

STUTTERING UNIVERSALITY

STUTTERING UNIVERSALITY

Film As Political School Vol. 1

AS FILM
POLITICAL
SCHOOL

1



















STUTTERING
UNIVERSALITY

AS FILM
POLITICAL
SCHOOL

Contents

- 13 Stuttering Images of the History
Shkëlzen Maliqi's Polemical Writings on
Kosovafilm
Tevfik Rada
- 49 The Mistaken Dramaturgy
Shkëlzen Maliqi
- 55 Stuttering Universality of the Film *Proka*
Shkëlzen Maliqi
- 55 *Ad Hominem* Arguments
Shkëlzen Maliqi

Stuttering Images of the History Shkëlzen Maliqi's Polemical Writings on Kosovafilm

Tevfik Rada

This volume brings together Shkëlzen Maliqi's polemical texts on two films, *Njeriu Prej Dheu* (Man of Soil, 1984) and *Proka* (Proka, 1985), both produced by Kosovafilm● His critical remarks on the ideological narratives of the films provoked a stir in the mid-1980s intellectual milieu in Kosovo, including heated reactions from Gani Mehmetaj and Mehmet Kraja, who attacked Maliqi in their respective papers● Despite all its flaws, Maliqi's criticism opened up the possibility for a discussion on the artistic quality of the films, but it was quickly drowned by a futile polemic● From today's vantage point, these texts can be read in at least two ways● Firstly, as a testimony to the intellectual contradictions in 1980s Kosovo● Secondly, as an attempt towards a critique of the two above-mentioned films' narratives● In what follows, I will investigate this historical moment and show how the contradictory material positions of the cultural intellectuals of the period was also echoed in the aesthetic form of the films themselves●

The Polemic Unfolded

On the 15th of December 1984, philosopher—and up-and-coming political analyst—Shkëlzen Maliqi (b● 1947) published a short review called 'Dramaturgjia e Pandehur' (The Mistaken Dramaturgy) in *Fjala* Journal,¹ criticizing

Agim Sopi's film *Njeriu Prej Dheu*● This was the first feature film of the young Sopi (b● 1957) who studied in Zagreb before returning to Kosovo in the early 1980s● The film shows the tragedy of a Kosovo Albanian family who falls victim to the socio-political pressures of 1950s' Socialist Yugoslavia● The main character Sokol (Abdurrahman Shala) is a peasant who owns a small plot of land● As repression against Albanians increases, he joins a wave of emigration to Turkey● A few years later, his son emigrates from Turkey to Germany in order to work as a *gastarbeiter*, leaving wife and child with his father● Far from his homeland, Sokol is lonely, unhappy and desperate in a foreign city● His wife is dead and his daughter-in-law cheats on his son● Sick and beset by melancholic delirium, he attempts to go back to his homeland by boat, but dies on the shore● In his will (written shortly before his death), he asks to be buried in his land● His phantom goes back to his homeland and meets with the remaining members of the family● He encounters a changed world, where his sister went mad and young people emigrated abroad for work● Sokol's phantom keeps interacting with people until his son returns with his father's bones in a suitcase and buries them● *Njeriu Prej Dheu* was the most watched local film in Kosovo during the Yugoslav era●² In his review, Maliqi criticized the film of having a 'mistaken dramaturgy'● He believed that the film was hastily and amateurishly done and the plot had many weaknesses; the first part of the film was a fairly typical melodramatic family story, while the second part revolved around the arbitrary and absurd ghostly rebirth of Sokol●

A year later, Maliqi published a longer criticism of Isa Qosja's debut feature *Proka*, called 'The Stuttering Universality of the Film *Proka*'● Qosja was a slightly older (b● 1949) filmmaker who had studied in the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade● The film is based on Albanian writer Filip Papajani's story of the same name, which was published in 1936● It tells the dramatic story of Proka (Xhevat Qorraj), a lonely and hardworking man who lives in a village among superstitious people● Eventually, the village suffers a drought● Proka invents a simple method for watering his land, while the other peasants are engaged in collective rituals to bring on the rain● The rulers of the village—including the police—are satisfied with the lethargy and self-indulgence of the peasants, but concerned about Proka's hardworking stubbornness (and his fertile land)● They lock Proka in a monastery-prison and torture him● Proka manages to escape thanks to a young woman who helps him● Chased by the police, they run away together until they are cornered● They embrace and fall to the ground at the very moment it starts to rain● The film ends with a shot of the couple hugging in the middle of the water-soaked mud● Violence has suddenly ceased, as if by magic●

Proka premiered at the Pula film festival in July 1985 as part of the official competition● Gani Mehmetaj (b● 1955), a longtime film reporter for *Rilindja*, wrote that for the first time in its history, Kosovafilm was attending the Pula film festival with two of its own productions (the other one was Agim Sopi's film which was screened out of competition)● Celebrating this

fact, Mehmetaj reported that the films received many positive reviews from Yugoslav critics and the audience who—allegedly—“agreed that the films of Kosovo brought a freshness of thematics and style” to cinema●³

Maliqi found the films’ narratives problematic and criticized the delusion of local critics who were celebrating the films as mature cultural productions of Kosovo● He believed that it was only thanks to an “alchemical transmutation of our film critics” that these immature and amateurish films could be turned into gold● According to him, there were several reasons why *Proka* was cinematographically “stuttering”● He argued that the original story of Papajani was not appropriate for cinema and Qosja’s adaptation was even messier● The plot was full of arbitrary decisions, such as the final scene in which Proka and the young woman hug each other, which causes an abrupt suspension of violence (Maliqi labelled this a cheap *deus ex machina*)● The relation between Proka and the society that he lives in is abstract● His is an “unmotivated opposition to a likewise abstract totalitarian reality●” Moreover, the film was set in an environment where the historical references were ‘erased’● Maliqi concluded that by erasing these references, the film was attempting to give the story a universal validity● Qosja implied that no matter where and when, the story of Proka would always prevail●⁴ In contrast, Maliqi stated, there was no way to bypass the historical, contextual particularities and achieve universality●

Shkëlzen Maliqi’s critique caused heated reactions amongst the Kosovar intelligentsia●

Mehmet Kraja (b● 1952), at the time an author whose novels were published by *Rilindja* publishing house, responded by comparing Maliqi to the ignorant Dr● Adhamudhi, a fictional character from Anton Zako Çajupi’s play *Pas Vdekjes* (After Death)● According to Kraja, in diagnosing the “unhealthy” elements in the arts, defaming them and deciding “how to cure our cinema”, Maliqi—just like the pseudo-scientist Dr● Adhamudhi—was working against the interest of the nation● Kraja was particularly upset as Maliqi’s text did not pass over criticising the good old Papajani’s original work● Around the same time, Gani Mehmetaj published a longer response in *Fjala* called ‘Denoncimet dhe Akuzat e Një Gjeniut’ (Denunciations and Accusations of a Genius)● Mehmetaj also referred to Maliqi as a doctor who was seeking to “cure our cultural milieu●” He noted that the time for diagnosis and advice on how to do art was already over● Mehmetaj continued by asserting that Maliqi still lacked experience in Kosovo’s cultural sphere that would warrant such criticisms against it● Overall, he thought, Maliqi had no sense of artistic judgement and misused artistic terms (or, “mistranslated” from the original, sarcastically pointing to the fact that the original text had been written in Serbian)● Mehmetaj ended his text by quoting positive reviews of the films by Yugoslav writers● Isuf Berisha also joined the polemic by writing a short response to Kraja● Berisha was a young philosopher and sociologist, who was part of a new philosophical circle affiliated with a journal called *Thema*●⁵ He criticized the position of Kraja who attacked Maliqi for his ignorance

of the “traditional” literature (under which he meant interwar Albanian literature such as Filip Papajani’s *Proka*)● Berisha drew attention to the symptomatic character of this reaction, placing it squarely within a rising nationalist atmosphere● He stated that Kraja’s response was typical of the cultural discussions of the time, with objective criticism distorted by the joker card of nationalism●⁶

Screening the Nation

After summarising the trajectory of the polemic, we should introduce the political and institutional ground where these arguments were played out● From Kosovafilm to the Theater in Prishtina or the Albanological Institute, the cultural institutions of the time in Kosovo had a folkloric and nationalist character● For a long time this nationalism could not take a political form● Indeed, a logic of conciliation was hegemonic in the cultural intellectuals● On the one hand, the cultural institutions performed the role of the bourgeois ideological apparatus; on the other, they had a pragmatic relation with state and Party●⁷ Cultural intellectuals were integrated into these institutions and—while their ideology was in contradiction with socialism—they were only rarely openly dissidents● This contradiction was reproduced through the specific socio-political developments that occurred in Kosovo under Socialist Yugoslavia●

Like many other cultural institutions (including Prishtina University), Kosovafilm was founded at the end of the 1960s, as the region was entering a fast-paced process of

industrialization● This was enabled by the political reforms which were enacted in the mid-1960s● In 1966, the vice president of Yugoslavia, Aleksandar Ranković, was purged from the Communist Party● Ranković was an old communist from the pre-war era, who was very powerful in the UDB, the Yugoslav secret police● He was responsible for the socio-political repressions of Albanians in Yugoslavia during the 1950s and 60s whose infamy haunts collective memory in Kosovo to this day● With the 1966 changes, the cultural autonomy of Albanians was recognized and new, influential institutions were promoted● At the same time, cultural exchanges with Albania were allowed to a certain degree● The Yugoslav political reforms continued after a wave of both liberal and nationalist uprisings between 1968 and 1971● This historical sequence caused seismic changes within the Party and paved the way for the 1974 Constitution of Yugoslavia● The political decentralization of Yugoslavia came to a legal conclusion with this Constitution● Kosovo acquired its political autonomy⁸ within Serbia, while the Party’s unitary power was weakened throughout the federal country●⁹

The political reforms and the dismissal of Ranković in 1966 was experienced as a ‘national liberation’ among Kosovo Albanians● Indeed, a cultural vitalisation followed the reforms● Besides the institutions, several new journals were opened● Publication of new book series of Albanian writers (from Albania proper) was initiated● However, the narrative of the ‘national liberation’ obfuscated a fundamental change in the economical structure of the

Yugoslav socialist system● In 1965, through the impetus of the liberal wing of the Party, market reforms were introduced throughout the country● The reform liberalized prices, strengthened the power of banks and weakened central planning● It further integrated the country within the world market and reorganized enterprises according to market logic● The reform contributed to the high amount of unemployment and the uneven economic development within Yugoslavia●¹⁰ It strengthened the capitalist social relations that cemented Kosovo's status as the most economically backward region of the Federation● The high rate of unemployment in Kosovo during the 1970s and 80s was a key factor in political transformations● Susan Woodward reminded how high rate of unemployment pushed the majority of the population to earn their incomes in the individual (private) sector:

“...in household agriculture and crafts, petty trades, family businesses, and temporary labor migration to Switzerland, Germany, and Italy, but also Slovenia● Just as full employment in Slovenia shaped its political system, so the employment profile of Kosovo generated a social and political organization based on family and ethnicity, including large extended families to support a household-based strategy of economic diversification, and an entire parallel society as the basis for mobilizing collective political action against the regime●”¹¹

The unemployment and the rising unevenness was a nationally particular experience of the structural transformations in Yugoslavia● A materialist theoretical understanding was vital to comprehend this particular experience as part of a contradictory whole● The far-ranging effects of the reform—as well as the contradictions between socialist and capitalist relations—were not discussed by Kosovo intellectuals, who instead busied themselves with their provincially-minded cultural theories● When these tectonic shifts—combined with an acute economic crisis—deepened the nationalist attacks against Kosovo in the 1980s, even the most progressive Kosovo intellectuals had nothing but eclectic cultural theories to respond to the situation●¹² In the pulsating social ground of these years, the political memory of the class struggle waned behind the discourse analysis of the nationalism●¹³

Kosovafilm came to its so-called ‘maturity’ in the late 1970s, at a time when all these changes were being crystallized● These were apparent in the film productions themselves● The repressions of the 1950s’ ‘era of Ranković’ and his subsequent dismissal from the Party became one of the most controversial themes●¹⁴ In 1979, Sinan Hasani’s novel *Era dhe Lisi* (The Wind and the Oak) was adapted to cinema by Besim Sahatçiu● The film (also produced as a series for TV Prishtina) became highly popular in Kosovo and received several awards at festivals, including Pula● The film tells the story of a Kosovo Albanian partisan fighter (Abdurrahman Shala) and his young nephew (Faruk Begolli), from the liberation of the country up to the

'betrayal' of the Albanians by the UDB and the eventual salvation of the nation, which comes with the end of Ranković● The film begins at the time of establishment of socialist institutions, after the end of the war● Unlike previous Kosovafilm productions, *Era dhe Lisi* was not about the partisan struggle (which had already exhausted itself as a theme by the late 1970s)● It emphasised the top-down 'national liberation' of 1966●¹⁵ *Era dhe Lisi* posited the history of national affirmation as another beginning: it celebrated national determination, awarded after a period of 'deviation'● This narrative was already consolidated in those years among the bureaucracy and intellectuals; as such, it obscured the deeper shifts that occurred in terms of class struggle●

Many Albanian intellectuals and artists came of age during the national euphoria of the 1970s, when the Party became a loose political setting for bureaucratic and institutional careers● Nonetheless, the 1981 mass demonstrations caught them off balance● The demonstrations started as a protest against the poor conditions of the students, but soon evolved into a demand for the republican status of Kosovo● The police violently repressed the demonstrations● The Army moved in with tanks to secure the martial law● The Party managed the situation not by acknowledging the class character of the crisis but by declaring it as counter-revolutionary● As the political bureaucracy in Kosovo took a step back and compromised with Belgrade, nationalist elements active in cultural institutions were censored and police control was tightened● The 1981

protests put the ideology of national affirmation into crisis● Amidst the growing economic instability and rising unemployment, the political bureaucracy and the Serbian intelligentsia monopolized the ideological discourse on Kosovo during the 1980s: in the media, the figure of the Kosovo Albanian was very often attacked as counter-revolutionary, irredentist and primitive● These attacks further exacerbated the already contradictory position of the cultural intellectuals and artists of Kosovo●

Cinematic Cryptograms

Both Agim Sopi and Isa Qosja were younger than Besim Sahatçiu● Just as Shkëlzen Maliqi, they had returned to Kosovo after their studies, and then made their first films in the early 1980s● Both Sopi and Qosja dramatized the spectacle of national existence in this period, and in doing so embodied the contradictory position of the Kosovo Albanian artist/intellectual● While in Sahatçiu's film, partisan liberation was still the starting point, in the phantasmagoric narrative of *Njeriu Prej Dheu* the socialist rupture ceases to be the part of the collective memory● In fact, even the *moment* of national affirmation is erased● The nation is stripped of any collective or political elements and becomes timeless: it jumps from one state of suffering to another● We are left with a family man who is a victim of politics and who wants to go back to his homeland to get buried● Sopi brings forward the most depoliticizing elements of the family melodrama to address the post-war political changes●

We can observe a similar absence of the political in Qosja's films too● What makes Isa

Qosja distinct, however, is that in the 1980s, he tried—unlike Sopi—to become an *auteur* (albeit a belated one) with a specific stylistic language● His cinematic means for accomplishing this were visual symbols and allusive metaphors● The symbols and mysterious metaphors in Qosja’s oeuvre operate through visual excess; this forms the basis of his cinematographic style and estranges the familiarity of the plot● The surreal and grotesque images interrupt the linearity of the story● In *Proka*, it is enough to remember the close-up scene of the old and unpleasant face of the woman with a smoking pipe which unexpectedly enters into the frame; the giant with the donkey; or, the scene in the beginning of the film when Proka’s head comes out of the water like an alligator on the hunt● These magical instances function differently from the almost mythological narrative of *Njeriu Prej Dheu*● The surreal element in Sopi’s film was more like a pre-modern yearning for an idealized family and a restoration of what had been lost●

Maliqi, too, drew attention to the socio-political roots of symbols used in artistic productions of Kosovo● In a 1987 text on the bureaucratic control of the media in Kosovo, he interpreted the allusive language used by local artists as a remnant of the ‘Ranković era’● According to Maliqi, at a time when nationalist expression was strictly controlled by the secret police, some Albanian writers and journalists invented “a new school of crypto-writing which is still influential today as an artistic style”¹⁶ This “school” created a hermetic language full of allusions and symbols● In his text, Maliqi mentioned his criticism of *Proka* and how several

people reacted by saying that he could not solve the puzzle of the film● They believed that the film’s allusions symbolized *something* which was prohibited by the law, and each person should solve it on their own●¹⁷

The cinematic symbolism of Qosja reached its apogee in his later film *Rojet e Mjegullës* (Keepers of the Fog, 1988)● The film was adapted from a novel by Rexhep Qosja – long-time director of the Albanological Institute in Prishtina, writer and Isa’s older brother – called *Vdekja më Vjen Prej Syve të Tillë* (Death Comes to Me from Such Eyes, 1974)● The film tells the story of a writer called Dinor who is harassed by the secret police● The police follow one of his close friends and manage to learn about a mysterious dream Dinor is having● In a setting that blurs boundaries between nightmare and reality, Dinor is tormented and punished for not explaining the true meaning of his dream● The film takes place in 1950s Kosovo; as such, it is another story about the repressions of the UDB● Dinor, the apolitical intellectual at the centre of the film is disoriented between magical visions – such as an eerie opening scene featuring a burning horse – and the violence of the secret police● All the nightmarish visions and assaults end when Dino writes a declaration in which he claims his loyalty to the socialist system● In the next scene, a man in a closed office room (who obviously symbolizes ‘the bureaucracy’) orders the secret police to stop the violence● This moment has a similar effect to the one described by Maliqi in his analysis of *Proka* as a *deus ex machina*● After this order from the top, Dinor finds the main secret police, which is surrounded

by peasants, and kills him by stabbing him in the eye with his pen●

Maliqi is correct in pointing out the historicity of the artistic metaphors used in Kosovo● However, these were not merely cultural remnants from the 1950s, but also an aesthetic manifestation of the contradictory position occupied by local artists/intellectuals in the 1980s● On the one hand, they were working under socio-political pressure, but on the other, they were institutionally privileged compared to the unemployed masses● They were aware and frustrated by nationalist attacks from Belgrade, but were at the same time keeping a distance from these very masses and from the working class● Symbols gave the flesh to the political closure in which they found themselves● Qosja's *Proka* and *Rojet e Mjegullës* illustrate the socio-political logic of the symbols: political emancipation becomes a cultural enlightenment project, in which national intellectuals lead the process and solve mysteries● As such, the symbols and allusions were not directed towards the masses or the working class, but to the national intellectual● He is enlightened and privileged—but repressed at the same time● He knows the true cultural meaning behind the symbols● He creates the national cryptograms and he solves them himself● In this game, the working class ceases to be the subject of history● *Proka* is an entrepreneur who invents simple technological means in order to cultivate his land● Masses are poor but superstitious and backward, while the police and governors are cruel● Dinor in *Rojet e Mjegulles* is an author whose book was already officially published●

He is anxiously squeezed between the peasants (with whom he refuses to identify) and the bureaucracy●

Despite his insights, Maliqi's analysis relied too much on the idea of the archaic remnants and neglected the contemporary reasons behind the mutations of the form● This was an ideological blindspot that followed him throughout those years●

Archaic Cultural Remnants

Shkëlzen Maliqi is a peculiar phenomenon in the intellectual history of Kosovo under Socialist Yugoslavia● In 1966, he went to study philosophy in Belgrade; in 1968 he took part in the student movements there; in the 1970s he wrote a thesis on Byzantine aesthetics; in the process, he became acquainted with the most progressive conceptual artists of Yugoslavia● When he came back to Kosovo in 1982, he found himself in the middle of polarizing political tensions● He became popular overnight thanks to his texts in which he frontally criticized the nationalist academics of Belgrade● Yet—unlike the local cultural intelligentsia—he disdained the folkloric and traditionalist aesthetics which dominated the artistic productions in Kosovo● He was an anti-nationalist with an avant-garde sensitivity● In the 1980s he was continuously engaged in debates with the cultural institutions of Kosovo● He had no difficulty in seeing and criticizing the reactionary forms of *Proka* and *Njeriu Prej Dheu* and while he did not explicitly dismiss the films as nationalistic, he was dragged into a polemic defined on these terms● One can even say that Maliqi's critique suffered from a

weakness similar to the one he was criticizing● He wrote that the narrative of *Proka* stuttered because it aimed to arrive to the universality without passing through the particular● But Maliqi's argument did not come to its conclusion through a historical and materialist process; he thought the films were faulty because they were done in a wrong manner, because their narratives were based on false consciousness● This point of view did not allow him to put aesthetic problems in relation with contemporary socio-political transformations● Rather, the national and folkloric melodrama was seen as a cultural remnant from the past, an anachronic hangover●¹⁸

Maliqi continued to write polemical texts against local provincial writers stuck in the mud of nationalism and localism● These essays on Kosovo films are his initial confrontation with the prevailing local doxa; as such, they announce his later polemical style● He did not continue writing on Kosovo cinema (which was, anyways, ground to a halt by intentional funding cuts)●¹⁹ With the publication of these texts, we point towards this important turning point● In doing so, we hope that young critics will be encouraged to incorporate reflections on institutional frameworks and the relation between form and socio-political contradictions in their study of local films●

- 1 From 1968 onwards, *Fjala* came out bi-weekly in Prishtina● It covered articles, interviews, news and published critiques on cultural and artistic issues● Shkëlzen Maliqi briefly worked as its editor between 1986 and 1987 but resigned after his text was censored by the publishing house●
- 2 Gani Mehmetaj, *Sharmi i Filmit*, Prishtina, Kosovafilm, p● 23●
- 3 Gani Mehmetaj, 'Mendime për Filmat: "Proka" dhe "Njeriu prej Dheu": Vepra Kinematografike të Pazakonshme', *Rilindja*, 10●08●1985, p● 13●
- 4 In an interview from 1985, Isa Qosja defended Proka's relevancy to urban reality: "Proka has close ties with the preoccupations of the urban man; this is where the film's intention lies: to deal with a problem that marks our times [●●●] In the reality of a developed urban state [●●●] Proka will find its fullest expression● Haven't we finally acknowledged that so often people are disturbed by those who just mind their own business and don't compete with others? Proka is exactly such a character●" 'Plotësim i Mozaikut të Temave', Isa Qosja interviewd by Gani Mehmetaj, *Rilindja*, 29●06●1985, p● 12●
- 5 *Thema* was launched in 1984 by the Philosophy and Sociology Institute in the Philosophy Faculty of Prishtina University● The bilingual journal brought together a new generation of philosophers and sociologists who were partly influenced by the *Praxis* school: Muhamedin Kullashi, Gani Bobi, Shkëlzen Maliqi, Isuf Berisha etc● It published 15 issues until 1997●
- 6 In fact, the polemic between Mehmet Kraja and Shkëlzen Maliqi continued in the early 2000s● For the details, check: Shkëlzen Maliqi, 'Pse Kraja Flet Jerm?', *Java*, 07●10●2004●
- 7 In the 1980s, Shkëlzen Maliqi complained that education in Socialist Yugoslavia was still perpetuating a bourgeois nationalist line, with only a few formal changes● 'Ballkanizimi i Argumentit Historik' (1985), *Nyja e Kosovës*, 2010, Prishtina: Kolona MM, p● 18●
- 8 It is worth noting that Albanians in Yugoslavia could never acquire the constituent nation status in contrast to nationality (narodnost)●
- 9 Lev Centrih, *The Road to Collapse: The Demise of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia*, Rosa Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southeast Europe, 2014● Centrih recounts how the weakening of the League of Communists preempted its capacity for intervention during the 1980s crises●
- 10 Cathrine Samary, *Plan, Piyasa ve Demokrasi [Plan, Market and Democracy]*, Istanbul, Yazın Yayıncılık, p● 115-140●
- 11 Susan L● Woodward, 'The Political Economy of Ethno-Nationalism in Yugoslavia', *Socialist Register* 2003, Vol● 39, p● 80●
- 12 We can say that in Kosovo, discussions on capitalist social relations in State socialism did not take place; homogenous stagist conception of socialism was also very common● Theorists like Gani Bobi and Muhamedin Kullashi touched upon the

commodification of the culture in Kosovo throughout the 1980s● Both of them were influenced by Henri Lefebvre's theories through a lens of the *Praxis* school of philosophy● Nevertheless, they were far from developing a theory of capitalism as a world system and its combination with the post-capitalist social relations in Yugoslavia● This weakness was quite common among the leftist intellectuals in Socialist Yugoslavia●

Concerning this, Rastko Moćnik gave one of the best diagnoses on the ideological weaknesses of the post-1968 leftist thought in Yugoslavia● Firstly, their understanding of capitalism was solely based on commodity production, which led them to neglect the intrusion of capitalist social relations during State socialism● Secondly, their conception of socialism was stagist and “believed that the achievements of socialist revolution were irreversible●” Rastko Moćnik, ‘1968 In Yugoslavia’, *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 23:3, 399-416●

- 13 Under the austerity measures in Yugoslavia dictated by the IMF in mid-1980s, the workers from Kosovo were regularly organizing strikes in factories● Significantly, many important strikes that happened in Trepça Mine and Ramiz Sadiku factory during these years was based on working class solidarity and did not have any nationalist character● The party officials tried to discredit the strikes claiming that they were done by the political enemy and the nationalist irredentist forces● Jake Lowinger, *Economic Reform and the ‘Double Movement’ in Yugoslavia: An Analysis of Labor Unrest and Ethno-Nationalism in the 1980s*, PhD Dissertation, John Hopkins University, 2009●
- 14 As Daniel Goulding reminds us, in the 1980s, post-revolutionary historical themes such as the Tito-Stalin split were widely addressed in Yugoslav cinema● Daniel J● Goulding, *Liberated Cinema: The Yugoslav Experience, 1945-2001*, Indiana University Press, 2002●
- 15 The aesthetical representation of this top-down change must have been one of the most arduous task for the filmmakers, since it points to a subjective moment where the subject is absent● Significantly in *Era dhe Lisi*, Burim, Burim (the young nephew of the partisan who becomes a doctor) experiences this political moment as a spectator● He spontaneously learns the news from a radio●
- 16 Shkëlzen Maliqi, ‘Monopoli Informativ i Kosovës’, *Nyja e Kosovës*, 2010, Prishtina, Kolana MM, p● 128-129
- 17 Ibid, p● 129●
- 18 This argument can be theoretically observed in the way how Maliqi discussed nationalism in his texts● To understand Shkëlzen Maliqi, one should understand how his thought changed throughout the tectonic geopolitical shifts in the 1980s● The notion that nationalism was an anachronism (to be fought against with counter-arguments) prevailed in Maliqi throughout the early 1980s, but gradually shifted after the escalation of

nationalist expansionism in Serbia around 1987● Influenced by the observations of the Slovene sociologist and civil rights activist Tomaž Mastnak, he concluded that the Albanians in Kosovo were undergoing *democratic* nationalist homogenisation in contradistinction with the *totalitarian* nationalism● This totalitarian nationalism was characterised by its mythical and expansionist elements specific to Serbia● While the democratic nationalism was characteristic of places like Slovenia and Kosovo which (according to Mastnak) advocated the struggle for democracy, human rights and a legal state (‘Po Ndodhin edhe Kombësitë’ (The Nationality is Also Happening), *Nyja e Kosovës*, p● 211-218●) These shifts will be explored in an upcoming bibliographical study on Maliqi’s thought throughout the 1980s in a joint project with Sezgin Boynik●

- 19 In the early 1990s, when the socialist system was dismantled and the political rights of Kosovo and Albanians were oppressed by Serbia, Maliqi would find the aesthetic expression of his dissidence in contemporary art, or—as he called it at the time—*the art of resistance*● For further reference, refer to this compilation on 1990s’ art scene of Kosovo: Shkëlzen Maliqi, *Arti në Rezistencë: Shkrimet e Fundshekullit 20* (Art in Resistance: Writings from the end of 20th Century), Prishtina, Botime Kolliqi, 2022●





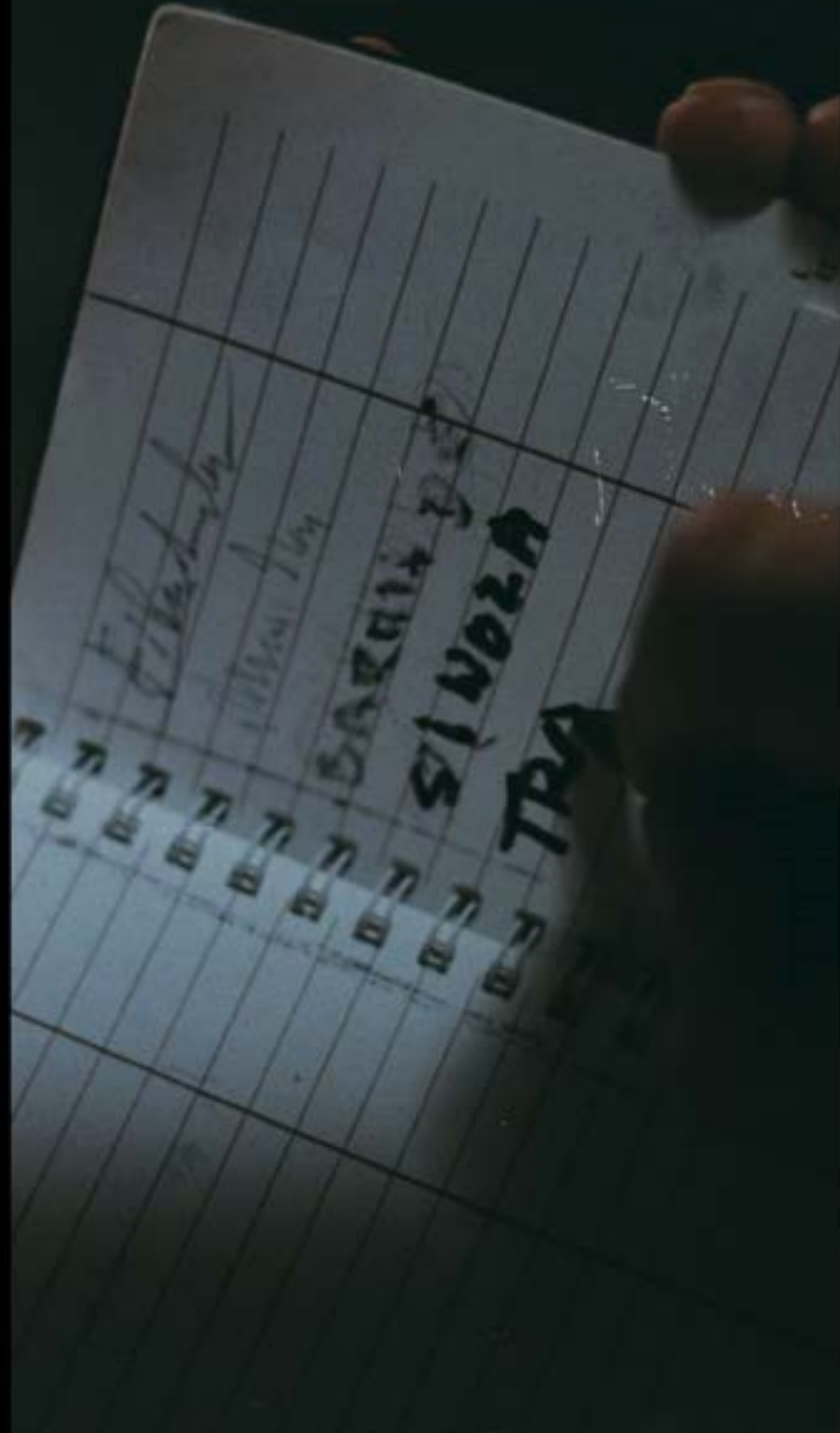





BARUM DE SPINOZA
TRAKTATUS POLITIKUS II, 8











The Mistaken Dramaturgy

Shkëlzen Maliqi

Njeriu Prej Dheu (Man of Soil)

directed by Agim Sopi

script by Agim Sopi and Fadil Hysaj

Njeriu Prej Dheu, which had its premiere a few days ago in Prishtina, is a debut film● Director Agim Sopi (who also co-wrote the screenplay with Fadil Hysaj) challenged himself in the medium of cinema following several theatrical endeavors● The theme of the film was promising● Regrettably, the actual realization did not show the same degree of curiosity and proactivity as its thematic premise● On the contrary, instead of a brave engagement with its purported theme, the authors of the film loose themselves in arbitrary constructions and hazy artistry● The theme fails to achieve the intended provocation● In fact, it addresses the migration of Albanians to Turkey, three decades ago●

The theme of exile can be easily documented● Why, then, such fear? Each violent exile from the motherland has traumatic consequences● These traumas form the crucial motive behind *Njeriu Prej Dheu* ● It was, therefore, necessary to address them openly and clearly in order to build the film's narrative and articulate the cause and effect of the traumatic events of the time; to build the narration from a base that contains a universal message● Since the title "Man of Soil" is a phrase that evokes the marvelous and critical films of the

uncompromising Andrzej Wajda's *The Man of Marble* and *The Man of Iron*, the film should have made an effort to echo the open and critical approach of Wajda. Fear has never been a good adviser when seeking artistic truth.

Instead of focusing on the important elements of the topic, the film only highlights its ephemeral aspects. The cinematic storytelling that sees Sokol (the displaced character longing for his village in Dukagjin) unfolds in an uneventful manner. The film focuses on the internal struggles and survival of the main protagonist, depicting them through a violent narration. As the story unfolds, an unexpected and remarkable isomorphism occurs, breaking from both theme and genre. In other words, the first part of the film adopts a realistic approach, incorporating folkloric elements and micro-bourgeois drama. In contrast, the second part of the film sees an unexpected melodramatic transformation into phantasmagory and somnambulism. The characters are portrayed schematically. A semantic analysis of the film's key moments reveals that they rely on superficial portrayals, such as "Trina awaits Bardhi for 27 years only for him to marry a prostitute who betrays him", or "All Gastarbeiters' wives are depicted as unfaithful" etc. The story of the film—how to put it—can only be recounted with the words of the kitsch and kitsch novel. This essence, however, is concealed by the artistic visuality, which is successful throughout the majority of the film, even if, truth be told, this achievement can be attributed to the visual character of the film's locations.

From what we could summarise during the screening and from the conversations that followed, the film was accepted and welcomed by our audience. Certainly, this does not say much about the value of the film itself. On the contrary, it mirrors the inherent receptivity of the overall environment and places it is shown in.

The weaknesses of the film are fundamentally dramaturgical in nature. The deficiencies in the composition and in the character development of the script are equally reflected in the final form of the film. We encounter the oddest dramaturgical and compositional mistakes in the discordance in the development of the story. As if the scriptwriters had been wondering whether the main character should come back dead or alive in his homeland—and with both of these variants intertwined without consistency in regards to the logical and visual predispositions of the viewer. Towards the end of the film, Bardhi transports his father's remains (who had passed away in a foreign land) and proceeds to bury them in the presence of the same deceased man. This scene, however, contradicts an earlier portrayal in the film, in which the father is shown returning alive to his birthplace, talking to his relatives and local peasants, after an absence of 27 years. At the end of the film, we understand that Sokol was actually not alive, that it was only his ghost who had returned to his homeland.

There is an enigmatic scene in the film, in which Sokol talks to the dead villagers. It is set in a field of ghosts. By the end of the conversation with the ghosts, Sokol cracks the skull of a man who had been following him

from Turkey—the scene effectively prepares the viewer for the story’s passage into the realm of ghosts● But the realistic tone of the film (which dominated the story until this point) cannot be effaced from the memory of the audience so easily● With this sudden diversion in the story, the whole first one-hour course of the film cannot be retro-constructively interpreted● The first part of the film is only saved from the interpretation thanks to this dramaturgical whim which is based on an ambiguous idea● If the objective was to revive the useless mythic belief in rebirth—in the form of ghosts of discontented and unlucky souls who left behind unfulfilled wishes—then the cinematic expression should have been adapted accordingly● This would have allowed a modern film adaptation of legends and useless beliefs● Such a thing, certainly, did not appeal to the screenwriters● This is why they have veered towards a form of *licentia poetica*, suggesting that ghosts simultaneously are and are not ghost● In the end, they have made a film which is loose on both ends, filled with arbitrariness and whimsy●

The film nevertheless has several visually pleasing details and scenes● It would be unfair to say that the director lacks imagination or the ability to create an atmosphere● Quite the contrary● The film’s shortcomings, however, lie in the fact that it was built upon unsteady bases and is lacking deep preparations● The noteworthy contributions of the team and collaborators include the wonderful scenography and costume design by Nuredin Loxha, the camera of Menduh Nushi, and the

music of Rauf Dhomi● Great performances were delivered by Abdurrahman Shala, the young and captivating Lumnije Muçaj● However, Teuta Rrahmani’s amateurish acting was disappointing● The cast also included Bislim Muçaj, Xhevat Qorraaj, Çun Lajci, Skender Tafaj, Avdush Hasani, and Nimon Lokaj●

Originally published as ‘Dramaturgjia e Pandehur’, *Fjala*, XVII, no● 21–22, 15●12●1984, p● 8●

Shkëlzen Maliqi

Proka

directed by Isa Qosja

adapted for the screen by Eqrem Basha

produced by Kosova Film, 1985

Our Young Filmmakers and a
Parable about Genius

The cinematography of Kosovo is young, without much experience or tradition● The number of films made by our filmmakers can still only be counted upon the fingers of one hand● This small corpus was not able to establish the cinematography of Kosovo either in terms of quality or as a relevant cultural fact● Since the craft of filmmaking (or rather various *crafts*—since films are made by large teams comprising collaborators of different professions) cannot be learned overnight, our cinematography was permitted to go through the school of trials and errors● Its slow development was also conditioned by reduced production capacities that delivered one or two films at the most per year; there have also been years without a single film being made● Filmmakers from Kosovo were not expected, *up until now*, to perform miracles and to make great and outstanding films, but rather to secure during this formative period professional and technical know-how for a future phase of maturity, when they would be expected to make serious film projects●

How long will this formative phase of our cinematography last? And, is it not already finished? Judging by our film critics, the phase of maturity has already started● They have been singing the praise of two recent films, *Njeriu Prej Dheu* by Agim Sopi and *Proka* by Isa Qosja, presenting them as being of high artistic quality● Sopi and Qosja are both young people and they just have made their *first* films● Can the notion that the future of Kosovo cinematography has already begun be better served than by pointing towards two young authors, who have already reached their full creative maturity by the time of their *first* film?

These paeans to the glory of the young directors remind me of the beautiful story at the end of Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Andrei Rublev* which is about the temptation of a young genius, basically still a young boy● He was given the task of making a bell of gigantic proportions, tall as a two-storey house, for some grandiose church, the kind only emperors can commission● How could such a technically complex task be given to a *boy*? People believed that his late father—the best and most famous of all the bell-makers—confided to him only his secret formula for the alloy which provides durability and perfect tone, even to the biggest bells● And the boy, full of self-confidence, manages to make such a bell● After it is installed on the bell tower, the gathered masses are all expecting the confirmation of the young genius' ability: the bell would have to undergo a final test● The bell starts to swing and the air fills with deep, heart-moving, divine, perfectly-pitched sound● But, at the very moment of

triumph, as everyone is standing in amazement and wonder of the delightful sound, the boy's spirit breaks down and he starts crying● Disconsolate, he admits in a voice filled with self-contempt that his father had not told him his secret; he had taken it with himself to the grave● The bell was the product of an irrational, childish audacity●

It would be truly wonderful if, in a similar manner, our young filmmakers—also inexperienced and yet brimming with self-confidence—managed to make perhaps not perfect, but at least good films (despite nobody to pass on film-making secrets)● Unfortunately, there are no such miracles today, nor trade secrets that are guarded as if they were sacred● Crafts, today have lost of their sacrality● Despite this, it may well be the case that filmmakers who completed their professional studies and have yet to master their craft still get the chance to waste considerable social resources on obscure film projects produced according to their own pleasure, with a feeling that they have been entrusted the mission of inventing the Kosovo cinematography—without feeling any obligation to be accountable to anyone● The films of our young filmmakers under study are not nearly as good as our film critics claim● They are—to be forthright—lousy beginner films● It is only by an alchemic transmutation of our film critics that these examples of immature and amateurish films can turn into gold●

I have already written a short piece about Agim Sopi's amateurish dramaturgy ('Dramaturgjia e pandehur', *Fjala* 21–22/1984, p● 8)● I will attempt to prove in this text that

Isa Qosja's film also exhibits a series of similar, if not even graver misconceptions● The reason for such a *merciless* critique is simple: our young cinematography needs no self-delusion● I understand that there are reasons aplenty for amateurishness and imperfections in our films; it is to be expected given the current circumstances● However, I cannot approve of alchemististic efforts that seek to turn amateur work into gold● We must make an adequate diagnosis of the state of our cinematography if we want to see it advance at all● I invite the people who disagree with my diagnosis to present their arguments and their own perspective● It is their right: anyone can judge public artistic products in good conscience on the basis of their experiences● The fact that there are different judgments about a film may not only be a matter of differences in taste● Likewise, criticism is not some kind of drumhead court-martial● Finally, the critics themselves will be judged just as they judge films, by that vast public sphere comprised of cinema-goers and readers of the press● All that our young filmmaker can say after completing his job is "Go see the film if you'd like!" Same for the critics; after they have done finished writing job, they can only say: "Go see the film if you'd like!"

Our Cinematographic Stuttering

Our film critics reporting from this year's Yugoslav Film Festival in Pula shared the unanimous opinion that *Proka* is a likeable, fresh and, above all, serious artistic film● They did not voice a single objection● Only Abdul Bunjaku, in his otherwise favorable review of

the film, made an indirect allusion that could be understood as an objection ('Pa risi të pritura', *Fjala* 14/1985, p● 14)● I have emphasized three words in this text that I deem important: "our stuttering", "inattentiveness" and "haste"● A● Bunjaku's effort invites us to 'leave aside' the film's clumsy aspects● I am, however, convinced that one cannot leave aside what is the primary function of critique: to judge even the lesser flaws of the film● Because only this impartiality ensures the merit of a judgment on a film's ultimate value● In this concrete case, elegant avoidance of the proper critical attitude is more than counterproductive● And if one is to treat the clumsiness and stuttering of *Proka* in an impartial way, it is no longer possible to write praises about the film as our very own critics did● Their arbitrary and self-righteous critique finds that it is not necessary even to mention, in contrast to A● Bunjaku, the ineptness of the film that is a product of a beginner●

What makes the film *Proka* stutter? What kind of "inattentiveness" and "haste" are causing its stuttering? The weaknesses of this film are not due to technique or craftsmanship (although those are also noticeable)● The weaknesses of *Proka* are primarily of structural nature, they pertain to the manner in which it was constructed, that is, they must have already been present at the earliest stages of its development● The main structural flaw was already clearly visible in the literary text that served as the basis for the film's screenplay (Filip Papajani's story "*Proka*"); it was then amplified in the script and, finally, grew even larger in the film's final form● I am speaking here of a

fundamental collision between the concept and the story, the topic and the plot● In order to sustain what they believe is an “extremely strong” idea and a complex topic, Filip Papajani, Eqrem Basha and Isa Qosja’s plot relies on excessively fragile, poorly constructed and, ultimately, banal solutions●

The Literary Text’s Non-Cinematic Nature
Papajani’s story about the tragic love of hard-working and honest Proka—he ends up being persecuted and destroyed by a social environment into which he had never fit in—is made of a series of poorly constructed and naive solutions● Papajani has tried to interweave elements of social drama (however Manichean) with the romantic motif of unfulfilled, tragic love, the kind of love that is both fatal and strong, the ‘until death do us apart’ kind of love, the kind that can only be affirmed through a common tomb stone (*they are only united in death!*)● The story is imbued with deep pessimism and a black-and-white approach to tragedy● The main character, Proka, has something of the Christian martyr—if not Christ himself● He is a meek thirty-year-old man who would not hurt even a fly; precisely because of his introvertedness, he is destined to play the role of the sacrificial lamb, paying for the evil social environment● Papajani idealizes Proka (and his lover) and paints the darkest picture of their social setting, which is presented as primitive and cruel● Both civil and religious authorities are powerless in the face of the primal wickedness of the social milieu; Proka cannot find shelter and protection anywhere—

which also, conveniently, explains his atheism, since religion cannot alleviate his suffering and the church is also complicit in upholding the evil social order● But rather than being properly integrated into the plot, the story of Proka’s shift to atheism is told exclusively in short theses● A Poorly constructed plot, an arbitrarily depicted social milieu, clumsily set-up scenography, one-dimensional main characters and lifeless tendentiousness all make up the main traits of Papajani’s story●

There is nothing cinematic about the story● Only an approach that would have eliminated every trace of Papajani’s tendentious schematism would have been able to make it more cinematic (in such a case, one could have even forgotten that Papajani’s story had served as the inspiration for the film)●

Screenwriter Eqrem Basha and director Isa Qosja have not sought to expand Papajani’s basic ideas and artificial imagery through a better constructed plot● They have only extended some minor details, while slightly displacing others, within their own interpretation● They have significantly amplified the social component of the story and have changed the ending● In the film, the tragic lovers do not die in the monastery; the screenwriter and director have decided to save them● But that salvation as the symbolical apotheosis of love has only seemingly removed Papajani’s pessimism● Ultimately, the film’s claim is not so different from the story’s● The film’s authors must have decided that Papajani’s solution (lovers are only united in death) was far too archaic and was bordering a form of Christian optimism

regarding afterlife that goes something like ‘this life is a valley of tears, the real life is afterlife, in God’● But, their symbolical solution—as I am going to demonstrate—is not capable of going beyond Papajani’s Manichean negation of this world (even if it laicized and atheized)●

Story of a Meek Hero and the Evil Environment

It is surprising that the authors of the film— young people of contemporary sensibilities— believed in the possibility of using such an archaic topic● Certainly, the story of the good individual who finds himself in conflict with his evil social environment has already been told and filmed countless times and in endless variations● It seems that our young filmmakers thought that the story of Proka, as one of its variations, would satisfy such a perpetually (re)occurring topic● This is how they have developed it:

The plot takes place in a village (or a small town), in a setting that almost resembles a fairytale● A draught strikes● The main character, Proka, a hard-working and smart peasant, is trying to alleviate its consequences by inventing a simple device for irrigating the land● His neighbors are all lazy, stupid, drunk, envious and servile● They are also superstitious and expect to please the gods with pagan rituals in order to bring on rain● They mock Proka because of his (insignificant and unintentional) difference and call him mad●

He is also persecuted by the authorities because he has allegedly instigated unrest● The real motives for this persecution are quite different, however: some villagers—with the

help of the authorities—want to appropriate his land● A village elder (Kryeplaku) seduces Proka’s widowed sister and thus Proka becomes an obstacle for his complete enjoyment of such a sinful relationship● In that strange village where all the people are evil (except one), there is an even stranger custom to send all kinds of madmen and rebels to a monastery, which represents not only a spiritual scared place but also a lunatic asylum, prison and torture chamber● In that monastery, Proka is submitted to a kind of torture straight out of the Inquisition● It is only there that Proka understands that he is suffering for no good reason, which is why he refuses to bow down in front of the cross—that is to comply with the evil order● He would have eventually succumbed to torture if a young and beautiful girl (his neighbor from the village) had not come to the monastery● She had already been the only fellow human that understood Proka, there was a mutual (if undisclosed) liking between the two● The girl becomes Proka’s nurse, consoler and savior● With the help of a good monk, the two flee● They are pursued by a posse comprised of priests, that looks like some Inquisitional police● When they are surrounded, the desperate fugitives fall into each other’s arms● That hug of the (half-naked) fugitives produces an unexpected twist, a *deus ex machina* occurs: the priests cannot bring themselves to watch this scene of carnal love and they retreat in shame● As the posse retreats, rain starts to fall● We can see the lovers laying in the life-giving mud● This is how the film ends●

This is only a brief synopsis; for lack of space, I cannot show in detail all its arbitrariness● There is a lot of it, just like in bad comics—and I have already announced that I would focus instead only on the basic conceptual faults●

The Unattainable Universality of the Film
The schematic character and the artificiality of the film's plot is amplified by the director's insistence on the topic's universality● He did opt for a risky move in situating the film in an indeterminate geographical area and period● Papajani's choice of situating the story in the 19th century was followed by the screenwriter but more or less ignored by the director● Isa Qosja believed that it was possible to make a film in which the plot takes place in an indeterminate locale, outside any cultural or historical milieu● In doing so, he wanted to depict a narrative pure in its universality● His concept was something along the following lines: the conflict between the individual and their social environment represents a universal topic that runs through all historical periods● As such, it possesses certain constants or key structural elements● Therefore, one only needs to isolate such constants and to logically arrange structural elements in order to tell the story in its universal essence● Through a cinematic depiction of such a stripped-down story, a universal film necessarily comes about; the topic can thus be tackled without any spatial or historical references●

This kind of reasoning is plainly wrong● A cinematographic alchemy that would make it possible to extract the elixir of universality is a meaningless and unfeasible fantasy● It is

impossible to reach directly into the universal with artistic means—and film, moreover, is the least suitable of arts for such a project, since it is a visually determined medium which always depicts a very concrete milieu● There is somewhat more room for abstracting the concrete environment in literature (for example if the plot is developed as a 'stream of consciousness' narrative●) There are, of course—even in such cases—some spatial and historical references, but they are present in their otherness, submerged by consciousness, and they do not make up the overall atmosphere of the story itself● It is different in the case of film● The atmosphere of a film is always spatially and historically situated● Let's take an example: the main character of a film is in a room with bare walls● Even that single sequence, in its most stripped-down elements, will point to a specific spatial and historical milieu: the very architecture of the room, the way it is illuminated, the shape of the windows and of the room itself, the main character's clothes and shoes, as well as the way in which his hair is cut, his movements and gestures will situate the scene in some specific historical period● Accordingly, we will recognize a medieval monastery or a prison cell in a sheriff's office in the Wild West, or a still-unfinished room in an apartment in a contemporary high-rise, or a cosmonaut in a spaceship, etc● Whatever the film's story, it cannot be abstracted from the contextual meaning of things and objects that are filmed and provide a spatiotemporal context●

In the case of this film, there is no clear understanding regarding the essence of the

story● The universality of the topic around which the story is developed is one thing; the story itself is quite another● A story always condenses specific events and circumstances● The story on which *Proka* is based represents a false universality● It is because we are dealing here with a classic story with a classic unity of space, time and plot, which simultaneously tries to reach universality without abiding by such unity● However, a story cannot be something else than a *specific* story that takes place in a *specific* space and time● A story can, of course, be also a dream, a fairytale, myth, utopia, futuristic projection, and not some kind of real or fictional life story● But imagined stories have a structure as well, which mirrors those of life or historical stories; they are also contextualized within a concrete space and time● A dream, fairytale, myth, etc● develop out of their own inner logic, just as an oak grows out the soil surrounding it● There is always an immanent order that is embedded in a certain concreteness which in turn determines a series of logical (or illogical) events●

Since the film *Proka* still had to preserve plot and story in their essence, a total abstraction from their contexts could not have been possible (what in the name of universality had to be thrown out of the door comes creeping back through the window!)● But since such *return* was not thought-through, it occurred in the most arbitrary manner● The “windows” through which the film *Proka* is filled with context are not only aesthetically diverse but also scattered throughout very different scenes● This syncretism in terms of style creates an

absurd effect since historically distinct spaces and times are compressed within the film’s space-time: alongside a pagan milieu there are also elements of Christian Inquisition and references to a 19th century small town● The simultaneity was not regrouped within the 19th century, as Papajani had—logically—done● On the contrary, the film mashes pagan rituals with the Inquisition and some Balkan kasbah from 19th century, (even if that kasbah is neither Balkan and truth be told, not much of a kasbah at all)● The reason for this is not only that the context is abstracted from Turkish rule but because this kasbah is displaced to the Mexican-American border● To put it briefly, the authors have taken different elements from various authentic historical milieus and amalgamated them into a single story● But such an amalgamation cannot claim to represent a totality since those diverse milieus are each pointing to their own, specific contexts● There is something absurd about this: the main character of the film is simultaneously persecuted by pagans, the Inquisition and 19th century gendarmerie●

Checkmate in Three Moves

This kind of stuttering and unattainable universality is certainly not the only flaw of the film● There is plenty of schematic thinking and arbitrariness in the authors’ development of the topic● From the moment one bases a film on the schema of the good individual dealing with a bad social environment, it is clear an artificial and poorly constructed plot will ensue● The topic of the film is conflict between an individual and society—but the way it is specifically developed

pushes us to ask: how come there such an individual exists in this kind of environment? It is evident in the film that a complex theme (the individual-society relationship) is reduced to a bad abstraction: society versus the individual, all against one. In the film, Proka is the only *individual*. Moreover, he is a very special individual, since he is—contrary to the other villagers—seemingly not a product of the social relations that make up his environment. Proka is *sui generis*. He differs from all the other villagers in both aspect and essence, since only he is different; the others are all the same. Only he is good; all the rest are evil. Only he is an individual, while the rest are just a mass, etc. In other words, one could say that Proka is a stranger in his own milieu, since he shares with the others neither belief nor behavior.

This kind of character is clearly imaginary, just, just as the social environment in which he suffers. Proka is engaged in an abstract, self-produced, unmotivated opposition to a likewise abstract totalitarian reality. Just as Proka does not belong to such a reality, the reality does not belong to Proka; the conflict between them cannot be real, but only a poorly constructed, artificial conflict, a conflict between two abstractions. The relation that Proka is situated in—a lonely struggle against darkness—can be illustrated on a chess board: a single white pawn (without a king!) standing alone against all the black pieces. This poor, foolish pawn will lose the “game” in three moves. The main character of the film, situated in arbitrary social relations, is also losing his “game” in three moves: the villagers declare him mad, the authorities

imprison him and the church destroys him. This is exactly how things unfold in Pappajani’s story. The authors of the film have made an even more arbitrary decision to save their white pawn by throwing into the game a white queen, a treacherous monk and a *deus ex machina* in the shape of a hug in the mud. The main character is thus saved, but can this flimsy construction be saved at all?

Proka is in fact not a real hero. He should, rather, be understood as the victim of an idea, the victim of a bizarre artistic experiment his sole existence has been conjured to test. The authors of the film have used him as some sort of litmus paper with which they could test the evil of a dark realm, of a totalitarian reality. We could go even so far as to say that he is not declared mad by the villagers—but by the authors themselves, since we encounter him as a fool that keeps his mouth shut and endures whatever calamity is thrown at him. He simply allows things to happen to him and it is only at the very end of the film, that its authors allow him to get his revenge, to stand up against evil. It is only then, when he is helpless, entirely hopeless, and predestined to be annihilated, that we realize that he was a heretic and a rebel from the very beginning.

The love twist that suddenly comes about does not organically belong to the story. The very salvation of Proka and his loved one is an illusion. The lovers might have escaped, but such an escape cannot save them (or the world) because the world remains evil, the dark realm remains intact. Wither could the lovers escape anyway, out of darkness, out of

evil? It would be best for them to escape into another film● Their muddy embrace standing in for some kind of symbolic triumph of love does not represent the kind of open ending that gives the viewer freedom to imagine one for themselves, for example, as in the stories where the lovers live happily ever after and have a lot of children● The inconclusiveness of the film's last scene reflects and confirms its overall inconclusiveness●

That the film's main character is not even a true rebel perhaps represents the biggest flaw in its development● What should have been the beginning of the film is actually its very end● If Proka was indeed a heretic and rebel, he should have been presented as such from the start● That is the reason why the authors have even failed on their own terms: narrating the story of an individual rebellion● At the moment the good hero rises against the corrupt world, he cannot be represented as a sheep destined for sacrifice; he should be shown, at the very least, as a desert lion● The parallels the authors have (consciously or unconsciously) drawn with Prometheus, the prototype of the rebel *par excellence*, could thus never have been developed to their full extent● Proka was probably conceived as some kind of a distant cousin of Prometheus● As it is well known, Prometheus broke the orders of gods and gave fire to humanity● Because of this transgression, he was chained to a rock● Proka, as a feeble variant of Prometheus, gives people rain● Fire and rain, in this case, symbolically express man's mastery over natural disasters● Prometheus did not only bequeath fire, but also knowledge of how to start and extinguish it—to

master it● By inserts a technical invention into the natural order in the service of the people's wellbeing, Proka "makes rain" on his own● Such ideas, although present in the film, have nevertheless been almost entirely diluted amidst the banality and artificiality of the plot●

In the Service of Arbitrariness

If the foundations and pillars of a building are not strong enough, it will tilt and eventually tumble● The screenplay and its dramaturgical development represent the foundations and pillars of a film● Since *Proka* lacks a solid screenplay, and the dramaturgy is so shaky, all the other contributions have not solidified it but rather added to its imbalance (and ultimate collapse)● The scenography, costumes as well as the actors' performances have been put into the service of the of the director's arbitrariness● The main character of the film is conceived in such a featureless manner and his actions are so void of psychological motivation that none of the actors were able to play in a convincing way● Xhevat Qorraj performed the role of a puppet, a white pawn; this is certainly not his fault since the role of Proka was already lifeless and paper-thin thanks to the director's approach● In terms of acting, some of the more noticeable roles were performed by a number of cameos that might have been more effective if the situations in which they were thrown into had been more realistic● This includes characters such as the drunkards (Xh● Qena and M● Qena), the executioner (D● Tahiri), the police chief (H● Miftari) or the priest (I● Begolli)● It is a shame that good actors such as Abdurrahman Shala, Istref Begolli and

others had to perform such artificial characters; even prominent actors would have been incapable of making them more convincing●

Agush Beqiri and Agim Çavdarbasha's scenography has significantly contributed to the arbitrary contextualization that I have previously discussed● This can be squarely blamed on the director; the choice of some of the interiors makes for an utterly incomprehensible overall scenography: the village tavern is decorated with wall paintings and other adornments which evoke the design of contemporary restaurants, while other details (such as tables and chairs, cutlery and glasses) appear to have arrived straight from the restaurant "Rugova" in Prishtina● Violeta Xhaferi's costumes cannot be considered to be original creations either, since they were made to serve the director's ideas● They are neither bad nor good on their own, the simple fact is that they were badly used● The camera work of Afrim Spahiu is well done overall, but it comes across as sloppy and inefficient because of a number of inappropriate angles and shaky shots, as well as badly-executed editing●

A Word or Two More About the Alchemy of Our Film Critics at the End

Only an alchemic transmutation can turn the films *Proka* and *Njeriu Prej Dheu* into *something* which they are not (Gani Mehmetaj, 'Pa kthesa dhe kërcime të hovshme', *Bota e re*, 13-14/1985, p● 17)● My fellow critics have nevertheless found that our films were among the best ones at the Pula Film Festival; maybe only a tad weaker than those that one received prizes, including

the overall winner *When Father Was Away on Business* by Emir Kusturica● Since our films were *almost* the best ones and remained prizeless, our critics have used the word *injustice* twice● But who are they trying to fool when they claim that our young directors "had clear concepts" and have "created successful films"? What purpose does it serve to promote the idea that our films are treated unjustly? Do the illusions of our filmmakers have to be the same as the illusions of our film critics? And, is the critic doing a project job if he satisfies himself with being a mere propagandist of our cinema department?

GO SEE THE FILM *PROKA*, IF YOU'D LIKE!

Translated from the original Serbo-Croatian manuscript 'Mucava Univerzalnost Filma Proka'● Published in Albanian as 'Belbëzimet e Univerzalitetit të Shpifur', *Fjala*, XVIII, no● 17, 15●10●1985, p● 9●

Shkëlzen Maliqi

A Reply to the Reactions of Mehmet
Kraja and Gani Mehmetaj

Imagine, dear reader, that your friend has invited you to the cinema● “Which film is screening?”—you ask● “Proka”,—he responds● “Well, then nice● I am curious to watch it because I read a review by Mehmet Kraja that someone called Dr● Adhamudhi wanted to tear it to pieces●” After the screening, when lighting a cigarette, your friend asks: “How was the film?”● “I didn’t like it at all”—you respond curtly● Let’s say your friend seems somewhat indecisive when assessing the film● Let’s allow him to dissent from your categorial judgement● Let’s say that he will share a word of affirmation or disapproval of your evaluation; let’s allow him, for instance, to be angry, even to swear, smile, or shrug his shoulders●

You and your friend are absolutely justified in forming your own opinions about the film you’ve just seen● After all, it goes without saying that nobody can deny your right as viewers to feel pleased, disappointed, indifferent, or even upset about it● After leaving the cinema, you go to a bar to have a drink● Your friend is curious to hear why the film *Proka* left you disappointed● “Why didn’t you like it?”—he will ask● “I didn’t like it because it’s artificial, not convincing, naive, and boring”—you’ll respond● “Why is it artificial: Why boring?”—he will continue with

the questions and you'll bring forward analytical arguments● Your conversation will become even more interesting if your interlocutor has a completely different opinion from yours, if he thinks the film was excellent● Your conversation will then turn into a polemic● There's a saying: "In matters of taste, there can be no disputes"● Indeed, when we rigidly adhere to our individual taste during discussions and adamantly defend them, the conversation can devolve into a futile exchange, rendering meaningful debate impossible● In order for the polemic to be fruitful, the judgment given by taste must be relativized; the arguments of those who experienced the film differently must be heard and you should allow for the possibility to alter your initial judgment about the film● But, imagine now a case when your interlocutor isn't interested in hearing your arguments and only reacts angrily to your opinion that *Proka* is a bad film● For instance, you might say that the story of Papajani is inadequate for cinematic adaptation, that the script is weak, you might have questions regarding the strength of the directorial concept, or point out aspects that seem banal● All the while, your friend reacts with anger and resorts to name-calling, labeling you as ignorant and suspicious, accusing you of some ulterior motives● Instead of counter-points, your friend presents *ad hominem* arguments● He seems uninterested in discussing the film itself, focusing instead on criticizing you● Instead of defending his analysis of the film with arguments, he tries to undermine your personality by depriving you of the right to have your opinions and to discuss them●

Dear readers, it's disheartening when someone denies you the freedom to either appreciate or dislike a film and openly express your viewpoint; when your judgement leads to *ad hominem* attacks● Ultimately, these only express that you are a nobody, a nothing● He who attacks you with such arguments does not consider you an equal, he doesn't want to engage in a cultural (and cultured) dialogue● He wants to silence your opinions and force you to give up your right to think for yourself● This doesn't take into account the fact that you might be right or wrong when you say that *Proka* is a bad film; you are not only deprived of the right to be right, but also of the right to be wrong● They don't present arguments that would sway your opinion regarding the film; instead, you get hit on the head over and over until you're forced into silence● We all know how certain individuals, due to the strength of their aesthetic convictions, (metaphorically) shoot anyone down simply for having an opinion● Your mistake wasn't in your evaluation of the film, but in daring to appraise it, to think critically about it● The seed of totalitarianism can also appear under a café table, while talking about a film; such ugliness rears its head with every attempt to disqualify the interlocutor through *ad hominem* arguments●

The Rush and Nervousness of M● Kraja
Mehmet Kraja first reacted to my own article ('Stuttering Universality of the Film *Proka*') in the newspaper 'Rilindja' (6●10●1985) by comparing me in a malicious way to Dr● Aramudhi, the antagonistic character from

the play “After Death” of Çajupi● Ah, Mehmet Kraja, full of worries● I wasn’t surprised—and neither was I impressed—by his jittery reaction● And I wasn’t frightened either by his malicious and poisonous lines● I have, indeed, fully understood the message he has sent me● I understood his aim is to insult me, to smear me publicly● I have understood his desire to become a hero for his fellow-thinkers● But his allusions and insinuations did not disconcert me● In his reaction piece, M● Kraja attacks my personality● In his review, he deals with my ‘inability’ to analyze our culture, he alludes to my ideological ‘illusions’● If I am what M● Kraja makes me be, it is obvious that the problem lies within me—rather than where I had placed it● If I would be the caricature M● Kraja has drawn, I would be (the implication is logical) someone’s marionette● In Kraja’s writing, there is a notable bitterness and personal rancor; he attempts to portray my own writings as a frontal attack on the entirety of Albanian Culture● He perceives me as an outsider who has infringed on his ground● With the unmistakable instinct of the guardian of the national treasure, he has discovered in me not only a personal enemy but also an enemy for this whole environment, a danger for the very cultural treasure which he so deftly guards● Why is he so bothered by me?

First of all, he probably, perceives me as someone who has dared to compete with him in performing the duties of the treasury guard● According to him, I am the one who “●●● *takes special care of the spiritual health of the people*●●● *the one who – constantly takes care of art*●●● *gives prescriptions for healing*●” Those

who are frequent readers of the cultural section of our daily newspaper have probably been long able to see that in his writings M● Kraja approaches the subject of cultural hygiene in a manner quite similar to my own● However, he perceives his commitment as constructive—he has the ethnopsychology of the territory at heart—, while painting my contribution as destructive, accusing me of “tearing it to pieces ●” According to him, I don't understand the very ethno-psychology, issues and needs of our cultural environment● On the other hand, in M● Kraja’s eyes, I am a *stranger who has just arrived*, a pilgrim who has spent part of his life in another environment● As such, I do not have the right to judge the creativity of an environment I have not inhabited until now● In safe-guarding our national heritage, I am myself a mere intern, with a dubious biography and no capital● I must, consequently, remain in the background, patiently awaiting the opportunity to demonstrate my worthiness before being granted the privilege to voice my opinions on matters that—for the time being—are exclusively evaluated by the discerning Mehemet Kraja● Does M● Kraja present any arguments to contest my assessments of the film *Proka*? No● He solely addresses my ideological denunciations● And what should be done now? Should I respond in the same manner? Should I, in turn, reply to his insinuations by engaging in *ad hominem* denunciation instead of ideological perspectives? No—such an approach would align precisely with what M● Kraja expects me to do● Let him deal with his own blindness● A sound cultural policy cannot be rooted in phobias, and the foundation of cultural dialogue should not be

established upon venomous political labels and insinuations● I would have preferred if M● Kraja's response could have been attributed to haste, an attack resulting from momentary nervousness● And I am—furthermore—ready to protect him from himself, not taking seriously either his *ad hominem* arguments or the various allusions directed toward me● So, let M● Kraja cast aside all the prejudices he may hold towards me and, if possible, approach my writings without ready-made allusions or categorizations● Let him present the counter-arguments with which he would contest my assessments● (If he has enough courage for a cultural dialogue and principled polemic●)

The Cognitive Laziness of Gani Mehmetaj
It is unfortunate when someone who considers himself an intellectual fails to comprehend the essence of cultural dialogue and instead acts in a cocky manner, resorting exclusively to *ad hominem* attacks when their purported “intellectual” commitment is questioned or exposed as duplicitous● In Gani Mehmetaj's response, (featured in this edition of *Fjala*), the cocky critic, stung by my observations that our film criticism is a form of alchemical artistry, reveals his intellectual vanity● He refuses to engage in a dialogue with me● He lacks the bravery to contend with the topics that I presented in the article “Stuttering Universality of the Film *Proka*”● It's difficult for this escape artist to partake in a serious dialogue: his lazy and hypocritical mind is careful enough not to fall into such “traps”● Indeed: why would he even bother to present counter-arguments

regarding my critical analysis of the film *Proka* and the state of our cinematography when it is far more convenient to discredit critical thought through the application of *ad hominem* attacks! It's easier for the cocky ‘intellectual’ to spit rather than think● And if, by any chance, he's pushed into actual thinking, he will react as if you had hurled the gravest insult at him● He will try to negate the person who raises thought-provoking questions, while remaining entirely uncritical of himself, suspended as if it were in a vacuum● This is his defence; his dodging and ‘fatal’ attacks on his opponent are nothing but flutters and sleep-talk● “The Reply” of Gani Mehmetaj is a typical example of someone responding to a ‘personality’ rather than addressing the issues raised by said personality● Irritated by the unpleasant critique and vexed by troubling questions, he responds with arguments that lack any depth● At the beginning of his ‘reply’, he immediately questions the critic who has dared to disturb his spiritual lethargy● Who is this critic? A certain Sh● Maliqi●●● an anonymity, someone who has no authority, a *nameless* figure● An anonymous nobody● But what does it want? To leave anonymity, to claim a place in the spotlight● G● Mehmetaj has revealed the true intentions of the anonymous nobody● He would rather not engage in a dialogue with it since doing so would in effect realise *its* ambitions● It is widely known, indeed, that Gani Mehmetaj is *someone who* has a *name, fame, and authority* while the *tormented* Sh● M● can claim none of these attributes● I am a *nobody, an anonymous* without a *name, fame or authority*● How happy

would Gani Mehmetaj be if I didn't exist at all? How joyful he'd be if I disappeared just as unexpectedly as I appeared, if I would not be here to steal his fame, authority, and name● But if all this is true, why did G● Mehmetaj even write a 'reply'? He wrote it since he detected in my article the vile and irritating tendency of denouncing Kosovar Cinematography● After unmasking the critic as an anonymous nobody—i●e● definitely not someone competent to review films—G● Mehmetaj also unmasks his hidden intentions, which are wicked and very dangerous● This Sh● M should be made a prosecutor, shouldn't he, so he can summon Kosovar filmmakers to 'account' for their ideological mistakes, he says● What tendency lies behind this meaningless interpretation of my articles? It is surely an effort to devalue my critical analysis● Having denounced me as a spy in the service of unnamed dark forces (just as M● Kraja did) he feels liberated from the obligation of engaging with my analysis of *Proka*● I don't even consider engaging in a dialogue "about *Proka*",—he claims● And why, indeed, would G● Mehmetaj engage in such dialogue with someone who has the hidden intention of denouncing Kosovar Cinematography and who wants to court-martial filmmakers... A marvelous revelation indeed● G● Mehmetaj transforms my critical analysis into a juridical condemnation● Why so? His aim is to inform the readers of *Fjala* of my "true" intentions● His underlying message is "don't be fooled by his critical analysis of the films *Proka* and *Njeriu Prej Dheu*● He is a dangerous anonymous nobody, a spy and

a prosecutor● Don't pay attention to his arguments since what matters are intentions, not arguments!" But perhaps he senses that this unmaking is not enough, he fears that the readers of *Fjala* might too easily be swayed by my analysis, which is why he eventually delves into the character of my critique as well—that is, to make an *ad hominem* judgement about my arguments too● After his offensive opening comments, he proceeds to insult my intellectual capacity● He irrevocably conclude that I lack analytical skills, that my criticism is arbitrary and schematic, that "I don't know the laws of art", that "I don't know art terminology" and that "I lack elementary linguistic culture●" According to G● Mehmetaj, I am an incapable and myopic film critic● "The Arguments" that G● Mehmetaj was able to present against my critique of *Proka* and *Njeriu Prej Dheu* can be summarised as follows: I am a nobody, a snitch and an incapable critic● He might not have read my texts but he has read me● He doesn't attack my writings but attacks me● The character of Gani Mehmetaj's 'reply' is pretty apparent● But, G● Mehmetaj didn't satisfy himself with such 'decisive arguments'● He has more in store● Because of his intellectual laziness, he didn't have the courage to contest what I wrote● (Why would he even bother, when he has at hand citations plucked from the Yugoslav press—where generally our films are evaluated positively?) But in this case his cognitive sloth is not to blame● We know that G● Mehmetaj tends to rely on authority and well-established names● And from this case it becomes obvious that this someone, this name, this authority who

opposes the anonymous and impotent critic (me) was probably not G● Mehmetaj himself since he doesn't have the courage to think with his own head; the ultimate authority is the Yugoslav film critic, who instead of him writes glowingly about our films● Has Yugoslav film criticism solely written positively of our cinema? Weren't there ever any negative reviews? Does he think that all these points of view were simply guided by ill intent—just like mine? Isn't it more indicative of the fact that G● Mehmetaj has never engaged with any of the negative criticisms of our films, thus violating the code of his profession—which is to provide objective information? Can G● Mehmetaj even comprehend that within the polarized debates about Kosovar films, relying on the affirmative opinion of others is simply not enough of an argument? I have clearly stated what are, in my eyes, the flaws within our films; these critical remarks cannot be simply canceled by pointing towards a few positive reviews that have either overlooked them or chosen not to acknowledge them out of courtesy● The focus of his response should have been to determine whether my critical observations were true or not● But he appears to be uninterested in actual film criticism; it is enough for him to remain a self-styled 'loudspeaker' for Kosovar Cinema● Even his own 'reply' compromises the public role of the film critic, which is, after all, the profession he has chosen for himself●

Originally published as 'Argumente ad Hominem', *Fjala* XVIII, no● 18, 15●10●1985, p● 9●

Colophon

Stuttering Universality

Film as Political School Volume 1

Published on the occasion of the exhibition

Palimpsests of History

National Gallery of Kosovo, Prishtina

09●11-03●12●2023

Editor:

Tevfik Rada

Contributors:

Shkëlzen Maliqi, Tevfik Rada

Translators:

Dušan Grlja, Blerta Haziraj

Proofreading:

Áron Rossman-Kiss

Design:

Bardhi Haliti

Special thanks to:

Hana Halilaj, Vlora Hajrullahu, Isa Qosja, Kosovafilm

Images:

pp● 1-10, 87-96

Gjurmë të bardha (1980) – Ekrem Kryeziu

pp● 33-48

Rojet e Mjegullës (1988) – Isa Qosja

Print:

Shtypshkronja Blendi

ISBN: ?

November, 2023



Ministria e Kulturës, Rinisë dhe Sportit
Ministerstvo Kulturo, Omladine i Sporta
Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport











