

## THE INFLUENCE OF ITALIAN TELEVISION AND CINEMA IN THE PERIOD OF THE COMMUNIST DICTATORSHIP

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**Abstract:** Before delving into the two themes that outline the period of socialist system in Albania (1944-1991). We will attempt to provide a brief retrospective by referring to the early influences of Italian culture in Albania. Based on historical facts, the influence or impact of Italian culture during the socialist period did not start there, nor was it incidental, but rather a continuation of a relationship that dates back hundreds of years. One of the theses of Italian cultural influence in various aspects of Albanian life is the geographical proximity between the two countries. By carefully observing the distant past now belonging to history, we notice that there is an extra factor, other than geographical proximity that serves as the glue for this cultural fusion. The question arises: What is it? What were the reasons that made Italian political and cultural hegemony necessary in Albania? The first undeniable fact that catches the eye is, Albania borders many nations, but none of the neighboring Balkan countries have had the same effect as Italy. The Albanian people resonate more with Italian culture than any other. Italian influence has been embraced by Albanians as a welcomed addition rather than an imposed one. There may be several reasons. Today we will consider the main reason: the similarity in temperament and inevitable intertwining of history between the two nations. The beginnings of this path of cultural influence date back very early. Referring to history, the Italo-Albanian connections date back to around the 1800s. But if we go even further back in time, it would be the years 1259, and then 1478, when the Ottoman army's conquest of Kruja, triggered the exodus of Arbëreshi settlers towards Calabria.

**Keywords:** influence, television, cinema, communist, dictatorship, art, film.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

#### What means were used to spread Italian influence in Albania in the 1800s-1900s?

Italian written press, the newspaper, was a dominant instrument in influencing Albania at that time. The written press was bilingual written in both Italian and Albanian, a rather original attempt at the time; further illustrating how determined Italy on establishing their cultural hegemony over Albanian territories. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by European Great Powers posturing for influence in the Balkans. Great powers such as the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Great Britain and Italy spent considerable political capital in a bid to gain control over the Balkans. We would like to mention the newspaper "La Nazione Albanese" (1897-1924) with its Calabrian owner, Mr. Anselmo Lorecchio. We would also mention the magazine "Nuovi Albanesi". Furthermore, we would highlight the newspaper "Corriere delle Puglie". This Apulian newspaper could be considered the first example of Italo-Albanian journalistic collaboration. While in Rome, the newspaper "Kuvendi" would be published, where the 22-year-old Albanian youth Sotir Gjika would be a correspondent. Born in Italy, to Arbereshi parents, he was the perfect fusion of Italian and Albanian mannerism. His cosmopolitan culture gave rise to a star in the Albanian Diaspora in the USA. Sotir Gjika would cover the Italian territory as a correspondent from the USA, along with Albanian, Romanian and Bulgarian territories. At that time, there were a considerable number of Italian newspapers focusing primarily on Albania in their editorial policy.

Approaching the time, it would be in 1927 when the newspaper "Corriere delle Puglie" would follow the policy of opening an editorial office in Tirana with Albanian and Italian editors, who would publish for the first time "Gazeta Shqiptare" (Albanian Newspaper), a newspaper owned by De Bonmartini, thus celebrating the relationship started both in the field of cultural exchange and in the commercial one.

With the fascist occupation in 1939, a department was created in the Albanian Ministry of Culture, with the objective of intensifying the Italian-Albanian relationship. After a year of Italian occupation in Albania, in 1940, a project to monopolize the media in Albania would begin, not only the print media but also radio and cinema, simultaneously also extending their influence in the hospitality sector. This influence only continued to grow in wake of the Italian occupation (1939-1943).

Now we find ourselves tangentially at the beginning of Italian influence in cinema and the topic that we will delve deeply into today.

## **2. THE INFLUENCE OF ITALIAN RADIO TELEVISION ON ALBANIAN TELEVISION AS WELL AS THE EFFORTS TO CAMOUFLAGE THIS INFLUENCE UNDER COMMUNIST CENSORSHIP**

Immediately after the capitulation of fascist Italy, many Italian soldiers remained in Albania. They could be found either fighting alongside Albanian partisans against the German Nazis, or as guests in Albanian homes.

Let's remember Antonio Gramsci's battalion, who fought alongside the first attacking Albanian brigade. After the liberation of Albania, many Italians did not return to their homeland but continued to stay in Albania, providing their expertise both in infrastructure and in the reorganization of arts and sports.

Immediately after the war, Radio Tirana (Albanian National Radio) would become one of the media spaces where Italians helped advance technical aspects immensely. Meanwhile, the Italian radio world managed to attract the attention of young Albanians who secretly listened. In the 1970s, Italian radio programming was innovative in bringing entertaining programs for the younger generation. Here, programs like "Bandiera Gialla" or "Alto Gradimento", led by Renzo Arbore and Gianni Boncompagni, played selected music for the listeners. We also remember a beloved radio program "Hit Parade" by Lelio Luttazzi.

It was precisely through the radio program "Hit Parade", that Albanians, under communist censorship, discovered the Beatles. Western music, according to Enver Hoxha, would be called decadent music. Through listening to the radio secretly, many Albanians managed to learn the Italian language, to this day Albania has a large percentage of Italian speaking population. The generation of the 1972-73 seemed to receive a certain spiritual education through Italian songs. We cannot emphasize enough that everything was done in secrecy. Being careful not to be discovered or caught by the State Security was incredibly important. Listening to foreign songs was a breach of law, would make you an agitator and propagandist, a criminal... and thus imprisoned.

Here we, would mention one of the Albanian singers who was imprisoned in his youth simply for being affectionate towards foreign songs. Sherif Merdani sang "Let it Be" by Beatles. at one of the festivals of RTSH towards the end of the regime. (Show the song)

For the Albanian youth of that time, Italian media became the only escape from the harsh, censoring reality. I personally remember the clandestine arrival of Italian fashion catalogs for women. So, we can say that Italian culture, received through illegal radio and television programs, played a key role in the intellectual formation of young Albanians in the 1970s.

With the arrival of the first television sets in Albania, the first channel sought was Rai Uno. At that time, we did not have repeaters for television waves, so people started making homemade antennas and boxes that functioned as television wave seekers. Again all of these were highly illegal and done in secrecy.

It is the introduction of the TV that began the golden age of Rai's almost magical influence in Albania. Albanians secretly communicated with each other, especially in the coastal cities of Durrës, Tirana and Vlora. These were the only cities able to receive Rai television signal. Here, people mocked the government under their breath because, even though they had set up powerful repeaters to block the signal, they had proven to be ineffective. The first cracks of the system were beginning to show!

Rai's screen was the most exciting window for Albanians, a window through which they could see the rest of the world for what it really was, away from the terrifying grasp of censorship. Italian television was what cracked the iron curtain of Hoxha's totalitarian control on information. Italian Television became a powerful tool to learn about "life as an Italian". Italian TV was widespread and easily accessible as we have already discussed Albanians had learnt Italian in the years prior through the newspaper and later on the radio.

The influence of Italian music and style would be noticeable at the 11th song festival on RTSH (December 1972). The liberal spirit both in song and in the concept of directing the festival would break all presentation rules.

As soon as Enver Hoxha saw the festival, he was furious. He unleashed scathing criticisms of it, calling it a festival with a decadent spirit. The presenters of the festival, the festival director, and the director of television, along with some singers, were sentenced to internment camps, spending the rest of their lives in prison, accused of being "promoters of capitalist West." (Show the documentary about the 11th festival) Adriano Celentano and his songs was a legend in Albania at the time. His songs were hummed and sung by young people when gathered in groups secretly. The expression of his song; "Chi non lavora non fa l'amore" became almost an anti-communist chant. Also show the song " Rroku i Burgut " by Francesk Radi In 1973, total isolation would begin for Albania and Albanians. The festival prompted a reorganization of Albanian television from 1973 until 1991, when the socialist system fell in Albania. This period was characterized by a complete isolation of Albania from the outside world. The few liberal rights that Albanian media had were completely revoked. Everything started to take steps backward, including culture, which was one of the sectors that was hit the most. In 1973, Rai Uno and Yugoslav national television were placed on the list of banned channels by the state. The State Security was the eye that kept every Albanian from deviating from the communist line of the party. The State apparatus was cracking down immensely on illegal broadcasts. They had instilled fear as an institution in the people. In 1974, drastic actions would be taken against

Albanian television. Enver Hoxha ordered the removal of the repeater on Mount Dajti. This meant blocking all signal coming from outside Albania. At the same time, a national action began to remove all antennas in the homes of every Albanian who had a television. Whoever resisted was punished! With the removal of the signal, artists and directors of television were cut off from the window that connected them to Rai and through Rai the wider world. For a long time, Rai was like a school and at the same time a museum for Albanian artists. Many programs or performances took ideas from shows on Rai Uno. Here I remember the program Pippo Baudo's "Sette Voci", and on the Albanian television screen, something similar was created "The Winner of Winners". But the desire of Albanians was so great to embrace the Western spirit that no totalitarian system could prevent it however hard they tried. Rai had already shown Albanians what life was like on the other side.

After over 2 years of total media blackout, Albanians invented the "group". A homemade antennae like device that enabled Albanians to receive Rai broadcasts again. The engineer who created this homemade device was captured and sentenced to prison. Nevertheless, Albanians secretly started to produce the "group" en masse and restarted following Rai Uno. The Moon was eagerly awaited because it showed Monday's film. So Italian Television was like a window to freedom. Broadcasts like La Domenica Sportiva, Fantastico, programs by Renzo Arbore, Maurizio Costanzo Show or TV series like Dynasty, etc. The totalitarian isolation of TVSH continued until the death of Enver Hoxha in 1985. Then things rapidly began to ease with the new government under the direction of Ramiz Alia. The first program that played an interesting role in showing Albania on Italian screens was the show Linea Verde in 1989, directed by the Kosovar director working for Rai at that time, Gjon Kolndrekaj. This show was the first real open attack on the communist system in Albania. Then TVSH began to broadcast the Sanremo Festival, which was a dream festival for the Albanian audience. Lo Zecchino D' Oro as well as Italian sports events, with football teams such as Lecce, Roma and AC Milan finding many fans. Events for the TVSH screen would also include the showing of the series "La Piovra" (The Octopus). Gradually, Albania was emerging from the total paralysis of the system. The Rai Uno, Rai Due screens have been a school for Albanian television creators and directors, at the same time a window through which they saw the Western world. It cannot be downplayed how important the Rai screen was in creating the necessary political climate to bring about the collapse of the communist system.

### **3. TELEVISION DOCUMENTARIES AND POLITICS IN ITALY**

With the Italian occupation, the Italian government aimed to establish not only territorial, but also cultural hegemony. Therefore, during this time, the production of documentaries initiated by the Italian government in Tirana began. This project in the field of fascist propaganda was called MinCulPop. Italian films of the time would be screened by Casa del Fascio in Tirana. In August 1936, a series of Italian films began to show in cinemas across Albania. At the same time, Albania became a film set for the movie "I trecento settimane" directed by Mario Baffico. The Italian government believed greatly in the fusion between Albania and the Istituto Luce. With the end of the war, another era began for Albanian cinema. The links between Italian and Albanian cinema can be seen in 1943 with the film "Appuntamento al Lago" directed by Mihallaq Mone. This cinematographic production was entirely Italian. Hoxha's regime focused on the development and support of cinema in its beginnings. The creation of the New Albania film studio would be called the Albanian Cinecitta, not in terms of the number of films but in terms of how it was organized and its core idea. With the breakdown of relations with the Soviet Union in 1961, the film studio turned its gaze to Italian cinema. Albanian filmmakers were inclined to choose neorealist films such as "Roma Citta Aperta" by Roberto Rossellini and had great interest in the films of Giuseppe De Santi, such as "Non c'e pace frag li ulivi", "Roma ore 11", "Un Marito per Ana Zaccheo". Albanian Cinecitta was obsessed with films that had won Oscars for Best Foreign Language Film. Here we remember films such as "Bicycle Thieves" directed by Vittorio De Sica, Oscar winner 1950; "La Strada" by Federico Fellini (1957); or the Italian-French films with historical themes such as the film "Il Conte Montecristo" by director Robert Vernay, or the film "La Certosa di Parma" by Christian Jacque.

These films that came from Italy would initially passed through a censoring commission in the Albanian Ministry of Culture to prevent any films that were propaganda against the system from reaching the general population. The selective barrier of films from the controlling boards was because they wanted to create a kind of protective barrier against the entry of Italian culture through cinema. Generally, they selected films with themes of mafia life and bourgeois decadence, the world of crime, etc. In a way these films were designed to make the public believe that across the sea lay a life full of crime and moral decadence, serving almost as evidence of the wickedness of capitalist societies. Here we remember Fellini's films "Le notti di Cabiria", Oscar winner in 1958 (which dealt with the theme of prostitution and the exploitation of the masses).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In Albanian cinema, Italy would be presented as the land of turtles. A kind of stigmatization that was done to the figure of Italian fascist invaders. Show a part of the movie *Debatik* by director Hysen Hakani. While in the movie *"Furtuna"* by director Kristaq Dhamo, the Italian invaders are portrayed as idiots, through a surreal and comical dialogue. Show part of the movie *Furtuna*. This anti-Italian spirit in films made by the New Albania Film Studio (Albanian Cinecitta) during the communist period is also noticed in the film *"Lulekuqet mbi Mure"* by director Dhimiter Anagnosti in 1976. This defiant spirit is also seen in other films such as *"Njeriu me Top"* or *"Plumba Perandorit"*. Show Anagnosti's film *Lulekuqet mbi Mure*. Furthermore, in the history of Albanian cinema during the communist period, it is worth mentioning the film *"Gjenerali i Ushtrise se Vdekur"* a production of the Albanian National Television. With screenplay written by Ismail Kadare, interested in this screenplay was also director Luciano Tovoli who realized this film with actors Michel Piccoli and Marcello Mastroianni in 1983. This film was Italian-French collaboration.

So, in this short journey through the history of Albanian cinema and radio-television, you heard and experienced the influence of Italian television and cinema.

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