

## *Deviating memories: Armando Lulaj's seriously playful excursions into Albania's history*

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This paper examines how certain contemporary audio-visual works from post-socialist countries in the Balkan region, employ archival footage from the communist period, to address and problematize the notion of remembering and suppressing national history through collective memory. I specifically focus on the work of the Albanian artist, Armando Lulaj and his videos *Albanian Trilogy: A Series of Devious Stratagems* (2011, 2012 and 2015) exhibited at the 56<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale. By re-using images and narratives produced during Enver Hoxha's regime, and still ingrained in Albanian visual memory, these films provide alternative readings of Albanian history from the Cold War to the present day. What is more, some of this archival material is made public for the first time, while the rest has been dormant and purposely forgotten in archival vaults. Lulaj's playful excursions, create connections between a problematic and suppressed past and the difficult and selective present, by juxtaposing evocative and politically charged visual records and contemporary footage of artist's commissioned performances.

**KEYWORDS:** collective memory, post-socialism, archival footage, national narratives, Albanian studies

Several contemporary audio-visual works from post socialist countries in the Balkans employ archival footage from the communist period to address and problematize the notion of remembering and suppressing national narratives through collective memory. This article focuses on the work of the Albanian filmmaker and artist Armando Lulaj and his *Albanian Trilogy: A Series of Devious Stratagems* (2011, 2012 and 2015) shown at the 56<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale. By re-using images and narratives produced during Enver Hoxha's regime, still ingrained in visual memory of the people, these works provide alternative readings of Albanian history from the Cold War to the present day. Lulaj plays with the characteristics and symbolism inherent to fables, both through the interrogation of the tropes in the original stories and in the ways in which he deviates from their intended purpose by deconstructing and debunking objects, images and narratives, and finally by providing a moral message.

Some of this archival material is made public for the first time, while the majority remains dormant and forgotten in state archives. For instance, in the film *It Wears as it Grows* the fact that a museum object is literally and metaphorically taken out into the streets forces

viewers to be confronted with its undeniable presence in their lives, and consequently, in the narratives surrounding this object. Armando Lulaj's playful audio-visual excursions create connections between a problematic and suppressed Albanian past and the equally unstable and selective political, economic and social present of the country, by juxtaposing evocative and politically-charged visual records with contemporary footage of the artist's commissioned performances.

### The past as a series of fables

The contemporary social, political and historical context of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe in the postcommunist period has brought about the readdress of national narratives, creating distinct discourses through continuous re-assessments of history but also through the recalling and suppressing of memory. In this sense, the process of remembering, mediated through film, is as much about re-invoking past remembrances as it is about repressing and selecting certain historical memories. Like many other countries in the Communist-bloc, Albania experienced a traumatic transition from state-run communist rule to a democratic neoliberal system in the aftermath of the regime's fall in 1991. In this context, cultural and collective memory underwent a profound crisis. The abrupt change not only led to a loss of social values, but also caused a trauma in the collective consciousness of the nation, which brought about an immediate desire to repress an all-too-close and painful history.

Enver Hoxha was at the head of Stalinist style of state administration from 1945 until his death in 1985, and the country championed self-reliance and grew increasingly isolationist during the Cold War years. Discussing the regime's insecurity, Elidor Mehilli argues that: "The irony is that tiny, isolated Albania, which shunned the (Non-Aligned) Movement, ultimately ended up radically non-aligned: violently critical of Moscow, Beijing, and Washington, and deeply distrustful of practically everyone else".<sup>[1]</sup> In 1961, rather than normalizing relations with the Soviet Union in response to quarrels, the Albanian leader Hoxha famously declared that the Albanians would "eat grass – if necessary – rather than sell themselves for thirty silverlings". This stance contributed to the economic depression Albanians experienced especially in the last decades of the regime, when Albania did not receive any foreign aid and depended only on its internal production. For instance, images depicting central Haussmann-style boulevards in Tirana show how locals would use them for promenades in the absence of traffic – due to the fact that hardly any Albanian family could afford to own a car.

Furthermore, Mehilli argues how "war shaped the identity of Communist movements, which spoke the language of defiance but acted as if under siege"<sup>[2]</sup> and finally during the second half of the 1970s, the Albanian government funnelled money into the construc-

[1] E. Mehilli, *States of Insecurity*, "The International History Review" 2015, vol. 37, no. 5, p. 1039.

[2] Ibidem, p. 1041.

tion of tens of thousands of military fortifications: a costly physical manifestation of the “siege mentality” that became pervasive.[3] This fear and suspicion of both external and internal enemies, manifested itself strongly in the formation and activities of the notorious secret police *Sigurimi*, which exercised a state of terror during the communist period, and many regime dissidents were either imprisoned, killed or simply disappeared.[4]

Armando Lulaj's *Trilogy* challenges the dominant narratives presented by Albania's post-communist governments, and entices Albanians to face the hushed histories of the not-so-recent communist past and critically re-examine their own past. Lulaj describes Albania as a “black hole”, and states how “we have a big problem with the past” (Lulaj 2017). A frequent topic of discussion in the media and public debates over the last decade has been the archival records of the *Sigurimi* secret police and whether or not they should be publicly released, mainly due to the consequences such an undertaking might engender. It is believed that many Albanians informed on their friends and relatives under the Hoxha regime. This is but one of many contentious issues post-communist Albania is facing, such as the restitution of private land and property prior to communism.

In February 2017, a new commission was charged with opening the files of the secret police, two years after the law was passed and with the support of the European Union.[5] There are 250,000 files on individuals and 50,000 files containing interrogations, now kept in the Ministry of Interior.[6]. While this is a positive direction for Albania, it will not necessarily result in personal or national catharsis, as the majority of secret files were burnt in 1991, the year the regime fell, and more than 90% of archival documents are estimated to have been lost according to some sources.[7] The manipulation of the past by Albanian politicians is also exemplified by The Institute for Communist Crimes' proposal to

## An Albanian Trilogy

[3] Ibidem, p. 1051.

[4] Over that period and until the collapse of Communism in 1991, more than 100,000 people were put in camps, another 20,000 were imprisoned and some 6,000 others died or simply disappeared.

[5] <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/26/world/europe/as-albania-reckons-with-its-communist-past-critics-say-its-too-late.html>>. Mathew Bunwasser, “As Albania Reckons With Its Communist Past, Critics Say It's Too Late”, “The New York Times” 26 Feb 2017.

[6] The Albanian daily newspaper “Koha Jone” reports on the Sigurimi files: <<http://www.kohajone.com/2017/11/07/dosjet-e-sigurimit-shoqeria-civile-dhe-media/>>.

[7] “Most of the Sigurimi files are in the archive of the Interior Ministry. The archive's former director, Kastriot Dervishi, 45, said he was not hopeful that meaningful insights could be gleaned from the files. During the Communist era, 90 percent of the files were destroyed every five years as a routine practice, he said. Of the files considered important enough to preserve, most were destroyed in the late Communist period by officials who wanted to protect themselves by erasing evidence of their crimes. Mr. Dervishi estimated that the surviving documents comprised random samples from the files of only 12,000 or so Sigurimi collaborators — roughly 10 percent of the total — between 1944, when Hoxha took power, and 1991.” <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/26/world/europe/as-albania-reckons-with-its-communist-past-critics-say-its-too-late.html>>.

ban screening Kinostudio-era films, which received widespread media attention prior to national elections in June 2017 and then was quickly dropped. Now that the effort to examine the communist legacy is on the political and cultural agenda, several museums and cultural spaces exhibiting communist era memorabilia have been inaugurated. Two military bunkers were repurposed as a project of the Italian journalist Carlo Bollino now living in Albania; BUNK'ART in November 2014, a former anti-nuclear shelter on the outskirts of Tirana, is dedicated to the history of the Albanian communist army and to the daily lives of Albanians during the regime and hosts jazz concerts, while BUNK'ART 2, located in the centre of Tirana, since its inauguration in November 2016 reconstructs the history of the Albanian Ministry of Internal Affairs from 1912 to 1991 and reveals the secrets of the secret police. The Sigurimi headquarters were also turned into a *House of Leaves: Museum of Secret Surveillance*, inaugurated in May 2017. In Shkodra, *The Site of Witness and Memory* was opened as a memorial commemorating the victims of the communist regime.

Lulaj doesn't simply criticise the mechanisms of the communist regime and their versions of truth offered by much of the fiction and documentary films produced by the state, but forces the contemporary viewer to come to terms with the current political and social situation, along the lines of Huyssen's view that: "The temporal status of any act of memory is always the present and not, as some naïve epistemology might have it, the past itself [...] [8]". The three films in the Trilogy, *It Wears as it Grows*, *Never* and *Recapitulation* allow the spectators to negotiate with their past, but also document the present by allowing for performative acts to occur in significant locations: the capital city Tirana, the Shpiragu Mountain near Berat and the fortress in Enver Hoxha's birth town Gjirokastra. According to the artists, the figure of the dictator as a sort of a revenant is a common thread which returns in all three works.[9] The locations create a temporal and spatial link between the past and the present through a sifted past memory. The deeper understanding and connection to the memory of Albania's problematic past and the reception of the film's message is dependent on the spectator's familiarity with the images, events and facts which are being recuperated on film and through film, as well as the gestures and acts performed by the people on the screen.

Through text, image and sound, as well as the juxtaposition of archival footage underscores the blurring of fiction and reality, and reveals the manipulation of truth and the illusion of Albania created by its leader Enver Hoxha and the ruling party. In many ways, Lulaj invites viewers to re-address differing versions of the communist fable, that of Hoxha's regime and that depicted by the current political system, which has sought to erase and replace the communist past with a supplanted

[8] A. Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, New York 1995, p. 3.

[9] M. Scotini, ed., *Armando Lulaj. Albanian Trilogy: A Series of Devious Stratagems. Catalogue*, Berlin 2015, p. 123.

memory, by creating and re-enacting new fables. This new official and dominant memory is one without a past.<sup>[10]</sup> Commenting on Albanian national identity and historical continuity, Lulaj affirms how “The imaginative fiction becomes a tool to reinterpret factual history by pushing the limits of it, and you can see this in the trilogy”.<sup>[11]</sup> What is at work in the first film, is the contemporary refashioning of the fable of the sea monster, Leviathan, where the laying of the whale skeleton in the intended resting place of the communist dictator, serves as the proverbial statement of the didactic point in the historical narrative for Albania.

While the two latter films, *Never* and *Recapitulation* use archival footage produced during the communist period, to create a dialogue with the contemporary images, and provide a re-reading of the original footage and its intention in the wake of present evidence and temporal distance from the event itself, *It Wears as it Grows* relies entirely on the recalling of past memory through the use of an archival/museum object. Here the film plays with the absence of images, and invites each spectator to fill in these absences mentally, from their personal memories of the time and consequently allows for greater freedom of interpretation.

The first work in the trilogy deals with an unlikely and curious incident from the country's history, perhaps what could be best described as an error on part of the Albanian navy. Reminiscent of the legend of the Leviathan, the sea monster referenced in the Hebrew Bible, a term which was later used for the “great whale”, and since the 17<sup>th</sup> century to refer to overwhelmingly powerful people or things, Lulaj connects the incident and the remaining object, cachalot, to the communist leader Enver Hoxha, by placing the remains in the leader's intended resting place.

On 25 May 1959, at the height of the Cold War, Nikita Khrushchev visited Albania to discuss the Soviet Union's plans to arm Enver Hoxha's state with submarines and warships, positioning long and medium-range missiles along the Albanian coast, in order to counter the U.S. missile bases installed in Italy for the sake of controlling the Mediterranean. In 1963, after the break in relations with the USSR, the Albanian navy, in a paranoid fear of enemy attacks, sighted an object that repeatedly appeared and disappeared at the surface of the sea off the coast at Patok. Believing it to be a submarine, they shot it. The object turned out to be a Mediterranean sperm whale. After being recovered, the whale's remains were displayed in the Museum of Natural History in Tirana, where it took on a different meaning altogether and became one of the museum's most prized possessions. As Lulaj explains: “*It Wears as It Grows* tells the story that is not documented in the archives. I found

### The Albanian Leviathan

[10] In the interview, Armando Lulaj recounts how the older generation learnt Marxist verses at school, and they now pretend not to remember any lines.

[11] Ibidem, p. 122.

out about it from various people who were involved in the incident, and the skeleton is its most emblematic documentation.[12]” This myth of the submarine, which materialised itself in the sea monster, assumes the role of document and monument of history at the same time, encapsulating the power of the fable.

In Lulaj’s short film, *It Wears as it Grows*, the skeleton of the whale reappears in the streets of Tirana, raised onto the shoulders of a group of people, wandering around the streets of the city until its final resting place inside Enver Hoxha’s mausoleum, also known as “Piramida”. This pyramid-shaped structure, completed in 1987, was designed by the daughter and son-in-law of the late Albanian communist to glorify his figure and create an eternal monument to him, like the pyramids of the Egyptian pharaohs. Not coincidentally, Lulaj’s film is made in 2011; when the demolition of Enver Hoxha’s pyramid mausoleum, and the construction of parliament’s buildings in its place, passed in parliament and was supported unanimously by all political actors. A project by a well-known architect won the competition. However after the 2013 election, this plan was abandoned, and the new socialist government decided to build an arts centre instead, a plan which has not been realised, and the building remains partially uninhabited today.

As the replica of the skeleton is carried through the streets of Tirana, first appearing on the abandoned railway tracks in the centre of the city, the group of people carrying it, assume the agency of history. On the other hand, as Jonida Gashi notes, the strategy used in filming the performance relegates these people to the sphere of film extras: “Yet another strategy [...] would be to film the extras in such a way to make them appear precisely at the moment in which they seem to disappear.”[13] Further Gashi notes how, due to the fact that the extras change from scene to scene, the viewer becomes aware only of their absence on screen: “It is the role of memory and remembrance that gives Lulaj’s portrait of the unemployed men and women in *It Wears as It Grows*, the “professional” extras, its profound poignancy[14]”. Thus, Lulaj’s work plays with the acts of memory and remembrance for the spectator in the process of viewing the work itself.

The paradoxical alignment between the sperm whale (initially thought to be a Soviet submarine) and the dead communist leader Enver Hoxha – as the carcass is placed inside the mausoleum to rest. Lulaj’s intention to bring out this narrative from the past is not accidental, and renders it a symbolic act against suppression of Albanian’s past, but places this memory in its rightful place – the pyramid structure intended to house the rests of communist leader. In a way, the ending provides a personal and national catharsis for the people, similar to a narratological resolution of the fable – the moral to the story. While there are no archival footage or newsreels of communist Albania, the collective memory of this period is evoked by bringing out the museum object

[12] Ibidem, p. 123.

[13] Ibidem, pp. 180–181.

[14] Ibidem, p. 183.

(the sperm whale carcass), carrying a series of associated meanings and charged with history and memory of Albania's past, including Hoxha's extreme paranoia, Albania's isolation and fear of foreign influence, and the break in political relations with the Soviet Union.

The other two films in the Trilogy, *NEVER* (2012) and *Recapitulation* (2015) also deal with two significant events which occurred during the communist period. *NEVER* makes reference to one of the greatest voluntary works of the communist era – in 1968 at the zenith of Cultural and Ideological Revolution between China and Albania, the army together with hundreds of young people covered the surface of 36,000 sq metres with massive stones, writing the name of the dictator Enver Hoxha, on the side of Shpiragu Mountain, nearby Berat, a 2500-year-old ancient town. In 1993, when the Democratic Party took power after the fall of communism, the army attempted to destroy the letters using napalm and heavy military equipment. Two soldiers were almost burned alive, and the remains of the letters became partially hidden by overgrown grass and bushes over time. For *NEVER*, Lulaj commissioned a group of villagers to climb the mountain and change the letters by overwriting a new word, referring to the past dictatorship and the current government, so ENVER becomes NEVER in a laborious process of '(un-)naming' the recent past.

There is an interplay between the men working on the mountain slope clearing the stones of overgrown bushes, and newsreel footage of Albanian pilots and fighter planes flying over a mountain range and revealing the dictator's name "ENVER" on the side of Shpiragu Mountain. The footage used is from an aeronautic documentary by Marianthi Xhako from 1974, entitled "Shqiponjat Marrin Lartesine" (Eagles Take Height), taken from the National Film Archive.

*Recapitulation* is concerned with an equally absurd incident and manipulation of truth, typical of the Hoxha regime's siege mentality. On 23 December 1957, a Lockheed T-33 Shooting Star airplane of the U.S. Air Force entered Albanian airspace, and allegedly, was swiftly identified by two Albanian MiG-15 fighter jets and subsequently escorted and forced to land at Rinas Airport. The pilot, Major Howard J. Curran, a WWII hero, was held and interrogated by Albanian officials for over two weeks, but due to US diplomatic pressure he was released. The airplane, however, never left Albania. In 1971, on the occasion of the opening of the new Weapons Museum in Gjirokastra, the birth town of the Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha, this symbol of the Cold War found a home on the outskirts of the castle that still hosts the Weapons Museum, with a label that reads "American Spy Plane". In 2009, the Albanian government wanted to remove the remains of the plane because it was deemed an affront to the now friendly diplomatic relations with the US government. That same year, former US Ambassador to Albania John L. Withers II stated that history should not be revised. In Lulaj's film, the plane is lifted into the sky above Gjirokastra in a symbolical act, allowing it to take flight again and assume an entirely new meaning as the voice of

the muezzin call to prayer resonates across the valley. In this final and accidental act (as explained by the artist in the interview), the work exposes the contradictions in contemporary (and post-communist) Albanian identity: while the country is of largely Muslim confession, the social and cultural customs of the people are inherently atheist.

## Conclusion

Harry Levin suggests that satire should be considered iconoclastic because the satirist strives to shatter images. Armando Lulaj's work is certainly satirical, and in a way iconoclastic, taking seemingly significant and insignificant incidents to shatter their symbolic power. Lulaj engages with images of the past, inviting viewers to face an uncomfortable truth, and in this way, his work deviates from official and institutional memorialisation and selective mythicisation of the past recently at work in Albania. What is more, *It Wears as it Grows* strives to completely do away with archival images made during communist times, but the skeleton of history carries a range of associated memories nonetheless, making this work perhaps the most powerful, as the mechanism of the fable, the imaginative fiction is at its strongest.

Armando Lulaj's *Trilogy* confronts the absurdity of Albania's communist and post-communist reality by allowing memorial sites once again to become places of performative acts, in which the Albanian people can re-acquire agency and take control of their own history. Further, Lulaj demythicises these "sites of memory"<sup>[15]</sup>: the alleged submarine is exposed as a mere skeleton of a whale, carried through the streets of Tirana by the people; the stones on the mountain can easily turn into the words imagined by the artist and become "never" instead of "Enver" (the name of the feared communist dictator); while the spy plane can be lifted above Gjirokastra fortress and manipulated to assume new meanings in its surroundings.

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