The bronze bust* all belong to early 70s and are mainly of a Soviet influence, that was lingering in the Albanian artworks. Second, the so-called Chinese period would be better translated as an indirect influence of the Chinese revolution and the anti-intellectualism it fomented; while as a reverse effect, Albanian movies were widely screened and were very popular in the Chinese cinemas of the period (Shen and Li, 2015).

There are obviously impressive analogies that transcend time periods even between movies we mentioned above as belonging to different Zeitgeists. This is a touchable phenomenon if we compare two stories – separated almost twenty years from each other’s shooting – namely, the movies *Old wounds* and *When life doors are opened*. The first was released 1969, the second 1986. The period of time related to years 80s is meticulously explained from Bejko, while denoting that the ‘*Albanian cinema was losing its populist strength... while the neo-realistic and Soviet artistic style were abandoned since the early 1970s*’ (Bejko, 2018).

As a matter of fact, the drama of Vera (the female doctor leaving the University Clinic of Surgery for a remote, rural area) in *Old wounds*, takes places in a closed environment with as little people involved as it could be: family,

colleagues. The other generation of doctors – such as Bardhyl in *When life doors are opened* – is straightforwardly exposed to the *Panopticon*, if we borrow Foucault's terminology (Diken, 2017). The secret, psychological drama of 1969 (Vera's), later explodes in an open environment, maybe not hostile but anyhow incomprehensible, when Bardhyl (1986) faces the duress of the profession, operates without an operating room, and wins the laurels of a miraculous doctor while no professional of the field would have ever imagined that something could really happen.

The medical profession is obviously a multi-faceted issue sometimes hard to interpret in lay terms. Nevertheless, Albanian cinema approached several times the field of medicine, producing unrepeatable characters, highly inspired scenes of dedication as well as of terrific reactions to disease, healing and death. While doing so, the character of the physician inside these movies seems to have been largely depicted along a strictly local perspective, remaining sometimes illegible to the foreign audience.

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