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Slogans/ Parrullat (Albania/ France, 2001) dir. Gjergj Xhuvani

By Dina Iordanova



Albania is one of the few European countries that are still eligible for assistance under the *Fonds Sud Cinéma* funding programme, administered by the French government in support of the cinema of underdeveloped nations around the world. In most of these co-productions, France is engaged as a minority partner, providing production and post-production services mostly at the high-tech end. *Fonds Sud Cinéma* is a smartly conceived enterprise, clearly meant to keep a steadily subsidized business coming to the numerous small and medium-sized French production outfits and post-production companies (see Iordanova, 2002). The main shortcoming of the operation is that producers who get involved in these projects are mostly specialized in working with various other countries (such as Russia, Lebanon, Italy) and are thus outsiders without much leverage within French cinema circles. Their lack of contacts and influence is most palpable when it comes to distribution: the films get made but remain seen very little. If it were not for the French government assistance, however, Gjergj Xhuvani's *Slogans* (2001) would probably not even have been made, as local funding bodies in countries like Albania distribute their meager production funds mostly by providing matching funds where foreign assistance is already in place.

Set in a small town in the mountains in the late 1970s, *Slogans* (2001) follows the arrival of science teacher Andre (Artur Gorishti) to take up a new position with the local secondary school. The atmosphere feels bizarre from the onset, and soon various absurd episodes begin taking place. Evidently, the focus of the school's endeavors is not on learning; pupil and teachers' energies alike are directed to appeasing the local authorities' demand to constantly demonstrate loyalty to the ideas of communism. Rather than in the classroom, instructors and students have spend their days on the surrounding hills where they assemble various prescribed slogans in white stones. About fifteen meters long and two meters wide, the

slogans are supposed to express the genuine feelings of all Albanians on the important matters of the country's political agenda. Andre is requested to make a choice between 'Keep Up the Revolutionary Spirit!' and 'America's Imperialism Is a Paper Tiger' as his next class project. When he chooses the slogan that is clearly the shorter and easier to put together, his allegiance comes under perilous scrutiny.

Even though the events take place in the late 1970s, everything looks and feels like in the middle of the ideologically absurd 1950s. Discussions of the shape of the slogan's letters and on the better suitability of certain stones is a fully justified subject of a serious conversation. A series of depressing episodes revealing the dull determination of the local communist party apparatchiks follows and results in unjust treatment of ordinary people. First an illiterate peasant is accused of conspiring with the imperialists because he let his goats disturb the neatly arranged stones of the slogans. Then a boy who has to make a class presentation on China makes a mistake and calls the country 'revisionist' (rather than the correct 'communist'), a misdeed for his father is reprimanded as he falls under suspicion for secretly indoctrinating his son in anti-communist beliefs.

It is mostly due to the French co-producing participation that the film received some exposure, ensuring at least been a degree of international distribution Albania and France, and in a handful of European countries. Distributor *Celluloid Dreams* was involved, and there is an entry giving synopsis and contact information related to the film on the web-site run by *France diplomatie*, intended to assist the international exposure of French-supported films. *Slogans* played as part of various festivals (Karlovy Vary, Tokyo), became the first Albanian film to be shown at Cannes, won awards at regional festivals in Bratislava and Cottbus, and

was part of traveling showcases featuring recent Balkan or Albanian cinema. Even though it is not available in mass distribution, *Slogans* appears to have reached a truly global (diasporic?) niche audience, as the six posts about the film on the IMDb originate from viewers based in locations as diverse as Australia, Hong Kong, Spain, Canada, Poland, and Norway.

Those who have written about the film in relation to its release in the West often begin by admitting they know next to nothing of the place where the film comes from, referring to it as ‘mysterious’ and ‘enigmatic’ country with ‘weird’ and ‘bizarre’ history. They usually end up recommending travel books on Albania, which, supposedly, contain some answers on this peculiarly isolated corner of Europe. Indeed, the countries in the communist camp lived in a self-contained universe. In addition, the Balkan region was the home of three of the states that came to be known as communist mavericks -- Romania, Albania, and Yugoslavia – as each one had a bizarre and non-conventional way in being a state socialist country and retain relative independence not only from the West but also from the grip of the Soviets. Among those three, Albania was by far the more isolated one, having voluntarily isolated itself from the West, but then also having broken up with the USSR, having reoriented itself to China, and then having broken up these ties as well around the time of the cultural revolution (an episode masterfully treated in Ismail Kadare’s *The Concert*). That a slogan like ‘Vietnam Will Win’ is still in use in Albania a decade after the actual end of the Vietnam war may come across as absurd, but this episode of the film is based on a true anecdote, showing the shocking extent of the country’s isolation from the rest of the world. It is particularly important to remember that this isolation was real and truly damaging.

The paranoid ruler that the country had ended up with, Enver Hoxha (1908-1985), undoubtedly enhanced Albania's maverick status. Romania and Yugoslavia were also led by mavericks in their own right, Ceausescu and Tito. But while we can find film portrayals that explain away the charisma of some of the top communists and the popular obsession known as 'cult of personality' (e.g. Stalin in *The Fall of Berlin*, or Tito in *Tito and I* or *Marshall*), a film on Enver Hoxha is yet to be made.

But while not directly presenting Hoxha as a person, Albanian cinema has had its own way in presenting the man by showing off his absurd deeds. Kujtim Cashku's *Kolonel Bunker* (1996), for example, explores the process of Albania's "bunkerization", a massive defense project involving the erection of thousands of concrete bunkers meant to protect the nation in a foreign assault. These semi-destroyed concrete bunkers litter Albania's landscape today and have become a sort of an embarrassing visual trademark of the country; they are featured, among other films, in Gianni Amelio's *Lamerica* (1994). One of the scenes in Fatmir Koci's *Tirana Year Zero* (2001) takes place in a field full of meter-tall metal spears sticking up from the ground: yet another one of Hoxha's defense inventions meant to pierce the foreign parachutists that may try landing on Albanian soil.

Reviewers are more or less unanimous of their assessment of *Slogans* as a called 'deliciously sardonic' satire, which takes a satirical swipe in making a 'scathing attack on the ignorant and imbecilic nature of fanatical politics' of Albanian communism (Russell). If we see the film in a wider context beyond the Balkans, however, it could be considered as yet another representation of the presence of Maoist indoctrination in Europe, continuing in the tradition

established by Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* (1968) and the Norwegian satire *Comrade Pedersen* (2001).

In *Slogans*, Jamie Russell points out, all these endless meetings and discussions of ideology 'have become so commonplace that no one can blink without offending some obscure party doctrine.' In that, *Slogans* is a faithfully realist account, featuring the unbelievable yet fully authentic extremities of indoctrination and stupidity of dedicated party apparatchiks.

Revealing moral stupor that comes across in everyday life situations has been the core approach of many of the most successful films about communism. Although many of these are set in the late 1940s and 1950s, some look into more recent periods. Some have relied on showing victims of the absurd (Hungarian *Angi Vera*), some on revealing the hypocrisy of the system (Bulgarian *A Woman of 33, Valentin and Valentina*) while others which prove that the genre of absurdist comedy may be indeed the most appropriate for exposing what is wrong with communist indoctrination, have openly relied on satire (as seen in classics such as Czech *Report on the Party and the Guests* and *The Ear*, or Hungarian),

Based on a story by Ylljet Alicka, who worked on the adaptation, the film relates a series of anecdotes rooted in real events. Andre's daily reality may seem absurd, but it is nothing more than a condensed account on an ordinary life of an employee under communism. The whitewashed-stone slogans on hillsides existed not only in Albania but also in other neighboring communist countries, they were suggested by the ideological department of the Party either centrally or locally and were 'built' not only by schools, but also by the army and factory workers. The absurd usage of ideologically-loaded terms that no one understood was another wide spread practice that went far beyond Albania and was endemic to the whole

communist camp; all sorts of things were qualified as 'revisionist' without ever being clear what was the doctrine that was being revised and without ever inviting critical scrutiny on political discourse. Thus, *Slogans* is a straightforward account on a seemingly absurd situation.

What seems more absurd to me, however, is Andre's behavior. To Western viewers, he is the only one who comes across as utterly 'normal'. Even though born and bred in Albania (and thus not knowing anything else), Andre resorts to a quiet resistance, in conspiracy with Diana, the French teacher (Luiza Xhuvani), whom he likes. He establishes himself as pragmatic and gets the unanimous support of the pupils by choosing to work on the slogan that is shorter and easier (and thus not trying to please the local party secretary). Later on he realizes he is not prepared to tolerate the absurdities, and becomes an outspoken advocate of the goats herdsman who is under serious allegation for ideological conspiracy. He then defends the boy who called China 'revisionist' and his father. And so on. With the exception of the dedicated officials, *Slogans* shows ordinary Albanians as Andre as normal people.

But if this was indeed the case, who are all these people who cheered at Enver Hoxha (and at Ceausescu, at Mao, at Stalin, and various other tyrannical leaders) and whom we see in some astonishing surviving video clips? Were they all 'normal' people like Andre who just pretended to participate and kept their heads down? Or were they, as it seems more plausible to me, believers in the idea that was being sold to them, who participated in the indoctrination without having recourse to any other possible view of the world (similar to the marching North Koreans we see on footage from Pyongyang). I would personally prefer to stay with the feeling of despair and suffocation, and the overpowering absurdity that permeates

Albanian classics like Ismail Kadare's *The General of the Dead Army* and *The Palace of Dreams*.

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